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*Don Quixote: Homeless in Seattle*

In regards to the theatrical project that I am looking at, *Don Quixote: Homeless in Seattle* (eSe Teatro, 2011-2014), I see a multiplicity of connections to the threads of thought (both theoretical and in praxis) within the various articles our conveners are asking us to look at, most notably the interview with novelist Renee Gladman and the essay by Mike Sell. Just to clarify, the play *Don Quixote: Homeless in Seattle (DQHS)* is an ongoing theatrical experiment spearheaded by Rose Cano, Artistic Director of Seattle's eSe Teatro and who also is employed full time as a Spanish-language medical interpreter at a public hospital in Seattle, a position she has held for the last seventeen years. In essence, the play is a reimagining of Cervantes' "first modern novel," situating the two main protagonists (Quixote and Panza) as undocumented Mexican immigrants navigating the experience of homelessness in modern day Seattle, a city that primarily finds itself identified with liberalism and technological progress (i.e. legalized marijuana and the home of Microsoft and Amazon.com). Yet the real-to-life characters (at turns hungry, beaten, and confused), are forced to move within the city's underbelly: emergency rooms, hygiene centers, and the street. Cano's play is structurally a tour of the city, and each scene is an actual Seattle location. But it is not the Seattle of the "everyday citizen," and especially not the Seattle of the tourists. From beneath freeway overpasses, to the *jornalero* corner of a Home Depot parking lot, to the flea-infested midnight mission of Seattle's historic Pioneer Square, Quixote and Panza navigate the localities where the average citizen would not tread. Indeed they are confined to these spaces due to their status as both homeless and undocumented. And like Gladman's novel (it seems, as I have not read it) where the

translatability of language is a major theme, neither Panza nor Quixote truly “speak the language” of the culture in which they are confined. Panza, an undocumented immigrant since childhood, has a tenuous grasp of Spanish. Quixote on the other hand is (as Gladman might put it) is “trapped in monolingualism;” he *only* speaks Spanish. The relationship between the two men is thus fraught with miscommunication as Panza repeatedly tries to give advice to the irrational “knight,” advice which usually leads to greater misunderstanding, and sometimes violence. In some ways, Cano’s play reflects perfectly Gladman’s own desire that her works are

“stories where “city” is an idea *toward which the author or characters reach*, a kind of reflective space that leads to questions about subjectivity or time. I love these questions regardless of the atmosphere in which they’re formulated, but *inside urban space, alongside buildings, traffic, transport, the encroaching crowd, the desolate part of the city, they take on dimension*. I can move “the problem of the person” around as though it were a thing” [emphasis added].

Cano moves the two homeless men throughout the play and the city. Quixote and Panza are at once part of the “desolate part of the city,” and the tech-heavy Seattle of the twenty-first century: in one scene they are temporarily employed as “Hobo-Hotspots,”—mobile wifi stations—at a tech conference at the Washington State Convention Center. This humorous scene, in which Panza attempts to explain to Quixote the fact that they’ve been hired to sell the “light of the stars” (*la luz de las estrellas*) is, like much of the play, based on actual events.

This leads to *DQHS*’s connection so to Mike Sell’s argument about the avant-garde. Essential to this production (and one of its aspects that led me to investigate it) is the fact that almost all of the events in the play are based on the actual experiences of homeless Latinos that

Rose Cano has interpreted for over the years. More importantly, Cano has crafted this play over the course of the last three years along with the help of the homeless and undocumented communities. Workshopping initial readings of the embryonic playscript at homeless shelters, day labor centers, a tent-city, drug rehabs, and missions, Cano used the feedback from these audiences (whom she refers to as her “co-author”) to help shape the structure and dialogue of the play, which is currently in its first full-fledged production at Seattle’s ACT Theater. I believe that Cano’s process fits squarely into Sell’s three criteria for a project to be avant-garde. By effectively engaging with a population as marginalized as the homeless, and bringing what in many ways is their voice to a main stage in Seattle, Cano is definitely setting out to *challenge power*. The death of one character in the play is a re-enactment of the killing of a homeless man by Seattle police in 2010, a case that is still contentious within the homeless community.

Secondly, Cano’s theatrical project would fit Sell’s model for an avant-garde being a *minority*. Although community theater projects nationwide try to reach marginalized populations in many ways, eSe Teatro’s process of active social involvement with the homeless community is radical, personally situated, and bears little resemblance to any other theater in the Seattle region.

Finally, and which has already been implied, *DQHS* works *with and within culture*, Sell’s third criterion. The play is both a *product of and an outreach for* a sub-culture in Seattle that, like in many places, is either villainized or ignored. Cano calls her post-play Q&A sessions “Dialogues with Dignity,” in which homeless spectators not only express their opinion about the theme, events and structure of the show, but contribute to the ongoing artistic production and empowerment of Seattle’s Latino theater artists.

Finally, Cano herself might be said to occupy a position in the “Undercommons,” one outside of academia. Her professional position as a medical interpreter has enabled her to create in the “fugitive” space of social activist theater. Like Gladman says of translators, Cano occupies “a special position with regard to the place of their found language(s) that is excellent for fiction. They have the tools to navigate comfortably, or at least functionally, within that non-native space, but because they are moving from the second language back into the first or the third language into the first (or whatever the configuration) they’ve got to stay a bit outside.”

Being both “outside” and “in” has allowed Cano to occupy, and thrive, in both the “professional” and “subversive” realms.