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Founded in Love: Ritual Dance and the Detraumatization of the Mexican Conquest

BY

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To Liam, because you make me smile.

To JBK, because I couldn't have done it without you.

El 13 de agosto de 1521... cayó Tlatelolco en poder de Hernán Cortés. No fue triunfo ni derrota, fue el doloroso nacimiento del pueblo mestizo que es el México de hoy.

August 13, 1521... Tlatelolco fell to Hernán Cortés. It was neither triumph nor defeat, but the painful birth of the mestizo people that today are Mexico.

-James Torres Bodet

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Introduction

My decision to research and write about the *danza de la pluma* stemmed from two incidents that occurred while I was studying abroad in Puebla, Mexico. First, I read Carlos Fuentes' short story *Chac Mool* for a literature class. In one scene, Pepe, a friend of the protagonist, comes up with the theory that had a group other than the Catholic conquistadors landed in Mexico, the conquest would not have been successful. He proposes that the continuity between Aztec religion and Christianity facilitated the syncretism of two cultures and two faiths:

Here come the Spanish and they propose that you worship a God, killed by a coagulation, with a wounded flank, nailed on a cross. Sacrificed. An offering. What could be more natural than accepting a sentiment so close to your whole ceremonial, to your whole life...? Imagine, instead, that Mexico had been conquered by Buddhists or Mohammedans. It's not conceivable that our Indians would venerate an individual who died of indigestion. But a God who, it's not enough that they sacrifice themselves for him, but also that they tear his heart out; caramba! Check-mate to Huitzilopochtli! Christianity, in its warm, bloody feeling, of sacrifice and liturgy, turns into a natural and novel prolongation of the indigenous religion (mit.edu).

This excerpt stayed with me for months after I read it. I was interested in the similarities between the two religions, but more than that, I was fascinated by the idea that nobody besides the Christians could have effectuated the same outcome. What would Mexico be, and more importantly, who would Mexicans be if the narrative of the conquest was altered?

Second, I learned about the *danzas de la conquista* in my folkloric ballet class. Dances of the Conquest are folk dances adapted from the Dance of the Moors and the Christians, a Spanish dance employed during the Crusades that portrays the victory of the Catholics over their Muslim adversaries. This dance was brought to the New World as both a tool to establish the political supremacy of the Spaniards, as well as a teaching aid in the evangelization of the natives. Over time, however, the dance adapted to its local context; it became the Dance of the Conquest, detailing the defeat of the Aztecs by Hernán Cortés and his conquistadors, and the natives' conversion to Catholicism. This new version of the dance transformed further as it spread over Mexico's vast territory, mixing with local traditions. When our class learned that many communities today continue to perform these Dances of the Conquest, often during religious festivals, I could not help but wonder why. Why would Mexican mestizos in the twenty-first century perpetuate the survival of a dance that enacts the violent clash of worlds that led to their

existence? Why would they ritualistically celebrate their problematic origins?

With these questions in mind I returned to the Wheaton campus. Here, I delved into the Dances of the Conquest, trying to understand where they were being performed, by whom, and for what purpose. I focused my efforts on the *danza de la pluma*, a specific Conquest dance that is native to the state of Oaxaca. The *danza de la pluma*, I found, is most frequently performed by citizens of mestizo descent, who often identify with their indigenous roots (trinidanzas.mx), in smaller towns which tend to be less integrated into mainstream Mexican culture. It is performed during *la Guelaguetza*, a weeklong Catholic festival celebrated annually throughout Oaxaca, and is widely considered the apex of the event. Its purpose, as explained by those who have taken part in the ritual, is to commemorate the introduction of Christianity into the country; to celebrate *mexicanidad*; to preserve a tradition; and to fulfill a religious promise to dance in honor of the town's patron saint (Brisset Martín, 9-10; Oleszkiewicz, 112). However, although they explain the purely religious significance of the dance, these reasons did not convince me. Why should a celebration of Catholicism, even its local history, require a remembrance of the entire conquest narrative? I wanted to know what exactly the ritual was doing, what it was putting into action, and what it was changing, perhaps unconsciously, for both the individuals and wider communities involved.

Ritual has traditionally been understood within the field of religious studies as an external expression or communication of internally held beliefs that bridges the gap between the mundane and the sacred. Although ritual is most often a corporeal experience, its meaning has typically been discussed in terms of symbolism and the transfer of belief onto material objects. Ninian Smart, for example, writes: "Look at a

cathedral and you are, so to speak, looking at an act of worship frozen into stone. Look at a crucifix and you are looking at a feeling of faith congealed into wood and metal”

(Smart, 118). Smart, through this analysis, actively contributes to the perpetuation of the specious interpretation of religious materiality that traditional religious studies upholds.

Religious studies, the academic progeny of Cartesian dualism and Protestant Christianity, indiscriminately situates belief as the defining factor in religions around the world.

Viewing material practices and objects this way, exclusively through the lens of belief, results in observations such as Smart’s, that reduce something as intricate and sensuous as a cathedral to an offering predicated on devotion.

Our modern habit is to look at religion from the side of belief rather than that of practice; for, down to comparatively recent times, almost the only forms of religion seriously studied in Europe have been those of the various Christian Churches, and all parts of Christendom are agreed that ritual is important only in connection with its interpretation (Robertson Smith quoted in Vasquez, 233).

Religious experience can be bodily; religious practice can have immediate cultural consequences. What we need, therefore, is an alternative theory of religion that allows for materiality, that accounts for inherent meaning and cultural embedded-ness, that understands that the stained glass, high ceilings, and general opulence of the cathedral engender a specific, desired experiences. They are not just symbols or expressions of something else, of some intangible faith.

In this paper, I use the materialist theory of Manuel Vasquez to understand the *danza de la pluma* as it truly exists and works. I try to explain the performative ritual as a religious practice grounded in a specific time and place that has a direct effect on those who take part in it. The dance is not just a method of worship, it is an experience that contributes to the cultural learning and identity making processes of all those involved.

The *danza de la pluma* enacts one of Mexico's most important myths: the violent conquest of its indigenous inhabitants by the Spanish and the subsequent mestizaje that led to the creation of the mestizo race. In the language of Victor Turner, the conquest is an entrenched social drama that unconsciously shapes society and citizens and is continuously performed, both unknowingly in quotidian activities, and purposefully through staged drama. Through these performances, the conquest and its social role are redefined ad infinitum.

I argue, thus, that the *danza de la pluma*, as a dramatic, non-violent representation of the conquest narrative, detraumatizes mestizo identity by re-imagining mestizo origins. The ritual alters the myth of the conquest in two steps. First in form, by transforming narrative into dance, which is an interpretation in and of itself, and second in story, by embellishing and omitting certain historical facts. These alterations to the myth of the conquest make it so that the reconciliation experienced during the dance itself becomes a part of the conquest social drama that unconsciously informs cultural and individual identity. The dance, which ends with la Malinche and her indigenous counterpart, Cihuapilli, merrily dancing together, subverts the bifurcation of mestizo identity, allowing the two halves of a troublesome heritage to make peace.

Chapter one of this paper provides a bit of background information to properly contextualize the dance, and describes the details of its performance. Chapter two outlines the theories of Manual Vasquez, Victor Turner, and Graham Harvey, the scholars whose work with material religious practices and ritual assists me in my analysis of the dance. Chapter three goes into the history of the conquest to illustrate why mestizo identity requires detraumatization. Finally, chapter four takes a second look at the dance

performance to determine what effect the experience of dancing has, and how it is achieved.

Author Ignacio Solares proposes: “Founded in love, Mexico ‘would have been another country... Then we Mexicans would be very different’. These ‘different’ Mexicans would not continue to feel, or reproduce, the tragedy of the past...” (Solares qtd. in Chorba, 51). Unfortunately, Mexico was not founded in love, it was founded in violence, suppression, and rape, and Mexicans therefore do continue to feel and reproduce this history. These reproductions, however, do not have to reinforce tragedy. The *danza de la pluma*, a material religious practice, revises the story of the conquest by means of performance, allowing it to become a story of union rather than interruption and subjugation. Ultimately, it is perfectly acceptable to question what Mexico’s fate might have been had the conquest not happened, but perhaps it is better to agree with Pepe and believe that the Aztecs and the Spaniards were flip sides of the same coin, rendering their convergence “natural” and, thus, detraumatizing an otherwise distressing ancestry.

Chapter 1: The Dance

The dances that we know today as the *danzas de la conquista* are performed in many different areas of Mexico. The most well known and widely performed of these dances is the *danza de la pluma*, or dance of the feather, which is native to the state of Oaxaca. Oaxaca, located on Mexico's southwestern coast, is home to the Zapotec Indians, the most populous indigenous community recognized by Mexico's national government, as well as a large mestizo population, a sizable portion of which lives in small, rural areas that remain beyond the reach of the globalizing forces that are transforming Mexico's urban landscape. Every year thousands of tourists flock to these communities to take part in and observe the patronal festival, *la Guelaguetza*. The

festival, whose name means “offering” in the Zapotec language, actually has its roots in an ancient Aztec celebration and its presence in Oaxaca can be traced to the arrival of the Aztecs at the end of the 15th century (Jancsó, 101). Following the conquest of Mexico by Spanish conquistadors at the start of the 16th century, missionaries forbade the celebration of indigenous religion, and replaced the Aztec festival with the Catholic Feast of the Virgin of Carmen. Over time the two melded together, however; it was not until the post-revolutionary period that *la Guelaguetza* developed into the festival that is celebrated today.

I. *La Guelaguetza*: The Festival

Mexico’s revolutionary government, recovering from a drawn out civil war, believed that by looking to and celebrating the nation’s common indigenous roots it could unite the country’s many disparate factions. Thus, one modern scholar contextualizes *la Guelaguetza* as follows:

Según [la opinión del gobierno revolucionario] una nación moderna necesitaba una sociedad unida y estable económica y culturalmente con raíces históricas... Éste es el periodo inicial de la búsqueda de la identidad común mexicana, la búsqueda de ‘lo mexicano’... [C]omienza una redescubrimiento de las tradiciones, viejas canciones y danzas regionales (Jancsó, 105).

According to [the opinion of the revolutionary government,] what a modern nation needed was a united, and culturally and economically stable society with historical roots... This is the initial period of the search for a common Mexican identity, the search for “the Mexican”... There began a rediscovery of traditions, of regional song and dance (My translation).

Thus, the significance of *la Guelaguetza* is multifold. It is at once an historical artifact, serving as evidence of the syncretism that occurred between Mexico’s conquerors and

conquered, a nation building exercise, celebrating this syncretism that led to the birth of “lo mexicano”, and a religious festival, allowing people to communally worship and perform their religion.

La Guelaguetza is an annual festival, a weeklong religious celebration, held in honor of the patron saints of different Oaxacan communities.

“En América Latina, la fiesta patronal es el evento anual más importante de cada pueblo... Gracias a ella se transmiten las tradiciones y el grupo humano expresa su existencia como colectividad y se comunica consigo mismo y con el exterior”(Oleszkiewicz, 108).

“In Latin America, the patronal festival is each village’s most important annual event... traditions are passed down and the human group expresses its existence as a collective and communicates with itself and with the outside world” (My translation).

La Guelaguetza is comprised of daily activities and frequently adheres to the following schedule: On Thursday evening there is an offering of candles and flowers at the local church; on Friday there is a procession in which people ride religiously themed floats and carry images of Catholic saints through the streets; on Saturday, “the eve”, religious acts are performed, there is a meal held in the home of the mayor, and dancers perform in the evening; on Sunday at noon there is a mass, which is attended by the archbishop of Oaxaca, and the *danza de la pluma* is performed at nightfall. On Monday there is a Thanksgiving mass and a rodeo. On Wednesday there is another rodeo. The following Sunday, “the eighth”, the *danza de la pluma* is performed for a second time, and on Monday and Tuesday the festival comes to a close (Oleszkiewicz, 109).

Although each part of this festival is culturally and religiously significant, the *danza de la pluma* is especially important due to its performative nature. Within a mestizo festival, the dance powerfully serves as “an embodied and performative way of

religiously being-in-the-world” (Vasquez, 81). In other words, by reliving the initial moment of mestizaje, the *danza de la pluma* allows dancers and audience members to situate themselves as authentically and contentedly Catholic and Mexican.

II. The *Danza de la Pluma*

The *danza de la pluma* is the descendent of the Spanish Dance of the Moors and Christians which originated during the aftermath of the Crusades in the 15th century. This dance was a tool of political and religious subordination, a way for representatives of the Spanish crown and the Christian faith (the victors) to enact their superiority over the defeated Muslims. The dance, which the Moors were forced to perform, thereby internalizing the inferiority of both their army and their God, was a dramatized recreation of the Christians’ victory over the “infidels” (Smith, 21).

The conquest of the New World was viewed by many conquistadors as a continuation of the crusades. When the battle for control of the land was over, the Spanish set about subjugating and evangelizing the natives the same way they had the Muslims of the Old World. According to Bernal Diaz del Castillo’s account of the Conquest, the dance first appeared in Mexico in Coatzacoalcos in 1524 or ’25 as part of a festival organized to receive Cortés (Roig, 176). By 1572, according to testimony, the events of the Mexican conquest had replaced those of the Crusades as the performance’s primary narrative. The Dance of the Moors and the Christians had become the *danza de la conquista*, the indigenous Mexicans taking on the role of the conquered infidels, and the Spanish conquistadors assuming the role of victorious soldiers of Christ. In accordance with the Europeans’ purported justification for the conquest and colonization

of the Americas, this dance was used mainly as a conversion tool; however, over time the meaning and function of this ritual has changed.

Since the colonial period, the *danza de la conquista* has spread all over Mexico and taken many different forms, one of which is the *danza de la pluma*.

The *danza de la pluma* as it is performed today in small Oaxacan towns during *la Guelaguetza* takes place in the rectangular outdoor space adjacent to each town's church. As stated previously, the performance follows the midday mass and often lasts until nightfall, resulting in a nearly eight hour show (Oleszkiewicz, 110). Typically, the dancers comprise three easily identified *bandas* or groups: the Aztecs; the Spanish; and the *bufones* or jesters whose role is to both liven the crowd through antics such as cracking jokes, feigning bullfights, and "stealing" kisses from women, as well as maintain order and keep audience members out of the designated dancing area, thereby establishing and preserving the boundary between profane and sacred space (Brisset Martín, 4).

The dance begins, after the jesters warm up the crowd with their initial entertainment, when the Aztecs and Spanish enter from either side of the "stage" (the entrance order changes according to local tradition). The Aztec soldiers are led by Montezuma. They are dressed in baggy shirts, white pants with brocade stripes of differing colors, short embroidered capes, and sandals. On their heads they wear large headdresses covered in brightly colored turkey feathers and decorated with small mirrors. In the right hand they hold a type of wooden scepter, in the left a rattle which they shake in rhythm with the accompanying music and movement of their feet (Brisset Martín, 4).

The Spanish soldiers, including Pedro de Alvarado, who ordered the slaughter of

Aztec nobles during the initial taking of Tenochtitlan and eventually became the governor of Guatemala, are led onstage by Hernán Cortés. They are dressed in dark blue jackets and pants, imitating the military uniform of the porfiriato era. Their swords hang from their belts. Cortés wears a tri-cornered hat of feathers and carries a crucifix. The ensign flies the Spanish flag (Brisset Martín, 4).

Each band is accompanied by a maiden, danced by a young girl. These are the two Malinches¹, or alternatively Malinche and her indigenous counterpart, Cihuapilli (Oleszkiewicz, 112). The former is dressed in a colorful sombrero, velvet dress, and shoes with socks; she stands with Cortés. The latter dons an Aztec-style blouse, a feathered headdress, sandals, and carries a quiver of arrows on her back; she stands with Montezuma (Brisset Martín, 4; www.trinidanzas.mx).

The matter of which historical events will be portrayed by the dancers is entirely decided by local tradition or preference. In the village of Trinidad Zaachila the dance acts out the initial meeting between the two groups; the invasion of the Spanish, which “bewilders” the Aztecs; the struggle by the natives to protect their empire and their eventual defeat; and finally their submission: “the Aztecs bow their heads and offer their hands to be chained” (www.trinidanzas.mx). In other parts of the Zimatlán district of western Oaxaca, the dance goes into more detail. Malgorzata Oleszkiewicz cites a performance that begins with the premonitions and dreams of Montezuma, the bad omens that, according to indigenous codices, plagued him in the months leading up to the conquistadors’ arrival. Then Alvarado’s embassy appears. He makes several demands of the Aztec king, including his conversion to Christianity. When Montezuma refuses to

¹ La Malinche was an indigenous woman who served as Hernán Cortés’ translator, advisor, and lover. Their son is considered the first Mexican.

give up his idols, Cortés declares war. Next the two bands act out the conflict itself, crossing each other and drawing their weapons. The Spanish are victorious and the natives become their prisoners, removing their feathers. At the end of the dance, the two girls dance together and then with the Spanish soldiers to represent the subsequent mestizaje and creation of the Mexican nation (Oleszkiewicz, 110).

The music and content of the dance were originally written by Dominican friars (www.trinidanzas.mx). However as the dance spread geographically and evolved over centuries, a set form transformed into varying local traditions. Today, some towns prefer no music other than a strong beat kept by the dancers' rattles and accompanying percussion; others employ full bands. The dance steps, however, have remained largely unchanged over time and space. The Aztec characters perform a combination of jumps, turns, and kneels, vestiges of indigenous ritual. The jump is very particular: the dancer twists his waist into the air and lands on one knee while at the same time preparing for the next step. In contrast, although the indigenous and European groups both form lines and cross each other to create different geometric shapes (Oleszkiewicz, 110), the Spanish characters do not participate in the intricate choreography of the natives, and play a more decorative role (Brisset Martín, 7). In this way, although the Europeans are the victors, the natives remain the artistic and performative focal point of the dance.

While at one point in history the *danza de pluma* served as a method of evangelization and subjugation, as the indigenous inhabitants of Mexico and their descendents, both Indian and mestizo, embraced Christianity, the dance's goals changed. In the modern, post-revolutionary, era, the *danza de la pluma* serves as a tool of reconciliation. When the two Malinches dance together and then with the soldiers, they

perform, and detraumatize through their positive celebration, the mestizaje that birthed the Mexican nation. As Oleszkiewicz interprets it, “[la] dualidad y la fusión del personaje de la Malinche es utilizada simbólicamente para representar la análoga dualidad inicial y la subsiguiente fusión de las dos partes esenciales de la nación mexicana: la indígena y la española” (112). “The duality and fusion of the character of la Malinche is used symbolically to represent the analogous initial duality and subsequent fusion of the two essential halves of the Mexican nation: the indigenous and the Spanish” (My translation). The *danza de la pluma* is a positive interpretation of history and, for religious practitioners, it not only reconciles their ethnic identity, it “sweetens” their problematic religious heritage.

Chapter 2: Theory

In the previous chapter we gave a short history of *la Guelaguetza* and established the narrative details of the *danza de la pluma*, concluding with its role as a positive dramatization of mestizo origins. In this chapter, I discuss the three scholars whose theories will provide the framework for my interpretation of the *danza de la pluma* in its socioreligious context.

I begin with Manuel Vasquez, a professor of Religion at the University of Florida, whose materialist theory of religion critiques the prioritization of the interior, and the textual process of analysis that currently dominate the field of religious studies. Vasquez proposes a new method of studying religions that relocates the body, acknowledges its

cultural embedment, and recognizes the diverse forms that religious activity can take. His approach to religious studies is crucial to my analysis of the material ritual of dance. Next, I turn to Victor Turner, a British cultural anthropologist, whose notion of the cyclical yet developmental relationship between social drama and staged drama contextualizes my understanding and analysis of the relation between history, myth, and ritual. Turner's theory allows me to relate the history of the conquest to the way that that narrative is mythologized, interpreted and incorporated into Mexican culture. Finally, I borrow from Graham Harvey, Reader in and Head of the Religious Studies department at the Open University, UK, whose uses a Maori definition of religion as "doing violence with impunity" informs my own reading of the *danza de la pluma* as a reconciliatory device. Together, these three academics provide a definition of religion that works to explain a ritual whose significance is based in the physical enactment of a violent cultural narrative.

I. Manuel Vasquez

In the introduction to his book *More than Belief*, Manuel Vasquez gives a brief description of what he means by a "materialist" theory of religion :

I call this framework materialist because it approaches religion as it is lived by human beings, not by angels... A scholar working within a non-reductive materialist framework... begins with the acknowledgement that the practitioners' appeals to the supernatural, god(s), the sacred, or the holy have powerful material consequences for how they build their identities, narratives, practices, and environments (Vasquez, 5).

What Vasquez offers, thus, is an alternative understanding of how religion functions in the world. He suggests that within the field of religious studies, the traditional scholarly process, in which all religions, no matter their origin or structure, are viewed through the

lens of “belief”, is inherently flawed and therefore requires rethinking. The root of this problem lies in the field’s underlying Christian bias: “[T]he academic study of religions has largely been the Cartesian study of Protestantism” (Harvey, 97). Religious studies scholars must move away from the indiscriminate use, no matter how unintentional or seemingly secular, of the theological concepts and language of Christianity. Religion is more than an abstract complex of held ideas, and religious practices are more than symbolic incarnations of intangible faith to be decoded. Shrouding religions around the globe under the pure, white sheet of belief hinders our collective quest for deeper understanding by forcing dynamic systems of living to fit an ultimate mold. The first step we must take in order to correct our error, Vasquez asserts, is to bring the physical body back into the conversation.

Somatophobia has long plagued religious studies (Vasquez, 173). Indeed, the body, in all its fleshy this-worldliness, has been excluded from the study of religion for several centuries now. However, this has not always been the case. Remembering that we are operating within a decidedly Christian chronology, we can look to the early Catholic Church for a time in which the body was very much included in the theology and practice of Western religion. The corporeal self, although not completely trusted due to its susceptibility to a variety of wicked temptations, was central in medieval Catholicism. This is mainly because it was the crucial locus of communion, meant both literally in the gathering to worship that was imperative to medieval practitioners’ understanding of themselves as the physical foundation of the Church, and theologically, in reference to the somatic sacrament of the Eucharist:

[M]edieval Catholicism fashioned itself as an ‘embodied community’, more specifically a ‘sacred eating community’... By organizing activities

through sacred and symbolically sacrificial rituals, by defining itself as the Body of Christ, and by having as its main cultic act the Eucharist, the Church was able to engage thoroughly with its constituents' fleshy sensuality, reactions, and impulses (Vasquez, 30).

The early Church recognized the body as a legitimate mediator of spirituality; it was entirely possible and even normal for medieval Catholicism to be experienced and validated through physical encounters and rituals (Vasquez, 31). All this changed in the 16th century with the advent of two monumental events: the Protestant Reformation and the wide-spread acceptance of Rene Descartes' dualistic philosophy.

The Reformation intended to eliminate the intermediaries- the superfluous, decorative fluff- between the individual worshipper and her/his salvation. Its proponents rejected not only the bureaucracy of the Church, but also its materiality. Ritual was cast as an unimportant, 'low' form of religious practice; the Word of God took precedence over imagery and all other sensory accessories to worship; the body, powerhouse of sensual activity that it is, was naturally written out of this new, disembodied form of Christianity (Vasquez, 32).

Rene Descartes, however, is truly responsible for the outright rejection of the body by modern Western thinkers. Descartes introduced the modern subject, one whose existence, whose being, is determined not by the will of an external force, but by her/his own ability to produce thought. This modern subject is independent! Empowered! Asomatous. By declaring thought, the essence of the mind, as that which verifies existence, and claiming, as a result, that because of its non-thinking nature the existence of the body is philosophically suspicious, Descartes effectively stripped the body of its legitimacy and created the infamous mind/body dichotomy that became the foundation for generations of Western scholarship (Descartes, 2; 14).

From this binary composition of the self, coupled with the austerity of the Reformation, stems the field of religious studies as we know it today. The mind and its byproducts (belief and interpretation) shape the language used and tactics employed in the Western study of religions from around the globe. “Beset by Cartesian anxiety, the study of religion became ‘the study of human beings as if they simply were believing, disembodied minds’” (Vasquez, 43). The body and its experiences, by contrast, were relegated to the savage realm of natural law, stigmatized as pre-modern and misunderstood as symbolic. Wrongly dismissed and discussed, it is time, as Vasquez affirms, to seriously introduce the body back into religious studies and mend the philosophical rift created by Descartes.

Certain phenomenologists of religion, such as Maurice Merleau-Ponty, have already begun to do just that. These “non-essential” phenomenologists argue against a dichotomous composition of the self, and posit instead that the experiencing subject is an integrated psychophysical whole, that both the I and the body are “integrally involved in our consciousness” (Twiss and Conser, 23). Merleau-Ponty, famous for his phenomenology of perception, claims that the corporeal self must be the primary experiencing subject because it is through the body’s sensory capabilities that we encounter the world. Only through our senses are we able to cultivate an understanding of the reality in which we live. Thus, it seems that the physical body is the true subject of experience (Abram, 45). However, it is out of these sensual experiences, in which we come to situate ourselves in the world, that reflection and opinion- thought- arise. Therefore the self is neither the non-thinking, material body, nor the non-material, thinking mind; the self is an integrated whole whose perceptions of and interactions with

the outside world through the physical body contribute to the formation of consciousness.

Merleau-Ponty expresses this idea when he writes: “Truth does not ‘inhabit’ only the ‘inner man’, or more accurately, there is no inner man, man is in the world, and only in the world does he know himself” (Merleau-Ponty quoted in Vasquez, 81). Not only does this rescue the body from scholarly exile by invalidating Cartesian duality, it illustrates its reciprocal relationship with culture. Merleau-Ponty’s experiencing body-subject does not exist in a vacuum; it is embedded in the world in which it perceives and acts. In this way, while the psychophysical self is shaped by its surroundings, because it is cultivated through experience, perception, and interaction, it gives form to its surroundings as well through the resulting action taken: “Our lived reality emerges from the reciprocal exchanges between our embodied practices and material apparatuses and the environment that is itself summoned and enacted by those practices and apparatuses” (Vasquez, 83). Ritual, therefore, can be understood by religious scholars as contextually informed, embodied experiences of world-making.

Ritual is the enactment and communication of cultural code. It is at once founded in *and* actively transmitting, thereby reinforcing, histories, norms, and traditions, even identity. The power of ritual lies not in its ability to point to an inaccessible force through symbols, but rather in the experience of performance itself, which can be both transformative and educational. Significantly, Vasquez asserts that ritual dances “are ‘work done with the body’ to produce subjectivity, to ground orientation, cognition, and language in space and time” (Vasquez, 112). He calls this “kinesthetic learning” (Vasquez 112-113). Ritual, dance especially, thus serves as a method of establishing and fortifying social inclusion and cohesion through the performance of cultural narratives, or

in the language of Victor Turner, social dramas.

II. Victor Turner

Victor Turner writes that social dramas “occur within groups bounded by shared values and interests of persons and having a real or alleged common history” (Turner, 69). These dramas initially occur as major breaches of the social norm and are eventually integrated into the norm itself, leading to world-changing narratives that shape the way that members of the aforementioned groups will conceive of themselves, behave socially, and relate to one another. These drama-based narratives are then seamlessly woven into the cultural fabric of society so that centuries after the fact they continue to manifest themselves. It is like this: we are born into a web of dramas that dually inscribe meaning and have a significance of their own; we act them out both unconsciously in our daily lives and deliberately through ritual; our retellings subsequently become part of the social structure only to be re-internalized, re-interpreted, and re-performed. In other words, these entrenched narratives mold society and are in turn molded themselves resulting in a perpetual cycle. Turner uses Richard Schechner’s figure eight diagram (Turner, 73) to explain this cyclical relationship between social drama and stage drama (our conscious performances of social drama):



Further, knowingly portraying the stories that we recognize as mythologically meaningful strengthens us as human subjects: “As heroes in our own dramas, we are made self aware, conscious of our own consciousness. At once actor and audience, we may then come into the fullness of our own human capability - and perhaps human desire to watch ourselves and enjoy knowing that we know” (Turner, 75). There is, therefore, a pleasure reward to be had from purposefully positioning ourselves within and experiencing a social drama.

Looking at Turner’s diagram, we could replace “theatrical techniques” with *la danza de la pluma*. Turner provides the framework that allows us to understand how the violent history of the conquest is mitigated by the ritual of dance. The problematic narrative of mestizo origins is consciously performed by mestizo descendants. Informed by the post-revolutionary effort to celebrate the mestizaje, as well as the pleasure that comes from knowingly acting out a social drama, the dance becomes a positive reliving of the initial syncretism between two religions and races. That positivity is in turn integrated into the original, historical narrative which informs subsequent social interactions, identity formations, and eventually produces a new performance. This

continues forever. Thus, the redress that is a part of the ritual process (Turner, 75) extends beyond the ritual itself, influencing the broader cultural context and making real the reconciliation of the dance. The way that this reconciliation comes about is explained by the theory of Graham Harvey.

III. Graham Harvey

Graham Harvey's suggestion that we look at religions from a Maori perspective that "the purpose of religious activity, is to violence with impunity" (Harvey, 99) seems particularly relevant to a 'religious' interpretation of the *danza de la pluma*. The idea that the reason for religion, its objective, is to do violence with impunity sounds ludicrous at first, but explained by the ideology of the Maori people it begins to make sense.

The Maori understand that small acts of violence against nature are unavoidable in the carrying out of daily life. Religious activities that involve tree-cutting and tuber-digging, for example, are inherently violent. Practitioners must, thus, seek permission and offer placation for their violent acts (Harvey, 100). In this way, the violated beings are more likely to willingly give their lives, and less likely to harbor resentment against their violators. In other words, religion (seeking permission and offering placation) puts an end to what could become an endless cycle of violence and revenge.

Often, the consequence of violent acts is more violence. Assaulting a relational being implicates perpetrators in further confrontations with the relations of that being. In the ebb and flow of cause and effect, there are penalties for taking life. Religious activity is an intervention in those processes (Harvey, 101).

Interpreted in this way, we can say that the universal purpose of religious activity is to

detraumatize acts of violence.

The *danza de la pluma*, a religious activity, accomplishes just that. By performing the ritual of dance, Mexican mestizos retroactively allow for the conquistadors to have done violence with impunity. The ritual transforms the relationship between mestizos and their heritage into one that is non-violently active; it interchanges a violent interaction with a dance interaction. The violence that was done against the natives is nullified, they give permission and are placated, and while this can be seen negatively as an excusing of terrible crimes committed, it should be seen positively as the process of reaching a rapprochement- not only culturally between mestizos and their troublesome past, but individually between the conflicted halves of mestizo identity. The dance sanctions reconciliation.

It is important to note that this process only works in the context of materiality. It is the dance- the choreography, the costumes, the music- that achieves the desired effect. The purpose and end result are the same as the Maori ritual, it is just a non-verbal mechanism, the physical enactment of the conquest narrative, that does the work.

Conclusion

A materialist theory of religion is especially appropriate within the Latin American context. The body has been central throughout the region's religious and political history. United in movement; disappeared without a trace; humbled under the weight of floats during the processions of *semana santa*; dumped into the Atlantic from planes; displayed in raucous joy; abandoned on roadsides; bodies have been and continue to act as the texts upon which Latin American history is written and culture is coded. One

needs only to walk into a cathedral in many Latin American cities to grasp the importance of the corporeal. Frequently displayed are large models of Christ in agony, bloodied and bruised, or la *Virgin de los Dolores* dressed all in black with tears streaming down her face. To dismiss the power of materiality in the understanding of a Mexican ritual would be to overlook its entire purpose. During the *danza de la pluma*, the Catholicism that was learned on the body through torture, murder, and rape is celebrated with the body through the release of dance.

Chapter 3: The Conquest and its Aftermath

Now that we have an understanding of the *danza de la pluma* as it is performed in Mexico today, and have established the theoretical parameters within which we will discuss the dance and its effects, I would like to provide some historical context. In order to consider the ways in which a performative interpretation of Mexico's creation myth detraumatizes a problematic identity, we must acknowledge the circumstances that

necessitated the process of detraumatization in the first place. Furthermore, understanding the relationship between history and staged drama will help us to situate the *danza de la pluma* within Turner's figure eight diagram.

I begin this chapter with a brief overview of the conquest itself, the who's, what's, and why's of Mexico's turbulent genesis. I then examine the ramifications of the conquest: the reordering of society, the introduction of new racial categories, and the emergence of a syncretic religion. Finally, I discuss how this heritage has influenced modern Mexico. That the legacy of the conquest is a significant part of Mexico's collective consciousness cannot be denied; like any country, Mexico has created and continues to draw upon a founding myth. The binary and violent nature of this particular myth, however, necessitates a packaging of the past that makes it "okay." The *danza de la pluma*, as a ritual and thus a rectifier of fragmentation, answers this demand.

I. Empires Collide

The story of Hernán Cortés' conquest of Mexico has often been misconstrued or oversimplified as the sweeping victory of European might over indigenous naïveté and general inferiority. While the Spaniards' success can be partially attributed to their more sophisticated technology and to Emperor Montezuma's initial mistaking of the conquistador's arrival as the long-awaited return of the god Quetzalcoatl, scholars have concluded that the imperialistic bloodlust of the indigenous ruler was truly an important factor in his own defeat. Montezuma was an arrogant, fervently religious, and militaristic ruler (Kandell, 5). A former priest of the warrior god Huitzilopochtli, he placed great emphasis on the rite of human sacrifice, and during his reign the Aztecs instigated a great

number of *guerras floridas*, inter-tribal wars in which the goal was not to kill but to capture enemy soldiers to be sacrificed (Kandell, 4). Tribes conquered by the Aztecs were forced to regularly pay tribute in the form of wealth, goods, and sacrificial victims, and adopt the cult of Huitzilopochtli in place of their own gods. In short, Montezuma's imperialism gained him many enemies.

When Cortés mapped out his strategy to take Mexico, he recognized that he could manipulate the resentment of Montezuma's foes to his favor. He not only tactfully played tribes against each other, he incorporated all those willing to fight (and there were many) into his army. It is doubtful that the Spanish would have triumphed without the assistance of their 200,000 indigenous allies (Hassig, 175). Tenochtitlan, rather than an Eden wiped out by European brawn and greed, in many ways reaped what it sowed.

That is not to say that the Aztecs "deserved" what happened to them. I only mean that had the Aztecs not terrorized their neighbors through violent political and religious subjugation, things may have gone differently for them. In any case, what we can take away from this version of history is that rather than a rupture, the physical conquest of Mexico can be seen as a continuation in the country's history of imperialistic power plays.

This "continuity" that I propose, however, does not in any way excuse the Spaniards' treatment of Mexico's indigenous inhabitants. Soon after the fighting ended, any short-term benefits that the Aztecs' former tributaries had gained from their participation were nullified by the conquistadors' economic and political ambitions: "The war was more a coup or at most a rebellion than a conquest. The conquest came later, after the battles, as the Spaniards usurped the victory for which their Indian allies had

fought and died” (Hassig, 183). Too late after the fact, the natives realized that they had in reality exchanged one oppressor for another. Forced religious conversion, the suppression of indigenous culture, and the exploitation of indigenous labor through the *economienda* system, all characterized by terror in the form of physical brutality and rape, were the symptoms of Spanish rule.

It is also important to note that although a sense of continuity is less burdensome than that of rupture, it cannot erase the fact that bloodshed and conflict are built into Mexico’s founding myth. Mexican national identity cannot escape this sanguinary legacy.

It is out of this tumultuous reality, one of violence and societal upheaval, that a new Mexico emerged.

The defeat of Tenochtitlan left the Spaniards with a victory they could claim, and they seized the political and economic power with which they could impose their culture. Defeat left the Aztecs and the rest of Mesoamerica with little alternative but to adapt: they had lost the power to maintain their own culture at anything above the local level (Hassig, 180).

Although natives did have some opportunities to preserve aspects of their culture, through academic projects such as Bernardino de Sahagun’s *Códice Florentino* for example (Brading, 32), there was no option of indigenous autonomy in conquered Mexico. Nor was there an option of political alliance. In an effort to “adapt”, many native tribes offered the daughters of kings and nobles to the Spaniards to unite the two groups through marriage. Unfortunately, however, the conquistadors largely misunderstood these efforts and kept the women as concubines, accepting them as gifts rather than the diplomatic gestures they were (Hassig, 176). The Spaniards, despite the fact that they gladly accepted the natives’ assistance in the war, were not interested in sharing power.

Although they denied indigenous efforts to unite on a political level, the

Spaniards did not segregate the native population but rather incorporated it into their social structure. Further, while they imposed Western culture and forbade many indigenous practices, the colonizers could not prevent certain syncretisms from occurring. The two in which I am most interested have to do with race and religion.

Unlike the colonizers of North America, the Spanish conquistadors were single men traveling without families. Rape, concubinage, and inter-marriage with indigenous women were all common practice. This resulted in the emergence of a new race of citizens of mixed indigenous and European heritage: the mestizo. At once offspring of deceit, oppression, and violence, and biological suture of Old and New worlds, the mestizo identity is paradoxically characterized by both conflict and union. Embodying this idea is La Malinche, a Mayan slave girl given to Hernán Cortés' party as a welcome gift who became his interpreter due to her knowledge of both Mayan and Nahuatl, and eventually bore his son, Martín Cortés, considered to be the original mestizo. Today many Mexicans, a large percentage of whom are mestizo, view La Malinche as a national mother figure.

A second woman who is revered as a female emblem of the mestizaje is the Virgin of Guadalupe. Today the name and image of this Mexican Madonna can be found everywhere throughout the country, from the dashboards of public buses to the tattooed bodies of its citizens. "Because of her Aztec features, the Virgin of Guadalupe is 'the supreme expression of Mexican cultural identity and the patron saint of the continent'" (Chorba, 57). A blend of the Virgin Mary and the Aztec goddess, Tonan (Brundage, 154), the Virgin of Guadalupe is part of a history of religious syncretism that began during the Spanish missionaries' efforts to evangelize the New World. Despite the missionaries'

insistence on punishing anyone who practiced indigenous religion with whippings, incarceration, exile, and in extreme cases death (Brading, 3), they were unable to stop converted natives from privately, and perhaps unconsciously, blending features and practices from each tradition. This syncretic process is seen in the progression of the Spanish Dance of the Moors and the Christians to its Mexican incarnation, the *danza de la pluma*, which incorporates indigenous movement and costume while celebrating a Catholic feast day. This dance, also a celebration of the *mestizaje*, has found new life in post revolutionary Mexico.

II. The Mestizo in the 20th Century

The post revolutionary government in Mexico was faced with the daunting task of uniting a country that had suffered from intense regionalism and class division for decades. Even the revolution itself was more a series of localized uprisings than a mobilized attack on the central government. The new administration, headed by General Álvaro Obregón, wanted to correct the mistakes of its predecessors (especially Porfirio Díaz) whose policies had allowed for such divisions to occur. He sought to unite the country by cultivating a sense of national identity. He believed that by looking to the past, he could find a common ground with which all Mexicans, no matter their material or geographic circumstances, could identify. “Because history plays a central role in Mexico’s collective mind, Mexicans have long used the past as a basis for their self-searching and cultural identifications” (Chorba, 12). Thus, Obregón embarked on a campaign to dialogue with the masses and impart to them a cultural education. To start, the president appointed José Vasconcelos as the Secretary of Public Education.

Vasconcelos was a philosopher and writer who became famous for his work, *The Cosmic Race*, in which he discusses the advantages of mixing races. He came up with ideas such as the government-backed mural movement that paid homage to Mexico's indigenous past and celebrated Mexican independence. He also supported cultural initiatives such as the revival of local folk dances (Rodriguez, 152). It was in this atmosphere that being mestizo truly became a source of pride and was incorporated into the national sense of *mexicanidad*.

However, despite the revolutionary government and subsequent administrations' acceptance of the mestizaje and their efforts to extend this acceptance to the Mexican people, many citizens still had (and possibly have) conflicted sentiments about their problematic heritage. "[A] clear difference is evident in the way the Mexican state and the Mexican populace feel about Mexico's reputed mestizo nature" (Chorba, 1). We can see this is true through an examination of two situations. The first is a specific instance. In 1982, the government installed a statue in Coyoacán, a wealthy suburb of Mexico City, that depicted a 16th century mestizo family (presumably that of Cortés).



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When the community was bluntly confronted with their past in this manner it resulted in a schism in public opinion. Some agreed with the intended meaning of the installation, viewing it as a celebration of their mestizo roots. Others were made extremely uncomfortable by what they saw as a celebration of conquest and its residual violence (Chorba, 1). In fact, eventually the statue was moved to a quiet corner in the Xicoténcatl garden to assuage the public's discomfort. Clearly, even as they neared the turn of the century, many Mexicans were (and in many places surely continue to be) ashamed of their ancestry and preferred it remain latent, a history book chapter and nothing more.

The second example of the Mexican populace's conflicted attitude towards the

mestizaje is its relationship with the figure of La Malinche. While many consider her to be the mother of *mexicanidad*, the foundress of Mexican nationality (Cypess, 7), others have trouble seeing past what they view as her betrayal of the indigenous people. Further, while the Virgin of Guadalupe is universally regarded as the archetypal Mary figure—giving, virginal, a supreme good—, La Malinche is often viewed as the Virgin’s antithesis, Eve—selfish, prostitute (“tainted flesh”), a supreme evil (Cypess, 6). Her role as not only Cortés’ interpreter, implicating her as traitor to her own people, but as his mistress is especially problematic: “La Malinche’s sexual involvement with Cortés led to her designation as the first ‘*chingada*’, a term charged with severe negative connotations for Mexicans, conjuring up personal violation and submission to rape” (Cypess, 7). The idea of mestizos being *hijos de la chingada*, no matter how factually based, has been woven into Mexico’s myth system, providing the basis for skewed senses of identity informed by unconscious feelings of shame and resentment. *Hijos de la chingada* renders an entire race of people illegitimate.

There exists a need, therefore, for the establishment of an alternative reading of history, a revised interpretation of Mexico’s most fundamental social drama that is irreversibly incorporated into the country’s complex of root paradigms. Sandra Messinger Cypess writes: “The [conquest] has been described, interpreted, and converted into a symbolic construct that is reinterpreted by each successive generation. [It] remains a reverberating presence in the Mexican and Latin American psyche...” (Cypess, 1). A reinterpreted construct need not be negative; it need not emphasize the suffering of the past; it need not abet ethnic shaming.

The ritual of dance makes this alternative construct real *kinesthetically*. Embodied

performance rituals like the *danza de la pluma* rewrite myth and repair what has been fragmented. In this way, staged drama alters- and in this case rectifies- social drama.

Chapter 4: The Dance Revisited

Now that we understand what purpose the *danza de la pluma* serves, we can reexamine the details of the performance outlined in chapter one to see what is actually happening. In this chapter I first discuss the dance itself to show how the narrative it depicts fits into Turner's cycle of cultural myths and what effect this has on the communities in which it is performed. Second, I consider the power of dance in terms of the *danza de la pluma*'s social reverberations. When I say the "power of dance" what I am referring to is the ability of dance specifically, because it is a physical, artistic, and expressive medium, to cultivate and inform both individual and group identity. Turner's figure eight model allows for, and even counts on, a pattern of redefinition and reinforcement. This pattern is played out through the *danza de la pluma*. Lastly, I use the "power of dance" to explain the religious significance of and the "group making" done by the ritual. Once again, a materialist theory of religion becomes paramount. Dance is a form of bodily praxis; it is healing but it is also experiencing. When Mexican mestizos dance the *danza de la pluma*, they dance their identity with the meaning they wish for it, and through the experience of dance itself, make it real.

I. A Second Look at the *Danza de la Pluma*

This section will break the dance down into its components, each of which contributes to the dance's effectiveness. We will discuss each component as it appears during the performance.

First are the *bufones*, or jesters. Their role, as mentioned in chapter one, is to liven

the crowd, to maintain order, and to ensure that audience members do not enter into the performance area. Understood within the context that has been established in previous chapters, this role takes on new meaning. The jesters, especially because they are the first dancers the audience encounters, set the tone of the ritual. By entertaining with short skits and jokes they ensure that the atmosphere of the event is festive (it is, after all, a festival) rather than somber. They turn what could otherwise be a distressing revival of the past into an enjoyable experience of reconciliation. Further, by preserving the border between ritual and secular space, the jesters allow for the dance to work. The power of the performance is contingent on its removal from everyday life. Theorist of religion Mircea Eliade, writing on what he deems the sacred-profane dichotomy, posits: “Spatial nonhomogeneity finds expression in the experience of an opposition between space that is sacred- the only *real* and *really* existing space- and all other space, the formless expanse surrounding it” (Eliade quoted in Allen, 168). If sacred space is the most real, where the purest and most effectual experiences are to be had, then there must be a border differentiating it from profane space. The jesters in the *danza de la pluma* create and protect this border from a breach that could inhibit the potency of the performance.

Second, we must take a deeper look at each band of dancers, the Aztecs and the Spanish, and pay special attention to the significance of their appearances and actions. The representation of each group conveys the true focus of the dance. The indigenous characters are portrayed by adults, and dress in elaborate, dazzling, traditional costume. As explained by one town’s educational website, their attire is imbued with symbolism: the stripes on their pants represent hope (green), purity (white), penance (purple), and fire (red); some villages’ dancers’ shirts are embellished with a heart on the breast, a

reference to the ritual of human sacrifice and the Aztec belief that the heart was the food of the gods; if they wear cloaks and aprons, these symbolize nobility and fertility (trinidanzas.mx). The beautiful intricacy of the Aztecs' costumes communicates and substantiates their role in the conquest narrative as a cultured and powerful people.

The Spanish soldiers, in contrast, wear the military uniforms of the porfiriato era, a troubling period in Mexican history. Members of the military were not popular at this time. First, they made up the *rurales*, an elite troop that exercised the will of Díaz in remote areas of the country, putting down *campesino* uprisings and suppressing “todas las manifestaciones de insatisfacción política hacia el régimen de Díaz” (Tobler, 58) “any manifestation of political dissatisfaction directed at the Díaz regime” (My translation) to ensure peace and stability. Then, they defended the president, whom many viewed as corrupt and violent, against the rebels when revolution broke out. This uniform is thus imbued with a sense of brutality and provokes animosity; those who wear it have historically been the enemy of the Mexican masses. Rather than by gruff or fierce looking men, however, the Spanish characters are portrayed by boys. Their appearance is meant to be weak; in this way they are unable to detract from the power of the Aztecs or make them seem unsophisticated by comparison. These factors, coupled with the fact that only the indigenous characters perform actual dance steps, communicate that the emphasis of the dance lies not in the victory of the conquistadors or defeat of the natives.

Es obvio que el espectáculo es una danza indígena, ritual y guerrera, que enfatiza más el virtuosismo, la resistencia y la belleza prehispánica, que la victoria de los españoles. Estos, por ser representados por niños, no interpretar ninguna danza, no tener el privilegio de ofrecer su espectáculo y encomendarse públicamente a Dios, y estar vestidos todos de manera igual y poco atractiva, pasan a segundo plano. Esta situación está en contradicción con su aparente papel de vencedores (Oleszkiewicz, 112).

It's clear that the spectacle is an indigenous warrior ritual dance, that emphasizes prehispanic virtuosity, resistance and beauty rather than the Spaniards' victory. The Spanish, because they are represented by children, do not execute a single step, they do not have the privilege of offering their performance or committing publicly to God, and by dressing identically and unattractively, they become secondary. This position is at odds with their apparent role as victors (My translation).

The purpose of the *danza de la pluma* is not strictly to assert the superiority of indigenous Mexicans over Europeans. In reality, I believe that the dance, through all of its devices, seeks to close the gap between the two groups that has developed in the world's collective memory of the conquest. The dance takes established binaries- educated/unrefined; advanced/pre-modern; aggressor/victim- and undermines them. Although the story ends the same way, the Aztecs are remembered rightfully as culturally significant, as valid contenders, as active participants in history rather than passive sufferers of European might. The dance makes them equal by leveling the playing field: the Spaniards are weak and disliked but ultimately the winners; the indigenous are magnificent and capable but ultimately losers. This new dynamic makes reconciliation between the two possible: "[T]he blurring of these lines and binaries consequently lessens the tensions between self and Other that many perceive as at odds in mestizo dualism" (Chorba, 44). By mitigating the conqueror/conquered dichotomy, the *danza de la pluma* allows dancers and observers to reprocess their roots and re-conceive of themselves as the descendants of a battle between equals rather than a massacre. Redress is achieved.

This effect could not be accomplished through costume and choreography alone. The ritual primarily detraumatizes by removing the literal trauma from the narrative. The costumes and choreography contribute to this by altering the relationship between the natives and Spaniards, but they are not sufficient. It is absence that is key. Portrayals of

explicit violence are conspicuously absent from the *danza de la pluma*. There is no epic battle; there is no bloodshed; there is no theatrical mutilation; there is no rape. The implication of conflict is there, when the two sides cross each other and draw their weapons, but there is no suffering depicted, no anguish expressed. I propose that the absence of violence in the *danza de la pluma* is necessary for detraumatization. Rather than highlight the violent domination of one group over the other, the dance is meant to make each group equally instrumental in the founding of the mestizo race. The ritual allows that the violence happened, but it is not a major plot point in the new narrative. In this way the reconciliatory ending to the dance is made possible.

The final aspect of the dance that we must revisit is its conclusion, the dance between la Malinche and Cihuapilli. This is the most important instance of kinesthetic learning (Vasquez, 112). It is in this moment that the two groups come together, not through rape or concubinage or forced marriage, not by existing on opposite ends of the same social hierarchy, but through the joy of two children, happy to have found each other, celebrating their union in dance. “La Malinche y la Cihuapilli aparecen casi como dos aspectos de la misma persona, lo cual está enfatizado por la danza final que realizan tomándose de la manos” (Oleszkiewicz, 112) “La Malinche and Cihuapilli almost appear as two aspects of the same person, which is emphasized by the final dance in which they hold hands” (My translation). This is the re-imagined origin of the mestizaje, the joyous coming together of two small girls which produces a new subject, a sum that is greater than its components.

All of these ritual elements work together to create a narrative of the conquest that allows for the violence of the conquistadors and victory of one ancestor over another.

This new narrative can thus be woven into each community's web of social dramas that inform both culture and identity.

Nancy Jay writes that participation in the ritual of sacrifice “both signifies and *causes* membership in the group...” (Jay, 6-7). This is true not just of communal sacrifices. Nearly all communal rituals bind and demarcate. In Mexico, communities may be bound together through economic and cultural commonalities that often originate from a shared racial or ethnic background. However, despite the importance of “mestizo” identity, for the purposes of this paper, and for the way that Mexican citizens conceive of themselves and relate to one another, the term is rarely used by those to whom scholars (including me) assume it applies (Chance, 153). A “mestizo” culture does not explicitly exist, apart from mainstream Mexican culture, which defines itself by what it is not: not indigenous, not Afro-Mexican, not European. Yet the ethnicity is real, and it is informed by its roots.

The ritual of the *danza de la pluma* is an example of a group-making exercise. It not only begets membership in the group, it establishes the group's existence. Although dancers and audience members may not consciously self-identify as “mestizos” (as opposed to *mexicanos* or *gente de razón* and *gente decente* if they are distinguishing themselves from indigenous citizens (Chance, 154)), the dance invents a mestizo identity, defined by its origins, to which all those participating in the ritual come to belong. In the language of sociologist Rogers Brubaker, this makes performers “ethnopolitical entrepreneurs”:

By *invoking* groups, they seek to *evoke* them, summon them, call them into being... By reifying groups, by treating them as substantial things-in-the-world, ethnopolitical entrepreneurs can, as Bourdieu notes, ‘contribute to producing what they apparently describe or designate’

(Brubaker, 10).

Thus, although a concrete sense of ethnic identity may not exist within many small Mexican communities, by acting out the qualities of the *mestizaje*, the *danza de la pluma* defines, and in the act of definition makes real, the mestizo identity of all those involved in the ritual. The group is reified through performance.

To recap, the *danza de la pluma* has many functions. First and foremost, it is a religious celebration that commemorates the introduction of Catholicism into Mexico. This celebration, however, has deeper implications. Collectively, the elements of the dance- the costumes, the performers, the choreography, and the historical facts that are consciously included or excluded- work to rewrite the myth of the conquest, retroactively detraumatizing the violence that occurred, and transforming the narrative into one of peaceful reconciliation. In order to effectuate this transformation, the dance also cultivates a deliberate mestizo identity, bringing the problematic origins of those involved to the forefront of consciousness so that they may be absolved. This allows for the production of a group, bound together by race and ritual, which in turn permits the effects experienced by each individual to be expanded into the social sphere where they may be incorporated into each society's symbol/myth system. This system will subsequently inform future cultural and identity production, as illustrated by Turner's cyclical model. None of this would be possible without the power of dance.

II. The Power of Dance

To appreciate how dance is different from other ritual experiences, we must return our focus to the non-essentialist phenomenologists' experiencing body-subject. Human

experience is mediated by neither thought nor corporeality alone. Our sensuality and rationality are intimately interwoven, resulting in our unified psychophysical selves. Socialization, identification, and cultural production are all processes that emerge from an integrated somatic-cerebral subjectivity. Non-verbal rituals, therefore, are not only bodily experiences, they are authentic religious activities which have the power to communicate, inculcate, make real, and transform our very being-in-the-world, much the same as their immaterial counterparts. This section will explore why this is true for dance, and especially dance performance.

Dance has been used by cultures around the world as a method of group binding and religious expression since the first humans began traveling in packs larger than core family units. The rhythmic movement of our bodily selves, selves that are culturally embedded, especially in large groups, both demarcates group identity and mediates society's symbol/myth complex. Most importantly, the body-subject that dances is "a body that is written upon but also writes..." (Foster quoted in Reed, 521), meaning that although dance reflects and communicates established social narratives and meanings, it also has the ability to actively alter how those narratives are interpreted and subsequently employed. There are a couple of reasons why this is possible.

First, the self who dances is not the same self who eats lunch or studies for an exam. During a ritual performance, a dancer's secular self must become secondary and she/he must play the role of the performer. Just as there is a distinction between sacred and profane space, the dancer who occupies sacred space cannot do so as their profane self; they must take on a theatrical identity (Richardson, 233). The experience they have while acting within that theatrical identity, however, should not be discredited as false

because the emotions, the pain, the kinesthetic learning that take place during “play” are all real; they stay with the performer even after they have returned to their secular self. It is a constructed reality but reality all the same.

Second, during performance, dancers experience what Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi has coined “flow” (Turner, 55). Flow means that while “playing,” the dancer is completely and singularly invested in what they are performing. During flow a few things happen: consciousness is “narrowed” (Turner, 56) so that the only thing that exists in the dancer’s world is the present moment; there is a loss of ego that allows “kinesthetic and mental awareness” (Turner, 57) to be heightened; and the dancer feels as though they are in total control of their actions and environment which causes pleasure and a positive sense of self (Turner, 57). Flow, to summarize, is the mental state that arises during performance and allows for that performance to have meaning beyond its purpose as entertainment.

Although flow and the construction of a theatrical self are both interior processes that seem to encourage the mind/body binary, they are truly empty concepts if you do not take into account the work done by the body. The invented second self is substantiated by the movement it produces, movement that would be experienced in an entirely different way if a secular self were involved. Flow is effectuated through the performative movement of the body, which alone causes an alteration of consciousness. If the body-subject were not integrated, these concepts would make no sense.

All of this serves to suggest that during the *danza de la pluma* a real change is occurring. The experience had and cultivated by the dancers legitimately reshapes how the myth of the conquest reverberates in the consciousness of the Mexican people. This

experience comes from the act of dancing itself:

[C]ada uno de los danzantes forma un todo, sincronizados al compás de una música que vibra, se siente y fluye a lo largo de sus cuerpos. Sus saltos y movimientos están cargados de tradición, de gracia, estilo y soltura; de fuerza y poder, en cada danzante el tiempo se detiene y la historia del pueblo... se siente, en una comunicación física y espiritual que se establece entre los bailarines y los espectadores (trinidanza.mx).

Each of the dancers forms a whole, synchronized to the beat of the music that vibrates, is felt by and flows through their bodies. Their jumps and movements are charged with tradition, grace, style, and ease; with strength and power, in each dancer time stops and the history of the village... is felt, in a physical and spiritual communication that is established between the dancers and spectators (My translation).

A testimony referring directly to the *danza de la pluma*, this passage encompasses exactly what I wish to say about the power of dance. The ritual of dance is at once bodily and cerebral; it is culturally embedded; it both reflects and creates, giving it the power to instill but also transform established social narratives. Due to this power, the *danza de la pluma* is able to reconcile mestizo identity.

This understanding of dance rituals would be impossible from the prevalent perspective of religious studies that Vasquez and Harvey critique. The *danza de la pluma* is not about belief, although faith in God and a commitment to serve and celebrate their town's patron saint through performance inspires many dancers (Oleszkiewicz, 112). It is about materially enacting and constructing a particular identity that is tied to history and myth. The body can not be read and analyzed from a disembodied standpoint as if it were just a fleshier text (Vasquez, 110). Somatic religious practices have to be understood sensuously or risk losing their full meaning. Material activities demand material theories. Explained this way, it is clear that the *danza de la pluma* is doing more than pointing to something intangible; it is, through bodily praxis, transforming the material

being-in-the-world of Mexican mestizos.

Conclusion

In order for us to grasp the significance of the particular version of the *danza de la pluma* of which we have been speaking, we can look to the alternative versions that exist, in other words, potential options not taken. The first is not specifically a variant of the *danza de la pluma*, but it is a *danza de la conquista*. This dance is native to the Peruvian Andes and while it enacts a conquest narrative similar to that of the *danza de la pluma*, a few subtle differences completely change its meaning. First, any dialogue or narration included in the ritual is spoken in quechua rather than Spanish. Second, the mestizaje that takes place after the fighting in the *danza de la pluma* is excluded here (Oleszkiewicz, 113). Together, these two details alter the intended purpose of the dance. Rather than reconciling mestizo identity, the Peruvian *danza* celebrates indigenous identity and resists the cultural and political implications of European heritage.

The second alternative also prioritizes indigenous identity. This version is native to the Zapotec community of Teotitlán del Valle, another town in Oaxaca. The citizens here, who identify largely as Indian, perform their version of the *danza de la pluma* during the festival of their patron saint, The Precious Blood of Christ (*La Preciosa Sangre de Señor Jesucristo*). While the characters, choreography, and costumes are nearly identical to the *danza de la pluma*, the ending of the ritual is monumentally different. In this version, after the military victory of the Spaniards and the killing of Montezuma, the Aztec emperor is resurrected. There is one last battle and now it is Cortes who is slain. “With pre-contact order restored the dance comes to an end... The Mexican state (signified by Cortez and his men) is- at least for a moment- banished. The world is purified and returned to its indigenous glory” (Cohen, 150). This fantastic reimagining of the conquest is an attempt by the community to undo the marginalization

of the past four centuries. The Spaniards are the infantile losers; the indigenous are the victors who have successfully resisted submission. This assertion of indigenous identity as valuable has as much to do with the past as it does with the present. The small village, inhabited by indigenous descendants who are wary of outsiders, is evening out the hierarchical system in which they've been placed near the bottom. They are establishing their self-worth, both as Indians and as a peripheral community within a large nation (Cohen, 153).

These two communities attempt to detraumatize the past by affirming the worth of their abused ancestors and condemning and negating the violence of the Spanish in their dance performances. The *danza de la pluma*, by contrast, seeks to detraumatize the past by accepting and celebrating it- literally removing the trauma from the narrative. Mestizo identity is equal parts indigenous and European and the *danza de la pluma* makes that okay.

A Final Question to Consider

I have been reading and writing about the *danza de la pluma* for many months now and although I believe in the point that I have made, I cannot help but wonder one thing: Is it fair to “make okay” something as horrifying as racial oppression, violence, and rape? Although those are terrifying realities, I would argue that yes, it is fair.

According to Victor Turner, we are constantly rewriting and reconstructing our sociocultural worlds. We want to live in a reality in which we are happy and confident in our identities. Nobody should be subjected to a life in which they do not feel comfortable because of something over which they have no control, like their ancestry. Carrie C.

Chorba writes:

We have seen how the postrevolutionary state constructed *mexicanidad* around glories of the indigenous past and mestizo present. The large-scale suppression of open analysis of Mexico's Hispanic and colonial legacies has skewed the Mexican sense of nationhood... (Chorba, 33)

The *danza de la pluma* does not want to exclude the Spanish half of mestizo heritage.

That would only serve to further bifurcate mestizo identity and would in no way lead to a sense of wholeness, nationally or individually. What the dance effectuates is union, and through union reconciliation, so that mestizos may find comfort rather than conflict within themselves. The ritual of the *danza de la pluma* answers a human desire for redress, and ultimately, integration of the disparate, even conflicting components of our personal and communal selves.

Given the specific nature of my project, my sources are broken into testimony and analysis of the *danza de la pluma* itself, religious studies theory, and historical and cultural background. By bringing together primary and academic sources from these three categories, I was able to cultivate an understanding of the dance, contextualize it, and establish its purpose. Although none of my sources painted a complete picture of the ritual on their own, the information they provided me allowed me to fill in the gaps I perceived and formulate an original thesis.

Danza de la Pluma Sources

I had three main sources that assisted me in my understanding of the logistics and meaning behind the ritual of the *danza de la pluma*. The first was a page on a website that I happened across called trinidanzas.mx. This is a local website dedicated to educating the public on the dance traditions of the Oaxacan town, Trinidad Zaachila. Their description of the dance is firsthand and gave me insight into the way the ritual is perceived and discussed by those who actually experience it, rather than scholars looking in. I was wary of the site initially but the sincere and passionate language used, coupled with the videos of local performances, convinced me of its validity. I assume that the website is designed to draw in tourists and give them a bit of background information, but it was detailed enough to be truly helpful. The second source I used was a scholarly article, written by Demetrio E. Brisset Martín and published in the Spanish language *Anthropology Gazette*. This article is an ethnographic study of Dances of the Conquest that pays particular attention to the *danza de la pluma*. I found Brisset Martín's

description and analysis helpful in its detail, and I also appreciated the transcripts from his interviews with dancers. The final source that I found crucial in my discussion of the dance was an article by Professor Malgorzata Oleszkiewicz that focused on the *danza de la pluma* and cultural syncretism in Mexico. She included not only a description of the dance itself, but the details of the festival in which the ritual takes place. Further, I found her analysis of la Malinche's role in the dance incredibly useful. It was her connection between the dance of the two *niñas* and the *mestizaje* that inspired my idea of connecting the dance to reconciliation. Together, these three sources provided me with a complete picture of the *danza de la pluma* and all of its performative details: choreography, costumes, and local meaning. Without them I would have no concept of the dance as it actually exists.

Religious Studies Sources

My religious studies sources were a mix of classical and material theorists. Ninian Smart, always very straightforward and clear in his explanations, acted as the perfect "traditionalist" against whom I could introduce an alternative mode of scholarship. Materialists Manuel Vasquez and Graham Harvey are revolutionary theorists of religion who completely changed the way I view and speak of religious practices. They made me become aware of the anti-material bias that exists in the language I use and explanations I ascribe to material aspects of religions, especially those in traditions other than Christianity. I feel like a better religious scholar for having read them. Victor Turner was crucial to my understanding of performative ritual and the way that history, myth, identity, and performance are related. His figure eight model diagramming the

cycle between social and staged drama was indispensable in the completion of this project. And finally, David Abram's writing on phenomenologist Maurice Merleau-Ponty was essential to my understanding of the experiencing body-subject, and helped me to explain how a bodily experience could engender a transformation of consciousness. Together these scholars set the tone for my interpretation of the dance ritual.

Historical and Cultural Sources

I required a great many sources to attempt to accurately describe and analyze the historical and cultural contexts that both brought the *danza de la pluma* into being and determined its purpose. A few stand out, however. Carrie C. Chorba's work on mestizo identity as it relates to the past was fundamental in my explanation of how the dance ritual copes with the past and subsequently constructs identity. Sandra Messinger Cypess' book about la Malinche and how she has historically been received by the Mexican populace helped me understand how mestizos view their past and skillfully illustrated the conflict that is inherent in mestizo identity. Ross Hassig's unbiased retelling of the conquest, especially his debunking of the black and white myth of the battle between the natives and the Spaniards, provided me with a factual foundation on which I could base my analysis. These three gave my work a feeling of authority that would have been impossible to achieve through analytics alone.

Conclusion

Lastly, I am very grateful to the Wheaton library system. The volume of sources, both in print and online, is so impressive. As somebody working with a very specific

topic, I was completely satisfied by the amount of sources of which I was able to take advantage.

What my thesis aims to do is incorporate all these various perspectives and theories I've been able to utilize into one body of work. The history and culture of Oaxaca paired with a materialist theory of religion makes understanding the dance as a method of detraumatization simple. While I am not the first to write about the *danza de la pluma* or even the materialist study of religion in Latin America, I believe I am the first to make the connection between the two. This would be impossible without my first rate sources.

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