Title: Acting Human Rights, Theater of the Oppressed and Indigenous Peoples in the Americas Today.

By Mariana Leal Ferreira and Dominique Devine (SFSU)

ABSTRACT

When Theater of the Oppressed insinuates itself into the classroom or out onto the street, human rights education becomes an inspiring and powerful experience. From acting out skits, to exploring different characters within a human rights arena, alternative scenarios and endings turn out to be real possibilities. Drama promotes critical thinking, so that students can reflect upon and formulate their own ideas of the world they’d like to create. In this piece we commemorate on stage the adoption by the United Nations of the Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples in September 2007, more than 30 years after it was first drafted. This essay is designed to make the study and teaching of human rights exhilarating for actors and non-actors alike. Whether you have experience or not using theater as a pedagogical tool, the plays we introduce and the games we suggest will guide you through the principles and practice of Augusto Boal’s revolutionary method, showing how Theater of the Oppressed (TO) can be used to create a world where human rights are appreciated and protected. In particular, we use TO to discuss the current situation of Indigenous Peoples in Brazil, and in the United States, in light of the Second International Decade of the World’s Indigenous Peoples (2006-2015).

Who Are the Storytellers? Dramatic Oppression Today

Wanderley, Antonio, IronHawk, Mollie, and Pecwan are the main protagonists of five plays written about Indigenous Peoples’ rights in contemporary North and South America. Their histories of genocide, capital punishment and incarceration, disease and starvation, and the struggle to repatriate ancestors’ remains back to Indian country, alert the public to what Indigenous Peoples are doing today to fight for justice and self-determination. The antagonists, in turn—military dictators, government officials, corporate executives, and diehard scientists—
undergo profound identity transformations once their real identities are dramatically revealed. The original collection of one-act and full plays introduced ahead claims that an infusion of arts-based performances encourages de-colonizing points of view. The power of Theater of the Oppressed (TO) lies in its ability to delve into the emotions, issues, and mostly the oppression that lies within all of us, reaching out to broad audiences that rarely have access to, and most likely never benefit directly from, human rights education. The main argument, here, is that TO can effectively help facilitate public discussion about the human rights of Indigenous Peoples in the Americas, and worldwide, commemorating the recent adoption in 2007 of the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (DRIP).

It is thus that Wanderley Guarani, an Amazonian prophet and Indigenous warrior, manages to liberate his people from the grips of military dictators in the early 1980s following his vision that the world will end buried under a pile of gold, diamonds, and semi-precious stones. Wanderley’s transformation into Xondaro, the visionary warrior, comes after his agonizing experience carrying dirt instead of gold at the Castle of Dreams -- a prospecting site controlled by Goldtooth on the banks of the Xingu River. In Act One, Scene Five of Firewater, Goldtooth lands his single-engine plane on a dirt airstrip in the Xingu Indigenous Park, Central Brazil, inviting all Indians to go prospecting.

(...)

GOLDTOOTH: Castle of Dreams, everybody welcome! Everybody wanting to go will have a chance to pan gold today. [Goldtooth distributes soda pop, gumdrops, cigarettes, and sugar cane rum.]

WANDERLEY: Mr. Goldtooth, this is my dream come true! My prayers to Saint George have been answered! Hail Saint George!

GOLDTOOTH: Hail Saint George! Hail! Put on your clothes and get on this dragon fast. Better take a sword ‘cause it’s wild out there.
WANDERLEY: I’ll be buying a gun pretty soon… Mr. Goldtooth, these boots are mighty nice! I’m sure looking pretty dainty for a gold miner! I don’t know how to pan, but I learn quick. I’ll be needing some soap, deodorant, cologne, and a comb. And I’m really hot for a woman. I like this life. An Indian’s life is only for someone who knows nothing, right?

(…)

Antonio da Silva, in turn, a seven-year-old smart little nordestino, offers his body in sacrifice to forestall once and for all the madness of hunger in Alto do Cruzeiro, northeastern Brazil. In Scene Three of Madness of Hunger, the boy is trying to convince his mother Madalena to allow him to go to heaven, saving up the little food they have for his baby twin sisters instead.

(…)

ANTONIO: Mãe, listen, I had a dream!

MADALENA: Son, there is no meat. None!

ANTONIO: Mãe! Listen! I was an angel and I was flying for real! Way, way up there, way above the clouds, everything so blue and beautiful. Mãe! It is beautiful up there!

MADALENA: Eat the bread, here, and stop the nonsense.

ANTONIO: Mãe! I saw the gate to heaven, just like you said, gold and bright. And guess what, Papa was there, waiting for me with José, Marcelo, Eliza, and Paulinho! [Antonio’s sisters are crying louder and louder. The boy moves toward them holding a piece of bread]

MADALENA: Get away from them! Here, if you don’t want the bread, give it to me. [grabbing the bread from him and biting into it]

ANTONIO: Mãe! I wanna go there, please!

MADALENA: In your dreams!

ANTONIO: Mãe! I am ready to go there!
MADALENA: Now you shut up and go fetch some water. You were never supposed to be an angel, and now you’re too old to turn into one. You’re staying here with Mama and we’re going to have a good life together, just the two of us.

(…)

❖

We then move on to IronHawk, an Apache warrior on death row in the United States for more than 30 years. IronHawk embarks on a spiritual journey at the moment of his botched execution at a maximum security prison in Oklahoma, in the Summer of 2008. IronHawk on Death Row begins with the Apache Indian and his friend Hutch playing poker in the “cage,” a 10 X 12 cemented patio enclosed by steel bars in the prison yard. IronHawk’s left eye is covered by a black patch because of injuries sustained in a gladiator fight staged by prison guards and the warden.

(…)

IRONHAWK: You a snitch? I’m no Chief. I’m an Apache warrior -- IronHawk is my name, and I am innocent. I'm a political prisoner of the United States government, a P.O.W.

HUTCH: P.O. What?

IRONHAWK: P.O.W. means Prisoner of War.

HUTCH: You gotta be kidding me. What war? Vietnam? Iraq?

IRONHAWK: Indian wars, colonial wars. They’ve been waging war against my people for hundreds of years. Never heard of Wounded Knee?

HUTCH: Yeah, I seen cowboy movies on TV. Dances with Wolves, my favorite. But that was waaaay back then. Wake up Chief, we’re in the 21st century!

IRONHAWK: Big Foot, Geronimo, Crazy Horse… My heroes were all P.O.W.s, they all killed cowboys. Did’ya ever wonder why?

HUTCH: ‘Cause you guys are savages!

IRONHAWK: Genocide!
HUTCH: Genocide? Fuck. Too much reading those damn books. You think the law gives a fuck about us? Now, gladiator fights are cool, man, you ain’t giving up on those, are you. What fun is there for an inmate like me if there ain’t no fighting? Listen up, Chief. You planning some big escape? Cause books ain’t gonna get you out of this hole. And magic ain’t neither.

(...) 

In northern California, Yurok fisherwoman Mollie Ruud envisions her body as a slot machine that pops diabetes pills like silver nickels in order to regain control of her social and emotional health. Diabetes Jackpot is a monologue in which Mollie reminisces about her childhood on the Yurok reservation, her eight-year incarceration at Chemawa Boarding School in Oregon in the 1940s, and finally her struggle with diabetes and gambling addiction in the 1980s and 90s, until the moment of her death in the Summer of 2004.

(...) 

MOLLIE: I feel like a slot machine, popping pills like quarters, dimes and nickels into my mouth. We all wish we’d strike it rich gambling around here in these casinos. But who does? The machines are tight, real tight, they aren’t letting you win easy, just swallow up your money. You think you have a chance, you hear stories about folks who get a few grand. But most people? Nothing! Spend all their money in the casinos, they can’t help it. That’s what the government gave us Indian people for development, casinos!

I’m hooked on gambling too, just like these damned pills. Now you tell me, how many people actually get cured? I don’t see anyone around here, all my relations are dying off and they sure take a lot of pills! If it weren’t for Medicare, I couldn’t afford it. But if you look at these prices [showing her monthly medicine list] they add up to a lot of money, more than 500 bucks a month. Who pays the bill? The government pays the pharmaceutical companies, who are making big bucks on us Indian people. Just like mining or logging or fishing and now casinos. So every time
I pop a pill I feel like a gambler: I close my eyes and hope to hit the jackpot, that my diabetes will go away forever.

(…)

Medicine woman **Pecwan Sky Girl** grabs the scene and infuses Love Medicine into the bio-archaeology laboratory where she’s lived for 50 years, securing her own, and her relatives’ final repatriation and proper burial back onto their original homelands in northern California. Pecwan meets Wotek—a slick e-shaman who travels through the conduits, pipes, and cyber-space of the San Francisco Bay—when their remains are stacked up on top of each other in a dark damp basement of a bio-archaeology lab. In the first scene of *May Your Body Lay Naked on Mother Earth*, Pecwan is doctoring all of her 1500 relations whose bodies have been brought into the lab by a private developer who’s just dug them up in the San Francisco Bay. Pecwan and Wotek fall madly in love.

(…)

**PECWAN**: [singing the Moon Formula for Wounds] A ya ha ya hey, I have come to see you, Moon. People are hurt. They have hurt my relations!

[Her singing becomes more and more intense, high-pitched and beseeching. She is moaning, wailing, weeping, trying to placate the spirits of her brethren in boxes. It is an incantation to rid them of whatever spiritual ailments haunt them, to summon their light and their wholeness, to give them peace even though they are in pieces, and far from the nurturing soil of home.]

**PECWAN**: A ya ha ya hey, Moon, send me your love medicine! This relative here has gotten shot and wounded! There is blood no more, I can only find his bones!

[Pecwan starts rubbing Wotek’s bones one by one with a madrone leaf, placing them on her prayer rug. Wotek materializes from backstage wearing a slick silver Speedo suit]

**PECWAN**: A ya ha ya hey, Moon, your medicine is good! [turning to Wotek] I am giving you my medicine, my love medicine. May this tobacco help purify your spirit.
[Pecwan crumbles some smoking tobacco into the palm of her hand and blows it off onto Wotek, while stomping her feet vigorously dancing around him. Wotek begins to cry and sing aloud, too]

**WOTEK:** A na ha na ney, Sky Girl! Sing me the Song of the Stars! Sing me the Song of the Moon!

**PECWAN:** Indian, I pity you. You’ll be all right. See me standing here, you need not be afraid.

Money and arrows I have for you.

(...)

In *Acting Human Rights*, our ultimate goal is to show how Theater of the Oppressed can be used to protect human rights across the globe. We are particularly interested in supporting the implementation in practice of the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples in South and North America, as the document also provides a road map for the reconciliation of Indigenous and non-Indigenous peoples worldwide. This critical universal human rights instrument was adopted by the UN on September 13, 2007, with an overwhelming majority of 143 votes in favor, 11 abstentions, and only 4 negative votes cast by Canada, Australia, New Zealand, and the United States. Human rights Declarations become universally applicable upon their adoption by the UN General Assembly, regardless of how individual states vote. The UN Declaration affirms minimum human rights standards necessary for the “survival, dignity and well-being of the Indigenous peoples of the world.” These include the right of self-determination, protections from discrimination and genocide, and recognition of rights to lands, territories and resources that are essential to the identity, health and livelihood of Indigenous Peoples. The Declaration also explicitly requires that all provisions are to be balanced with other rights protections and interpreted in accordance with principles of justice, democracy, non-discrimination, good governance and respect for the human rights of all. Using Theater of the Oppressed, *Acting Human Rights* claims that the rights affirmed in the Declaration are vital to the survival of Indigenous Peoples in the Americas, and across the planet.
Human Rights are the rights all peoples are entitled to simply because they are human beings, irrespective of their citizenship, nationality, race, ethnicity, language, sex, sexuality, or abilities. Human rights become enforceable when they are codified as conventions, covenants, or treaties, or as they become recognized as customary international law.¹

Xavante children in central Brazil sing and dance for the well-being of their community.


Theater of the Oppressed as a pedagogical tool

When Theater of the Oppressed insinuates itself into the classroom or out onto the street, human rights education becomes an inspiring and powerful experience. Inviting students and the general audience to act out skits on Indigenous Peoples’ rights, exploring different characters within each story, alternative scenarios and peaceful endings turn out to be real possibilities. Based on true facts, the plays were recently written by Mariana Ferreira to raise awareness about the rights of
Indigenous Peoples in the Americas. All five pieces were stage-read and/or performed in public arenas by Dominique Devine, students and colleagues at San Francisco State University, and University of California at Berkeley. Full versions of the plays can be found at http://righttoknow.sfsu.edu or at http://humanrights.sfsu.edu.

Drama promotes critical thinking, and the discussion of these plays prompted by TO techniques enables students and the broader public to reflect upon and formulate their own ideas of a just world. TO has the power to spark strong student activism and promote social change in provocative ways, as several theater directors and educators have recently shown (Albarello 2007, Horn-Gibson & Marín 2008, Johnson 2005, McLennan & Smith 2007, Soloranzo 1989, Thompson 1997). Playwriting enhances the imagination, triggering feelings that may otherwise remain dormant in an academic setting. For centuries, theater has shown its power to change public perception of social problems. As Boal explains, “we are used to plays in which the characters make the revolution on stage and the spectators in their seats feel themselves to be triumphant revolutionaries” (1975:142). TO is radically different because it invites the audience to participate on stage in the theatrical action.

Whether you have experience or not using theater as a pedagogical tool, our practice writing and directing plays, and performing TO in classrooms and public spaces in the past few years, will guide you through some of the principles and practice of Augusto Boal’s revolutionary method of theater. The authors of this essay posit that TO can be used to envision a world where human rights are appreciated and protected. Following Boal, our goal is to engage you in a theatrical rehearsal of real life human rights issues directly related to Indigenous Peoples living in South and North America today.

Using the five plays introduced above as starting points, we suggest activities that can help actors and non-actors alike realize that the dramatic situation faced by most of the original inhabitants of this planet can be changed if their human rights are protected. The issues addressed by the characters in each play also challenge participants to make connections between the
oppression faced by their own communities, and other peoples around the globe. Student testimonies presented ahead on practicing TO in the SFSU classroom, and in the streets, clearly demonstrate that the teaching of human rights can be an empowering and exhilarating experience for actors and non-actors alike. In several of our graduate and undergraduate courses at SFSU, including “Anthropology and Human Rights” and “Endangered Cultures,” students concur that a more meaningful and comprehensive understanding of human rights can be built. TO requires that we take a stance, engage in action, and become “spect-actors” rather than mere spectators of the “other.” As spect-actors, we can take part in games and exercises designed to liberate the oppression that ultimately lies within our own selves. Ultimately, bringing theater and critical thinking into the advocacy and research mix has the power to generate new attitudes and knowledges about our own human rights, and consequently the rights of all peoples and communities on this planet.

We start with a short background of Mariana’s experience with TO in Brazil during the military dictatorship (1964-1985), briefly introducing Boal’s and Freire’s influence on her work. Next, we move onto both Mariana’s and Dominique’s experiences using Boal’s theory as a pedagogical tool in the anthropology classroom at SFSU and at national conferences and other public forums in the United States. Finally, we suggest TO games that can be applied to the five plays outlined above, or to any other human rights situation of your choice. Most recently, our TO activities at SFSU have incited students to start writing, directing and performing their own plays to a wide audience, raising awareness about human rights around the world.

1. Indigenous Peoples in Brazil and the early TO movement

Most people are not familiar with the details of the colonial history and genocide of Indigenous Peoples across the world. In the Americas, over 90 percent of the original population -- at least 20 million people -- were summarily exterminated after the European invasion began in the late 1400s. It is not difficult to imagine how different the fate of these communities would have been
had their basic human rights been respected from the start (Ferreira 2004, 2002a; Ferreira & Suhrbier 2002, Nelson 2008).

The human rights approach to TO presented in this essay stems primarily from Mariana’s experience working as a school teacher and practical nurse on Brazilian Indigenous territories in the 1970s and 80s, as well as her practice as a medical anthropologist and human rights educator in North and South America at the turn of the third millennium (Ferreira & Lang 2006). From the very beginning, the critical pedagogy of Brazilian educator Paulo Freire (1921 - 1997) oriented her work in both health and education. Freire's *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (2006), first published in Portuguese in 1970, provided substantial insights for young, revolutionary educators to develop a system of popular education in Brazilian Indigenous schools during the oppressive dictatorship of 1964 to 1985. Freire created his philosophy of popular education working with the illiterate poor of the Brazilian Northeast. Starting in the late 1940s, his innovative approach to literacy emphasized peasants’ ability to generate knowledge collectively, using “generative words”, such as land, water, and food, that conveyed their life conditions and worldviews.

Freire’s work inspired Augusto Boal (1932-2009) to invent TO in the late 1960s, helping people see themselves as historical actors, capable of organizing on their own and creating social change. The military dictators strongly opposed this system of popular education, and both Freire and Boal were forced into exile in the 1970s and 80s. Popular educators connected with non-governmental and indigenous organizations, and academic institutions, such as the Comissão Pró-Índio de São Paulo (Pro-Indian Commission of São Paulo) and the Universidade de São Paulo (USP), defied the military ban on Freire’s and Boal’s ideas, and carried out revolutionary educational programs, in spite of heavy retaliation.

Following Freire’s critical pedagogy, Mariana and her indigenous students in Brazil posited that learning should be viewed as an act of culture and freedom through *conscientização* (Freire 1973). All of the activities and publications produced by the Xavante, Kayabi, Suyá, Juruna and other students reflected such a consciousness, understood to have the power to
transform reality (Ferreira 1998a, 1998b, 1997, 1994a, 1994b, 1992). In order to evade repression from the military, the students sometimes wrote and performed fictional plays and short stories using pseudonyms, disguising the real identities of the oppressor and oppressed alike.ii

The new 1988 Constitution of Brazil helped further empower the Organized Indigenous Movement in the country, reflecting a worldwide trend at the turn of the 21st century. The original draft of the Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples had just been put together in 1985 by the Working Group on Indigenous Populations, the world’s largest human rights forum. The right to cultural diversity, to quality education and health care, and the fundamental right to occupy ancestral territories, also featured in the new Brazilian Constitution, are main themes fully addressed in the plays here presented. The concrete implementation of such rights, however, is far from reality. Indigenous Peoples in Australia, Brazil, China, India, Siberia, the United States, and all over the world, for that matter, still live in poverty and ill health, and face tremendous racial discrimination in their daily lives. They are united in their suffering, but they are also united in working towards having their rights respected. The Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples, adopted by the United Nations in September 2007, reflects more than 30 years of hard work on the part of the peoples themselves to take into their own hands the elaboration of this important international instrument of human rights protection.iii

In the Xingu Indigenous Park, central Brazil, Paulo Freire’s emphasis on dialogue, and people working with each other to transform the world, materialized into plays, short stories, memoirs, drawings, photographs, and maps published collectively in numerous newsletters, first-readers, atlases, and history books used in indigenous schools where Mariana worked. Like Freire, all of the young teachers and nurses working on Indigenous reservations viewed education as an effort to liberate people, and not as yet another instrument to dominate them. Freire's insistence on situating educational activity in the lived experience of participants has opened up a series of possibilities for the way education has been put into practice in Brazilian schools, including Indigenous ones. Boal’s Theater of the Oppressed is one such methodology, which
closely mirrors the dialogical and transformational aspects of Freire’s critical Pedagogy of the Oppressed.

Shaman Romdó Suyá, dressed in spotted jaguar attire, Xingu Indigenous Park

Photo: Mariana Leal Ferreira, 1998.
Students from 17 distinct Indigenous nations, speaking 17 different languages, attended the Diauarum School in the Xingu Indigenous Park, in Central Brazil, where Mariana taught Mathematics and Portuguese in the early 1980s. In 1981 Mariana and her students put together an original play at the Diauarum School. Fishing on the Xingu River conveyed, with no words and in action only, the everyday practices of local communities who relied heavily on fishing for survival. The idea was for each community to teach one another the multiple techniques to catch a huge variety of sweet water fish in the Amazon basin. As a result, games were quickly developed to introduce these practices to incoming villagers, especially those recently relocated from afar, such as the recently contacted Panará in 1978, by the military into the Xingu Park. Similar activities were developed for the various hunting techniques for large animals, such as the tapir (Tapirus terrestris), which led to several publications in Portuguese and indigenous languages that were then distributed widely to other peoples in the area.

Right then, at the Diauarum School, the true spirit of Boal’s methodology, experimenting with new forms of interactive theater, was coming into shape to address a situation of oppression given the forced dislocation of the peoples from their original lands, and their confinement on small reservations. As Boal had predicted, practicing TO helped reveal the more subtle forms of oppression, such as the military’s perverse system of privilege and compensation of some nations to the detriment of others. The ‘Fishing on the Xingu River’ workshop helped reveal different problems affecting the various local communities, such as the pollution of the rivers caused by cattle farms, mining and logging businesses. We practiced all possible forms of interactions, impersonating our main antagonists -- farmers, loggers, gold miners, military and government officials – here represented in the play Firewater. While the Gê-speaking Kayapó and Suyá, for instance, usually proposed more aggressive strategies, our TO games revealed that the Tupi-speaking Kayabi and the Juruna peoples, for instance, developed tactics that were oftentimes more effective than using violence. Rather than watch our plays and workshops as mere audience, communities from all over the Xingu Park – sometimes travelling in canoes for one or two days...
up and down the Xingu River and its tributaries, would join our informal educational activities to suggest novel possibilities to liberate themselves from the ill effects of extensive land invasion and widespread appropriation and contamination of natural resources. For example, conversations between farmers and indigenous youth who spoke Portuguese were staged, bringing different solutions on how to protect the headwaters of main rivers that ran into the Xingu Park from pesticides, mercury, and other environmental pollutants.

Ultimately, this experience points to the importance of understanding the breadth of human rights instruments of protection, most notably the Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (DRIP). TO emerges as an extraordinary methodology to explore different possibilities to create and re-create worlds anew, as it relies on individuals’ and their communities’ perceptions of how to overcome oppression and achieve liberation.

**TO in the Anthropology classroom**

A meaningful understanding of human rights can be built through storytelling and theatrical action. By drawing on Indigenous personal narratives in South and North America, we have put together a dynamic collection of theater plays that facilitates the understanding and dissemination of DRIP throughout the world. Bringing theater and critical thinking into the research and advocacy mix has the power to generate new attitudes and respect for others, and to construct an effective system to protect the human rights of Indigenous Peoples worldwide.\(^\text{vii}\)

Originally incorporated by Boal and his followers into community and street theater frameworks, TO has become an effective tool for teaching human rights in classrooms across the globe. In recent years, TO has been used across multiple disciplines and for a wide array of revolutionary issues: promoting sexual and reproductive rights (Thompson 1997), protecting youth at risk (McLennan & Smith 2007), and deconstructing race and racism (Horn-Gibson & Marín 2008). In Anthropology classes at SFSU, Mariana and Dominique have used theater as a pedagogical tool to encourage students to contemplate justice in a globalizing world, where human rights are at the forefront of the battle ground. Applying Boal’s methods to
Anthropological Theory, Endangered Cultures, and Human Rights classes, we have examined social issues from first hand experiences. Since 2007, the authors have explored the multiple characters students have created in the classroom to help protect the rights outlined in DRIP. In our efforts, we are joined by other social scientists and educators in utilizing TO as a pedagogical tool because of its effectiveness (Albarello 2007, Bartlett 2005, Johnson 2005). Students make connections through their own lived experiences and pertinent research, enhancing the body of critical knowledge towards the promotion of Indigenous Peoples’ rights.

Student testimonials on the power of TO as a pedagogical tool

Since the Summer of 2007, hundreds of SFSU students working under the guidance of Mariana Ferreira, and TO practitioners Dominique Devine, Eva Langman and Nathan Embretson have written, directed, and/or performed numerous TO plays on campus, in the streets of the broader San Francisco Bay Area, and at national conferences in the U.S. In Fall 2008, Dominique joined our TO team as a graduate student in the course “Foundations of Anthropological History.” Her play Realizing the Dream explained the demise of Neanderthals on this planet from anthropologist Franz Boas’ (1858 – 1942) historical perspective. Soon after in Spring 2009, Dominique practiced TO along with her colleagues in the “Anthropology and Human Rights” course, taking part in our Never Ending Peace and Love public performance at the United Nations Plaza in downtown San Francisco. The daughter of a Vietnam war veteran, TO helped Dominique reflect about her father’s, and her own traumatic memories of violence in times of war.

Several SFSU students have commented on their experiences using TO in the classroom to address human rights. Krystale Triggs, an anthropology major and human rights advocate deeply involved with TO issues, told the authors that “Personally, TO makes me realize where I stand in an established system of power. In understanding my place, I can further challenge myself and stand on higher grounds, empowering others” (email to authors, 9/28/2009). Student Margaret Decuir concurs: “Theater of the Oppressed really helped me learn about human rights violations by fleshing them out and making them real. Performing and observing real people
enacting something as serious as homelessness, veteran’s mental health or any other serious topic really helped me grasp the concept and feel more strongly about taking a stand against oppression and violence. (…) TO is wonderful and should be used in all schools across the world” (email to authors, 9/23/2009). Nicole Marchand took Anthropology and Human Rights (ANTH 588/788) in Spring 2008. This class organizes the SFSU Annual Human Rights Summit since 2004, to promote the human rights of all peoples across the globe. In preparation for the summit, students analyze the practice of human rights from an anthropological perspective, undertaking studies on violence, health equity, and the promotion of global peace. According to Nicole, “TO in the classroom creates solidarity, makes class more intimate and connected, and makes us think ON THE SPOT about critical human rights issues. You have to be sensitive to all sides in a TO game, and must think through all solutions thoroughly, whether you agree with them or not” (email to authors, 9/25/2009). Roshan Pourabdollah, a graduate student in the Department of Human Rights Education at the University of San Francisco, agrees:

As a student and educator, I am truly thankful for my exposure to TO during my time at SFSU. I’ve been able to take the pedagogical tools learned in Anthropology and Human Rights and transfer them to the classroom and community at large. The experience of being a "spect-actor" exposed me to new ways of deconstructing complex issues and imagining positive solutions. TO is fun, uncomfortable, exiting, and mindblowing all at once; and a tool I know I will use in many years to come (e-mail to authors, 2/3/2010).

Nathan Embretson, a video-maker and former SFSU graduate, became a TO advocate after his experience using theater in the anthropology classroom to raise awareness about the rights of Indigenous Peoples worldwide. Nathan helped produce and perform several plays mentioned in this essay.

Coming from a privileged background, I never had to think deeply about these issues before, so using TO techniques such as opposite thought, and forum theater allowed me to tap that human experience and see the issue in a more holistic way. This is the power
that TO brings to the classroom experience. It allows us access to those realities that we are not forced to confront in daily life, and it provides a platform to discover tools to fight against all forms of injustice (e-mail to authors, 1/15/2010).

Using TO in the classroom has opened up multiple opportunities for SFSU students and faculty to better understand the rights of Indigenous Peoples worldwide, and to further expand their human rights work. At the 15th Annual International Pedagogy and Theater of the Oppressed (PTO) Conference in Minneapolis, MN, in May 2009, Nathan and Mariana presented the workshop The Color Red. Fighting with Flowers and Fruits in Xavante Territory, Central Brazil. Using Forum Theater, the Joker (played by Nathan) briefly outlined the dramatic conditions of life faced by Indigenous Peoples in central Brazil today. Participants then rehearsed several possible solutions to the conflict between the Xavante people and big land owners in the state of Mato Grosso. “Living sculptures” brought alive spect-actors’ perceptions about the Xavante’s theory of environmental justice, based on an economy of gift-exchange and the circulation of wealth for all (Mauss 1990[1925]). Gift-exchange is diametrically opposed to the farmers’ capitalist economic action, which relies on accumulation and renewed profit for only a handful of individuals and big corporations.

**Theater of the Oppressed gains worldwide recognition**

The “Centro do Teatro do Oprimido” (Center of the Theater of the Oppressed, CTO) is the original TO organization in Brazil dedicated to Augusto Boal’s TO methodology. The website lists many important resources and TO organizations that are truthful to Boal’s idea of theater as a weapon, a rehearsal for revolution (www.theatreoftheoppressed.org). CTO was the recipient of the Prêmio Direitos Humanos 2009 (Human Rights Award 2009) granted by Brazilian President Lula da Silva, to Boal’s TO project. Lula’s government now supports several community initiatives that apply TO to address social justice issues (see http://ctorio.org.br/novosite/). Here in the U.S, the Brecht Forum in New York maintains the political, social, and class awareness originally proposed by Boal (www.toplab.org). The Jansanskriti theater company in India also
maintains the creative and conscious work first advanced by Boal (www.jansankriti.org). The PTO conference website (www.ptoweb.org/links.html) has several useful links.

Let us now move to a brief summary of Mariana’s plays on Indigenous Peoples’ rights, suggesting TO exercises adapted from Games for Actors and Non Actors (Boal 1992) used by both authors inside and out of the classroom to teach human rights.

Yurok couple in northern California.

Illustration by cartoon artist Sammy Gensaw. (Reproduced with permission.)
THE PLAYS

In Acting Human Rights, we bring some of Boal’s TO techniques on stage to examine the UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples. Wanderley, Antonio, IronHawk, Mollie, Pecwan and many other main characters in the plays here portrayed suffer from a wide array of human rights abuses, as mentioned before. The protagonists take concrete human rights action to create a better world for themselves and their communities. We are at a starting point: the UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (DRIP) as it now stands is a unifying document with a long history and vital implications for the future of the world. The authors’ main goal in presenting these plays within a TO framework is to prepare practitioners to take action according to principles of the Declaration, clearly spelled out in its 46 articles. The plays offer spect-actors a way to see the world as it is, and the Declaration shows an ideal world in which human rights are respected. Theatre of the Oppressed bridges the gap between present and future. What are some of the different outcomes that could arise if the Declaration were a legally binding document, that is, if it finally became a Convention? What are the strengths and weaknesses of the Declaration? How applicable is the document to specific cases of human rights abuses brought forth in the plays, as well as in the situations that concern you more closely? The objective, here, is to further rehearse these questions if we intend to fully implement DRIP into practice, and transform it into a Convention with legally binding power at an international level.

Outline of the Plays

We recommend looking for the full versions of the five plays mentioned at the start of this essay and outlined below at http://humanrights.sfsu.edu or else http://righttoknow.sfsu.edu. In the authors’ opinion, it would be best to download the plays and use them as starting points for the TO exercises we suggest, described in detail in Games for Actors and Non-Actors (Boal 1992). In addition, the section “TO Glossary,” presented below, will enhance your understanding of some of the most important Boalian techniques we use in this piece. We also suggest a few key political
issues for you to explore, such as mining on indigenous territories in the play Firewater, in order to gain a broader understanding of what’s at stake in each of the plays summarized ahead.

1. Firewater

Narrative Synopsis: This is the story of Wanderley Guarani, an Amazonian prophet and Indigenous warrior who liberates his people from the grips of military dictators in the 1980s following his vision that the world will end buried under a pile of gold, diamonds, and semi-precious stones. In exchange for sugar cane rum, cigarettes and a little money, Wanderley spent his life cleaning houses, fetching water and cutting wood for government employees on Indian reservations. He dreamed about becoming a goldminer, buying a cattle farm and flying an airplane all by himself until the day he met in trance with the Great Cannibal Spirit, ready to swallow Wanderley into the Hell Hole. The accuracy and uncanny detail of Wanderley’s apocalyptic vision, foreseeing the collapse of the world into the very same pits the gold came from helped save the Guarani from extinction. Following Wanderley’s death in military torture chambers, thousands of Guarani Indians march to Brasília, the country’s district capital, demanding the demarcation of ancestral territories and the return of Wanderley’s remains for proper burial. Under great international pressure, the President of Brazil, General Carneiro, signs the Demarcation Act of the Guarani reservation and gives back the skull of Wanderley to his People, setting free the spirit of the illustrious Guarani warrior Xondaro—Wanderley’s first name and true spirit at birth.

1.1 Dedication (Ideological Warm-up): Who should your TO Firewater activities be dedicated to? An individual, song, prayer, or event? You may wish to dedicate the practice session to an indigenous leader in your area or country of residence, or else to a community member or politician dedicated to social justice and human rights.

1.2 Key political issue: We suggest the “Exploitation of natural resources on Indigenous territories.” See www.socioambiental.org for detailed information in English and/or Portuguese.
1.3 Suggested TO activities:

a) “Inventing the ‘Indian reservation,’ and the Castle of Dreams.” Here you can explore The invention of space and the spatial structures of power, a TO game suggested by Boal in his arsenal of Theater of the Oppressed (1992:162). Explore different alternatives indigenous characters can undertake to rid themselves of oppression today.

b) “Without leaving a single space empty in the ‘Hell Hole’.” Here you have the opportunity to practice the occupation of a wide space/territory by actors in motion, as it refers to Indigenous Peoples’ organized movement today in the Americas to regain control of their ancestral lands. This exercise was adapted from Boal’s Without leaving a single space in an empty room (1992:127).

c) “The Encounter.” In this exercise you have the opportunity to use Forum Theater to practice the various types of encounters between Indigenous Peoples and colonizers today. In South America, there are more than one hundred small Indigenous Peoples (think societies, not individuals) who remain isolated from the broader national nation-states they live within. What are the possible scenarios that can be enacted portraying the encounters or “contact situations” between Indigenous Peoples and colonizers? In Complete the image, Boal suggests we explore “all the meanings a single image may have” (1992:139). Here, the encounter is the image.

2. The Madness of Hunger

Narrative Synopsis: This is the story of Antonio Batista, a seven-year-old smart little nordestino, who offers his body in sacrifice to forestall once and for all the madness of hunger in Alto do Cruzeiro, northeastern Brazil. Antonio considers himself “a lucky boy” and says he is “glad to be alive,” despite his bare-bone and ill health. He fears, however, for the fate of his younger twin sisters, on the brink of starvation, and for the sanity of his mother Maria, who suffers from chronic nervos. There is never enough food in the house for the children, who are constantly crying, driving Maria crazy. One day Madalena shares her last two Valium pills with her sister Maria so that the woman can make the decision no mother can dream of: Which one of her three
kids should she let go of this time? Should it be Sofia or Carolina? Antonio, she ponders, is already too old to be an angel. When Antonio overhears the conversation between his mother and aunt Madalena, the boy decides to carry out his plan: to offer his own body, like Jesus did, to end the sacrifice of others. What ensues is a battle between life and death, between hunger and desire, and between justice and fate.

2.1 Dedication (Ideological Warm-up): Who should your TO Madness of Hunger activities be dedicated to? The more than one billion people facing hunger in the world today need your attention. The homeless in your community who do not have access to quality food? Or the many Antonios in this world, who have given up their bodies and souls in sacrifice to save many others? You have many choices.

2.2 Key political issue: We recommend you look into the staggering facts about why so many people are hungry today, by going to www.worldhunger.org for detailed information. If there is enough food out there to feed the world, why isn’t it being properly distributed? Stakes are high.

2.3 Suggested TO activities:

a) “Following the hungry master.” Here you have the opportunity to exercise what Boal calls Emotional and Ideological Warm-up Exercises, starting with Abstract emotion (1992:223). In the absence of any concrete motivation on your part toward protecting Antonio, how does the boy gain your tenderness? And why does the exercise suggest using only numbers, rather than words, to convey emotions?

b) In “Below the poverty line,” participants can read aloud and discuss newspaper or web articles on poverty and hunger around the world. Despite our efforts, why do the popular imagination and the popular media continue to deny the serious issues of poverty and hunger today? Reading newspapers (1992:225) offers an opportunity to demystify the action of the bourgeois press, and rehearse information and experience brought by participants that are not contained in newspapers or easily found on the web.
c) “Ritual in which everyone becomes an angel” can inspire students to carry out any ritual in which they would ultimately turn into angels. Imagine, for instance, a group of young boys, like Antonio, playing soccer in dirt streets. In the course of the game, the boys turn into angels and continue playing soccer. What would these angels be like? How would angels living in poverty act like? See Boal’s Ritual in which everyone becomes an animal” (1992:224) for more ideas.9x

3. **IronHawk on Death Row**

**Narrative Synopsis:** IronHawk, an Apache warrior now on death row for 33 years, embarks on a spiritual journey at the moment of his botched execution at a maximum security prison in Oklahoma, in the Summer of 2008. The play examines the continuing Genocide of American Indians on death row in the U.S, highlighting the Geneva Convention’s ban on the execution of Prisoners of War or P.O.Ws. The play is based on Mariana’s experience teaching anthropology to American Indians on death row at a maximum security institution in Nashville, Tennessee, through the Long-Distance Education Program at the University of Tennessee (1999-2002). IronHawk uses “drama-as-a-medium,” following the works of Bertolt Brecht (1964[1930]), to create social change by inspiring and influencing public understanding about capital punishment.

3.1 **Dedication** (Ideological Warm-up): Who would you like to dedicate IronHawk activities to? To American Indians on Death Row in the United States, and Indigenous Peoples worldwide? To all of the 20 thousand death row inmates across the planet, and those executed every year despite reasonable doubt about their guilt? Take a stand.

3.2 **Key political issue:** According to Amnesty International, 137 countries have already abolished the death penalty (www.amnesty.org). Argentina, Chile, and Uzbekistan outlawed the death penalty in 2008. During 2007, 24 countries executed 1,252 people compared to 1,591 in 2006 (88% of the inmates were executed in China, Iran, Pakistan, Saudi Arabia, and the United States). Nearly 3,350 people were sentenced to death in 51 countries worldwide. More than 20,000 prisoners are on death row across the world today.
3.3 Suggested TO activities:

a) In “Capital Punishment,” participants can practice several of Boal’s Emotional warm-up exercises (1992:222-225). Actors can “perform pure emotional gymnastics” in Following the master or Stimulation of the dormant part of ourselves, by exercising a spectrum of emotions at stake in the capital punishment controversy. For instance, you may want to enact the emotions at stake for death penalty abolitionists, in contrast to those in favor of capital punishment.

b) Participants can practice Games of mask and ritual (Boal 1992:149-151) using several scenes from the play. IronHawk and Ms. Manslaughter, the warden, can metamorphose into each other in Follow two masters. IronHawk and Hutch, in turn, can start out playing their original parts and then change masks, representing instead each other’s “object of desire,” in Mask exchange. IronHawk’s botched execution can be sharply politicized in both the Addition of masks, and The politicians game.

4. Diabetes Jackpot

Narrative Synopsis: Yurok fisherwoman Mollie Ruud envisions her body as a slot machine that pops pills like coins in order to regain control of her social and emotional health. Born in the 1920s on the Yurok Indian Reservation in northern California, Mollie’s dilemma is whether to allow the billionaire casino and pharmaceutical industries to conspire and take control of American Indians’ soul and conduct in the 21st century. From behind a redwood tree where she was conceived, Mollie emerges in her traditional Yurok regalia singing shell songs of political liberation and emotional freedom, spitting out pills and coins originally used to devastate indigenous genotypes. TO is used as a powerful practice to change perceptions and actions of broad audiences and communities who still view American Indians as inherently at risk for diabetes, drug, and gambling addictions.

4.1 Dedication (Ideological Warm-up): Mollie Ruud, the main character of this play, was a human rights activist who spent her life (1928-2004) defending the fishing rights of the Yurok people on the Klamath River in northern California. Local heroes, like Mollie, need our support.
4.2 **Key political issue:** Indigenous Peoples are disproportionately affected by diabetes, a degenerative illness that affects primarily poor and disenfranchised peoples worldwide.

Eradicating diabetes is a political decision. Implementation of the Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples, and its transformation into a Convention, with legal international binding powers, would be a protective factor against diabetes. The Second International Decade of the World’s Indigenous Peoples (2006-2015) is the perfect moment for all of us to fight for this important Convention.

4.3 **Suggested TO activities:**

a) Several scenes from *Diabetes Jackpot* can be evoked to dialogue with Mollie Ruud, the main character, and suggest new endings to her dramatic life-history, using Boal’s games in The modeling sequence (1992:136-138). The possible scenarios include “A broken family,” “The body as slot-machine,” and “Hitting the diabetes jackpot.” Rather than imitating their paires, as in the Mirror sequence (1992:129-136), here the actors face each other and translate the actions they have seen by changing their own positions, suggesting new possibilities.

b) Boal proposes several workshop exercises to prepare students for Forum Theater or for the rehearsal of other kinds of theater. Here, Before and after, Transference of Emotion, and Exaggeration (1992: 226-234) are particularly recommended to help actors create healthy and productive dialogue within the theater space. Spect-actors and the Joker can say “stop” and intervene at any point during the action when a decision is made by the main character. In this way the students may engage directly with the characters offering points of divergence that lead to alternative solutions.

5. **May Your Body Lay Naked on Mother Earth**

**Narrative Synopsis:** For almost 50 years, Pekwan and Wotek have been in love. Their deep, spiritual affection spans cultural and geographic borders, and the physical and political confinement of their dark, cold, and polluted 12 by 35-inch prison cells. Pekwan’s and Wotek’s bodies are crammed into cardboard boxes in a bio-archaeology lab, stacked up amongst thousands
of brothers and sisters dug up from mass graves in northern California. The couple first met in 1959, when their spirits touched base in a damp, murky basement of a major U.S. University.

“For all our relations!” screams Pekwan, as scientists pour her remains from a cotton bag onto an icy steel table, poking at bullet holes in her skull. “For the seven generations!” shouts Wotek, as researchers drill a hole through his left thigh in search of fresh DNA. Since their Indian marriage in the 1960s, Pekwan and Wotek have worked day and night to protect the human and animal rights of their two and four-legged relatives. “Sing me the Song of the Stars!” cries Pekwan, protesting her ancestors’ recent transformation into research data. “Weave me a garment of brightness!” replies Wotek, when the United Nations finally ratifies the Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples in September, 2007. “We have made a footprint, we live in the light of day!” sing Pekwan, Wotek, and thousands of American Indian community members, commemorating their final repatriation and due respect for the right to proper burial of victims of genocide in the United States.

5.1 Dedication (Ideological Warm-up): Commemorate and acknowledge the significance of repatriation to Indigenous Peoples’ sovereignty, self-determination and human rights! Celebrate the agency of Indigenous Peoples in crafting DRIP, which will help sustain their cultural and political rights at the center of repatriation law and practice.

5.2 Key political issue:

In 1990, Congress enacted the Native American Graves Protection and Repatriation Act (NAGPRA), which set forth the process for all federal and federally-assisted museums, agencies and educational institutions to repatriate Indigenous Peoples’ remains and cultural objects to affiliated indigenous nations. NAGPRA also prescribed the rules that would apply to future excavations of Indigenous Peoples’ remains on federal and tribal lands. These laws represented a commitment by the United States government to honor the human rights of Indigenous Peoples to reclaim their ancestral remains and cultural objects, and to redress a history of genocide and colonization (see www.narf.org).
5.3 Suggested TO activities:

a) “Human remains in emotional situations” is an activity powerful enough to warm-up the actor emotionally so as to consider the issue of repatriation -- or rematriation, as we prefer to call it in this essay -- from varying points of view. Here, all of Boal’s Emotional warm-up and Ideological warm-up exercises (1992:222-226) offer excellent opportunities to prepare participants to fully engage in Forum Theater.

b) “Contemporary Indian wars” is the suggested topic for Reading newspapers (1992:225). Strikingly, the popular media today chooses to ignore the multiple everyday wars, large and small, enacted against Indigenous Peoples in South and North America, and across the globe. Try alternative sources, including reliable information provided by Survival International (www.survivalinternational.org/), International Indian Treaty Council (www.treatycouncil.org), and Indian Country Today (www.indiancountrytoday.com).

c) Students can also practice “Living Sculptures” by using scenes from the play. Suggested scenarios include: “Back to Mother Earth,” “Life after death,” “Making peace when you are in pieces,” and “Living in freedom.”

TO Glossary

Theater of the Oppressed (TO): a theory and practice of politically-engaged theater developed by Brazilian writer, director, and teacher Augusto Boal, who worked in literacy education with Paulo freire. Theater of the Oppressed emerged during the Brazilian military dictatorship (1964 – 1985), as Boal worked with oppressed groups that used theater as a tool to plan new forms of resistance. The goal of TO is to turn spectators into actors, all participating in breaking oppression together. Theater may not be revolutionary, Boal says, but it can be a rehearsal for revolution! Specific forms of TO include:

- **Image Theater**: exercises with bodies in still images and “dynamizations” (moving images), often images of oppression and images of possible ways to break it; and

- **Forum Theater**: plays in which audience members stop the action and enter it themselves,
to experiment with ways in which the protagonist(s) could break their oppression.

**Pedagogy of the Oppressed (PO):** a theory and practice of teaching and learning developed by Brazilian teacher and activist Paulo Freire, while doing literacy education with peasant populations. It is not enough, Freire said, to read the *word*; you must also learn the *world*. For pedagogy to be liberatory, Freire said, students, and teachers must engage in dialogue, in which the teachers’ knowledge and the students’ knowledge are respected and valued.

**Conscientização:** (“conscientization”): the name Paulo Freire gave to the process of learning to see the social, political and economic oppressions around you, and to take action against these oppressions.

**Spect-actor:** in TO there are no spectators! Everyone in the room must be actively engaged in the work. When this happens – for instance, when audience members enter into a Forum play – the spectator becomes a spect-actor.

**Joker:** the person or figure who facilitates the workshop or performance – and in the case of Forum or Legislative Theater, the person who mediates between the actors and spec-actors, and invites the spec-actors to join the action. Also sometimes called a “facilitator,” although Boal preferred the term “difficultator,” since more often than not, the Joker is the one who reveals just how difficult a problem of oppression is to solve!

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ENDNOTES

1 The forthcoming book Acting for the Human Rights of Indigenous Peoples, written by Mariana Ferreia and edited by Nancy Flowers, features TO “learning activities” for each one of the eight plays and short stories on the rights of Indigenous Peoples. The volume is part of the Human
Rights Education Series (book # 7), published by the Human Rights Education Center of the University of Minnesota School of Law.

ii We encourage you to check out The Pedagogy and Theatre of the Oppressed (PTO) website at http://ptoweb.org. PTO is committed to Paulo Freire’s and Augusto Boal’s movements of theatre and pedagogy to work with oppressed peoples of the world to develop critical literacies and actions to overcome social systems of oppression.

iii The full text of the Declaration can be found at www.un.org.

iv The Xingu Indigenous Park, located in the state of Mato Grosso, in central Brazil, was created in 1961 by the Brazilian government. It conveniently encapsulated Indigenous Peoples whose lands were taken away by incoming settlers and multinational corporations. The Diauarum School, located on the margins of the Xingu River, is now operated exclusively by the local communities with its own curricula and Indigenous teachers. For more information about Indigenous Peoples in Brazil, go to http://www.socioambiental.org

v Ferrera’s publications are listed in the References section.

vi United Nations documents show that much like Canada, Australia, and New Zealand, Brazil also followed closely the Indian policies developed by the United States in the 1800s to deal with ‘native populations’: encapsulation on reservations, compulsory attendance in boarding schools, and no means of economic development (Ferreira & Lang 2006).

vii There are over 370 million Indigenous Peoples in Africa, the Americas, Asia, Europe and the Pacific. They are among the most impoverished, marginalized and frequently victimized peoples in the world. This universal human rights instrument is celebrated globally as a symbol of triumph and hope. Effective implementation of the Declaration would result in significant improvements in the global situation of Indigenous Peoples. For more current information, see the edited volume by Melissa Nelson (2008).
Be aware that TO, much like Paulo Freire’s work, has been de-politicized and co-opted, particularly in the United States, to mean 1) avant-garde, experimental theater; 2) psychological/therapied/individual theater; and 3) liberal, white, academic, and elite theater.

“The true radical nature of the work—a popular form of theater, that is truly dialogical, grassroots, democratic, revolutionary, with a class consciousness, has been erased in many places in the US” (personal communication, John Chung, 2/1/10).

We also suggest you look at Boal’s TO games involving the creation of characters (1992:166-169), and Forum Theater workshop exercises (1992:234-235, 243).

This play was co-authored by Eva Langman, an SFSU anthropology graduate and TO practitioner.

Adapted from the “PTO Lingo” in the brochure of the 15th Annual International Pedagogy and Theater of the Oppressed Conference, May 29, 2009, at the Augsburg College in Minneapolis, MN, p. 3.