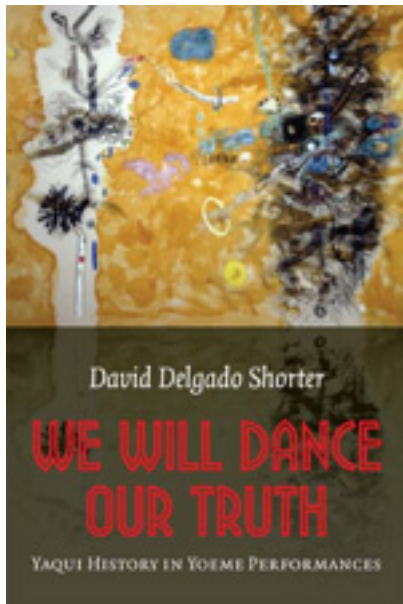


## ***We Will Dance Our Truth: Yaqui History in Yoeme Performances*** **by David Delgado Shorter**

Tamara Underiner | Arizona State University

Shorter, David Delgado. *We Will Dance Our Truth: Yaqui History in Yoeme Performances*. Lincoln, NE and London: University of Nebraska Press, 2009. 390 pages; \$45.00 cloth.



Over the past five centuries, many people—missionaries, military personnel, scholars, artists, politicians, bankers, tourists—have had reason to write about the Yoemem, but no one has written about them quite like David Delgado Shorter. Yoemem (plural of Yoeme) is the self-designation for the Sonoran desert peoples known to the rest of the world as the Yaqui, which comprise eight pueblos in northern Mexico and Arizona. By most accounts, they were missionized by the Jesuits in the 16<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> centuries, crossed by the U.S. border in 1848, forced into debt peonage and exile during the Porfiriato, and granted their own “zone” by Mexican president Lázaro Cárdenas in 1939. Their deer dances in particular have become iconic as a symbol of cultural resilience throughout the centuries of their now bi-national existence. This very resilience—variously narrated as resistance, persistence, coherence, endurance, survival—has made the Yoeme of interest to scholars from culture- and performance-related disciplines.

Shorter is one such scholar, himself embodying several of those disciplines, but his take is distinct. Trained in religious studies and the history of consciousness, Shorter offers an extended meditation on Yoeme performative historiography, drawn from

# EMISFÉRICA

---

careful analysis of prior published accounts and archival research, 15 years of his own ethnographic fieldwork in Potam Pueblo (Sonora), and close collaboration with several community members. His engaging study animates the intersections of ethnography, performance studies, and native studies to provide a number of unique perspectives not possible through singular disciplinary and methodological approaches.

Specifically, he is concerned to understand Yoeme myth and ritual as performed forms of historical consciousness from the Yoeme perspective. This may also have been of interest to previous non-Yoeme scholars (notably Edward H. Spicer and Muriel Thayer Painter), whom Shorter treats with critical generosity. But he is also careful to point out where prior work uncritically passed along certain biases rooted in a European-derived categories of human endeavor, so he lingers long in the spaces between the lines of their accounts to mine new interpretations of Yoeme historical experience.

For his part, Shorter brings an ear finely attuned to religious expression as key to cultural identity (heard in stories, songs, prayers, and conversations), an eye focused on performance as a form of “non-literate cartography”(deer dances, funeral rites and weekly church processions), and a deep philosophical appreciation for the ways performances emplace the Yoeme both spatially and temporally (283). Privileging such practices as sophisticated instruments of local historiography, Shorter “reads backwards” through the historical record to Yoeme intentionality, both prior to and during centuries of relations with non-Yoemem. This intentionality, as well as the central dynamics of those interactions, is registered repeatedly in the stories the Yoeme tell and in the symbolic actions they undertake in performance. Shorter’s readings of these performances question binaries like sacred/profane, history/myth, Christian/pagan, written/oral, colonizer/colonized, local/global, and others which have long tended to organize non-Yoeme understandings of these practices.

He begins with an analysis of the Yoeme Testamento and the Talking Tree stories—one a document detailing the origins of the eight pueblos, the other a set of stories frequently narrated about a primordial split between immortal ancestors and those who would accept the coming doctrine of Christian baptism. These myth-histories reveal a historical consciousness predating—and predicting—the arrival of the Spaniards, reconcile Yoeme nativity with diaspora in the contemporary world, and decenter European accounts of Yoeme subalternity by demonstrating their active participation in (rather than mere reaction to) colonial processes.

These accounts also elucidate the pre-contact worldviews animating latter-day religious performances that are often misunderstood as proofs of Catholic conversion. His study of the deer dance “demonstrates that historical claims of conversion not only fail to tell the whole story of native agency in colonial zones, but also overlook the role of indigenous performance in historically narrating a consistent and practical precolonial logic” (216).

Shorter’s close observations and measured reading against the grain of existing accounts are

important and interesting, but it is the way he narrates his encounter with this material and these people that makes this study important and exemplary. Shorter conducted his fieldwork in the mid-1990s and early 2000s, just as the critique of “writing cultures” as a representational practice had reached its peak. He responds by texturing his scholarly writing with extensive field notes and interspersing ethnographic dialogues (translated transcripts of field interviews) between each major chapter. These dialogues provide Yoeme perspectives on chapter themes, introduce contemporary realities that contextualize and complicate existing Yoeme historiography, allow the reader to listen in on some of Shorter’s conversations, and provide a sense of his working approach. A bridge chapter on “Reconsidering ‘Writing’ and the Proof of History” allows Shorter to engage directly in that critique, as he moves from the book’s first half on Yoeme narrative to its second half on Yoeme performances of deer-dancing, funerary rites, and religious processions.

From the first page, readers notice a number of interventions that are carried throughout the text. Not only is Shorter everywhere in the narrative, which is something we have come to expect from ethnographers, but so is his recording equipment and the mechanical sounds it makes. His first interlocutor, Ignacio Sombra, is both named and bodied forth: he sits upright, clears his throat, and speaks in a voice “more monotone than usual, his phrases paced and rhythmic” (1). Sombra’s words appear first in Yoeme, sometimes mixed with Spanish, the English bracketed.

Later, Shorter includes a long field note about a trek to find a handprint believed to have been left by Jesus when he walked Yoeme territory during his lifetime. Shorter is hungry, embarrassed, observant, overburdened with equipment, preoccupied about snakes in the boulders, and hard-pressed to keep up with his guide, Felipe Molina, a Yoeme scholar who features prominently in Shorter’s work. He is fearful that his search will prove fruitless, joyful when it doesn’t: “I question my own desire to document the handprint. Was I trained somewhere to want evidence beyond my own experience? What would a photo prove? To whom?” (32). In the end, he trusts the Yoeme, whose proofs of their own place in the world appear when they dance their truth.

---

**Tamara L. Underiner** is Associate Professor and Director of Graduate Studies for the School of Theatre and Film at Arizona State University, where she also directs the Ph.D. concentration in Theatre and Performance of the Americas, and teaches in the general areas of theatre history and culture studies. She is the author of *Contemporary Theatre in Mayan Mexico: Death-Defying Acts* (University of Texas Press, 2004), and has also published on indigenous and Latina/o theatre and critical pedagogy in *Theatre Journal*, *Signs*, the *Baylor Journal of Theater and Performance*, and critical anthologies from the University of Arizona and Routledge Presses. Her current research focuses on performances of indigeneity and nativism in border contexts. She is active in the Association for Theatre in Higher Education, the Latin American Studies Association, and the American Society for Theatre Research, and serves on the Board of the Hemispheric

# EMISFÉRICA

---

Institute for Performance and Politics.