

Texomazatl:

The Negotiation of Identity Through Aztec Dance

by

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Abstract

This work explores the identity politics of performance through the example of an Aztec dancer in the United States, Texomazatl (David Vargas). A central theme involves how Texomazatl's performance of Aztec dance both contests and accommodates hegemony, often simultaneously. This theme is explored through an analysis of his performances before school-age children and "outsider" audiences as well as his reflections on ceremonial Aztec dance.

Aztec dance is revealed as an act of resistance whose proliferation in the San Francisco Bay Area from the 1970's onward is closely tied to a social movement in the cultural empowerment of Mexican Americans within the United States. Hegemonic narratives in the United States that have historically portrayed Aztecs as a vanquished and extinct people challenge Texomazatl's presentation of Aztec dance as a continuing tradition. Texomazatl's deliberate methods of countering these obstacles in representing his identity include highlighting the presentation of his spoken narrative (which accompanies his dance performances) in a present tense format. Another method is the enlistment of audiences as participants in performances. In these ways, Texomazatl seeks to utilize audiences as agents of sorts for the inclusion of Aztec culture into the larger American cultural tapestry.

Through the course of my research, questions emerged of how de-contextualizing dance through specific types of performances may be impediments to the positive and meaningful presentation of Texomazatl's culture to "outsider" audiences. The thesis thus explores larger questions of how cultural performers who perform as their livelihood at

times have to navigate entanglements of cultural commoditization with the intent to bring about culturally educational performances and assertions of agency in their performances.

The thesis also touches upon the notion of authenticity as an entrapping force historically used by the dominant society in defining and disempowering marginalized populations. Texomazatl's experience provides an example of how concepts of authenticity of physical ethnic image may be strategically appropriated by a historically marginalized population (in this case, Mexican Americans through Aztec dance).

In sum, Texomazatl's experience allows a consideration of how in the quest for social recognition identity revitalization may emerge out of a legacy of cultural assimilation.

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“The Indian dance [is] for awareness of life, [the] complete relationship with that world in which he finds himself: it is a dance for power, a rhythm of integration.”

Martha Graham (Jones 1992: 170).

CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

In my discussion of “Aztec” dance, it is important to note that in contemporary times, Aztec dancers self-identify themselves as descendants of the Mexica people, or “Mexica.” Some also identify their heritage as “Azteca,” meaning “Aztec.” The people who are now popularly known in history books as “Aztecs,” did not refer to themselves as such. Some contemporary scholars use the word “Aztec” to refer to the people before the conquest, and use either the name “Nahua” or “Mexica” to refer to the same population after the Conquest. The broader population both in and outside of Mexico speak of these peoples from before and after the Conquest as “Aztecs.”¹ Most dancers I have encountered through time and place refer to the dance described in this thesis as “Danza Azteca” or “Aztec dance.” In fact, during his performances, Texomazatl informs his audience² that he is presenting the dance of the Mexica people, and that they are often popularly known by the name “Aztec.” He also explains how this word is derived from the Nahuatl (Aztec) word, meaning a person from their ancestral homeland called “Aztlán” (see Chapter 3). Historically, the Aztec Empire’s central government was based in Mexico-Tenochtitlan (Mexico City), and at its height it spanned geographically from roughly the “18th to the 21st degree north on the Atlantic [Ocean], and from the fourteenth to the nineteenth, including a very narrow strip on the Pacific [Ocean]. In its greatest breadth it could not exceed five [and a] half degrees” (Prescott 1998: 14).

¹ From Wikipedia, “Aztec” (www.en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Aztec. Nov. 29, 2009)

² Texomazatl interview March 4, 2007

This thesis seeks to explore the politics of identity of performance, through the example of a performing Aztec dancer, David Texomazatl Vargas. I consider how the multiple layers of both identity and meaning are mediated through, and defined by the performance of cultural dance. This is undertaken by an exploration of Texomazatl's (as he from here forward will be referred) recollections of his history as an Aztec dancer; his reflections regarding a dance show he regularly presented to an audience of school age children in various regions of the U.S.; and his continued public presentations of, and teaching of dance. I offer Texomazatl's history as a dancer and illustrate his participation in three realms of Aztec dance: ceremonial, educational, and performance. I also offer some background information on Aztec dance history, and how this dance form is a continuing phenomenon in the U.S. and Mexico (with a special emphasis on dance in the San Francisco Bay Area) as a crucial component to understanding Texomazatl's experience.

Critical locations of analysis in the politics of identity emerged in the course of structured interviews with Texomazatl's as well as my study of his Aztec dance performance and associated narratives. A key query informs my analysis: What is the relationship between performance and power? I begin exploring how this question can be investigated through an analysis of Texomazatl's Aztec dance performance as representative of a historically marginalized segment of American society (Southwestern Mexican Americans) asserting and celebrating their identity. Informed by these questions of identity and power, I seek to investigate the specific performance devices employed by Texomazatl and his troupe.

Turning to Texomazatl's experience as a performing Aztec dancer, I examine the manner in which a performance can be employed as "A tactic(s) of intervention" and "an alternative space for struggle" (Conquergood 2002: 152). I seek to explore the means whereby Texomazatl's

Aztec dance performance simultaneously resists, yet replicates the power structure it exists within. bell hooks acknowledges how ethnic presenters of culture (such as dancers) sometimes de-contextualize and almost trivialize the presentation of culture, “Out of necessity for survival in an oppressive world” (hooks 1995: 210). I examine a possible example of such a de-contextualization in Texomazatl’s performance of the “Night in Cancun” event (to be described in Chapter 6) which brought challenges to his assertion of Aztec identity due to the stylized, inauthentic and commercial surroundings under which the performance took place. At the same time, this investigation examines how Texomazatl’s Aztec dance performance seeks to build cultural understanding through educative performance. bell hooks refers to such a performance as one that presents itself as a vehicle for “educational and culture building aims” (1995: 210). Such concerns and ambiguities also emerged from my interviews and are discussed in some detail in this thesis. For instance, Texomazatl argues that instead of being merely “consumers” of his culture, audiences are implicated (to a degree) in the continuity of Aztec culture by virtue of being spectators and participants. He thus views audiences as agents in their own right who propel the inclusion of Aztec culture (as representative of a facet of Mexican American identity) into the multi-cultural American landscape particularly by means of participatory actions elicited from them, during his presentations.

My interviews with Texomazatl also raise questions of how physical ethnic image, showcased through performance, challenges or reproduces hegemony. I interrelate this aspect of Texomazatl’s performance “persona” with a wider investigation of how notions of authenticity, though historically often used as a hegemonizing and entrapping force, may be appropriated (through a performance medium) by marginalized groups, in support of wider strategic aims. As we shall see, Texomazatl is negotiating his ethnic identity not only within the modern nation-

state, but also by balancing concepts of past and present and therefore “authentic” and “inauthentic” as well. Every time he dances in private ceremonials or for the wider public, Texomazatl challenges common historical narratives³ representing the “complete” conquest and cultural demise of the Aztecs..

This thesis is focused mainly upon Texomazatl’s own perspectives on Aztec dance in general and his performance in particular. My knowledge of the impact of his performances upon audiences, for instance, relies upon his interpretation of their affect, partially solicited by audience questionnaires and his informal discussions with audience members.⁴ I do not attempt to approach the question of who has the “right” to perform the dances. Much more compelling is an exploration of Texomazatl’s navigation of the complex issues involving his cultural performances before “outsider” audiences. A central issue driving much of my investigation thus involves the ways in which Texomazatl seeks to preserve the meaning and dignity of his dances despite their de-contextualization from pre-Columbian forms of ceremonial dance. Specifically, I investigate the ways Texomazatl consciously attempts to introduce his dances and their meanings to audiences who arrive at performances, many holding unsavory stereotypes of bloodthirsty Aztecs, coupled with views of their extinction.

In the sum, this thesis provides an analysis of the often ambiguous meanings conveyed as an Aztec dancer negotiates his personal and collective ethnic identity through the act of dance and its accompanying narrative.

³ In 2009, all current California state adopted texts of 7th Grade World History from medieval to early modern times (to be used until 2012) placed Aztec history in the past tense, and ended with the Spanish Conquest. The only modern cultural contributions attributed to the Aztecs were the cultivation of corn and use of cacao in its modern form, chocolate. These textbooks are used nationwide to teach World History in the U.S., as well.

⁴ Texomazatl interview March 4, 2007

CHAPTER 2: METHODS

My primary research method was through taped interviews with my informant, Texomazatl. A total of six interviews were conducted between January 6 and March 18, 2007. The interviews lasted between 45 minutes and 1 hour and 40 minutes. I observed one performance, and was a participant observer (I narrated a script that accompanied dance) in other two dance performances⁵ with Texomazatl's troupe at the University of Alaska, Fairbanks, on February 25 and 26, 2007. The dances in this presentation were identical to those in his Green Meadows show (to be discussed in Chapter 5). I also was a participant observer in one of his dance classes in San Jose, CA, on January 19, 2007. Print resources (such as articles, book chapters, dissertations, and books about Aztec/Conchero dance and other forms of non-Western dance) also inform my research.

My personal involvement as an Aztec dancer (since 1989) in both ceremonial and performance realms naturally ignited my interest in the topic. Texomazatl is a valuable informant in my research on performed Aztec dance for a few reasons. First, he is an experienced performer/educator of Aztec dance, whose career spans more than 20 years and who continues to participate in ceremonies. Secondly, Texomazatl was the only Aztec dancer whom I knew of who made his livelihood from the presentation of Aztec dance. I felt fortunate to already know him; as he had been my first dance teacher and I had belonged to his group⁶ from 1989 until 1996. I was never on a paid tour with Texomazatl, nor had I danced in his group for over 10

⁵ Texomazatl and other Bay Area dancers seldom use the word "performance" when referring to dance since this can be interpreted as connoting an "act." In this interpretation, Aztec dance performance is seen as a staged identity for entertainment purposes. "Presentation" and "performance" are used here interchangeably for the reader's understanding. In Aztec dance the word used is usually "presentation."

⁶ The word "group" when referring to a number of dancers, who dance together, is a norm of reference in Aztec dance. In the U.S. "Troupe" is never used as a self referent amongst dancers, or in reference to other Aztec dancers.

years (at the time of the interviews). For these reasons, I occupied an insider but still somewhat detached position in my interviews with Texomazatl.

Texomazatl is a prominent figure in the world of Aztec dance in the United States. He has a relatively long-lived history as a dance leader within the Bay Area Aztec dance community. He has danced in Mexico, and has hosted visiting Mexican dancers on several occasions.

Texomazatl's belief in the positive influence of Aztec dance upon multicultural populations (within the Bay Area, California and the U.S.) drives his performances. His confidence in the socially constructive impact of his dance performances motivates him to continue dancing.

It is thus crucial that this thesis is read as an exploration of one dancer's viewpoint of his role as a performance dancer and a ceremonial dancer in the Aztec dance world in the Bay Area (primarily) and in California. It should not be interpreted as an authoritative discourse on Aztec dance generally, or Aztec dance in the Bay Area specifically. Aztec dance is by no means a monolithic endeavor. Even the word "Aztec" is not used by all dancers who are dancing the same or similar steps (see Chapter 3). Some groups call themselves "Mexica," others "Azteca" or "Aztec." Still others with more outwardly Catholic ties identify themselves as "Conchero."

CHAPTER 3: AZTEC DANCE

Contemporary Aztec dance originated as a ritual activity in pre-Columbian central Mexico (Sten 1990: 162). It was a spiritual/religious act, and was taught to be undertaken at ceremonial and secular events. Dance played a crucial role in festivals and rituals, often for the success of harvests (Scolieri 2003: 155-6). Aztec dance was practiced by all sectors of society (Lekis: 1958:43): from the common laborers to the emperor himself (Sten 1990: 29, 31).

Dance played a central role in pre-Columbian Aztec life. The Aztec codices (books written by pre-Columbian and colonized Aztecs) portray dance, “As a central organizing principal for recording, expressing, and interpreting the past” (Scolieri 2003: 148). In fact, Aztec painted histories “include representations of dance as well as tell history through choreographic terms” (Scolieri 2003: 156) and portray Aztec deities “in highly physical, if not choreographed poses” (Scolieri 2003: 152). Another indication of the key role Aztec dance inhabited was the fact that tributary city states sent tribute to the central government of Mexico-Tenochtitlan in the form of dance costumes⁷ made from the “finest materials” (Scolieri 2003: 154).

In common with much of Latin America, Catholic priests of the early colonial period in Mexico utilized many ceremonies and dances, “in a slightly revised form” to illustrate the teaching of Christianity (Lekis 1958: 44). Thus following the Spanish conquest of Mexico in 1521, Aztec dance continued in a publicly modified form. The Catholicized form of dance was called Conchero (“shell”) dance. There are two differing interpretations regarding the “authenticity” (that is, indigeniety) of the Conchero tradition as: a syncretic phenomenon, a

⁷ Contemporary Aztec dancers call the outfits they wear during ceremonies and presentations “trajes” (“suit” or “outfit”). They are not called “costumes” since this implies something that is worn purely for entertainment and a temporary identity. I’ve never encountered dancers in the United States who view their trajes in this light.

process of colonialism; or a “spiritual and sacred tradition with hidden (indigenous) meaning” (Vento 1994: 59).

Conchero dance incorporated Catholic symbolism into several aspects of Aztec dance. This is evidenced in the following: First, dance was preceded and followed by the singing of Catholic songs in Spanish. Second, dances were only allowed to take place in the courtyards of churches (Vento 1994: 59). Third, the altars used Catholic symbols and items including: candles, the cross, and soon after the conquest, images of the Virgin of Guadalupe. Fourth, mandolins were played while dancing took place.⁸

Many scholars have suggested that Conchero dance embodied hidden meanings in their syncretic aspects. Dancing in church courtyards, for instance, conveyed a sense of continuity to dancers since most of these churches were built on top of buried Aztec sacred sites (Vento 1994: 63). In addition, some of the songs contained symbolism that was important to the Aztecs. An example is the song “Estrella del Oriente,” (Eastern Star) a Catholic “Alabanza” (Mexican church song) in which the path to Christianity is revered. The song highlights symbols also important in Aztec belief, such as the planet Venus, a bright star associated with the central Aztec being, Quetzalkoatl, who resides in the East (Vento 1994: 60, 63). Drawing upon a choreographic and anthropological analysis of the cultural roots of Conchero dance, Gertrude Kurath describes the dance as, “Utterly Indian (Aboriginal) in the forward, tilted, bowed torso, and in the special quality of emphasis. [This is] typified by the prevalence of the stamp [leg movement]. Several steps are highly characteristic of Sioux and Pueblo Indian dances alike” (Kurath 1946: 397). Yet she states that “Deciphering the meanings to [many] movements in the dance form is impossible,” and, “The Indians themselves have no explanation of its meaning” (Kurath 1946: 399). In a later publication, she states that Concheros, “Have inherited or invented

⁸ Texomazatl described these syncretic aspects in an interview on March 18, 2007.

steps of [both] native and European character” (Kurath 1964: 166). Similarly, in *The Folk Dances of Latin America*, Lisa Lekis states that “It is difficult to analyze the exact religious beliefs of this group [Conchero dancers]. Although Catholic, the dances and ceremonies are basically pagan in intent...” (Lekis 1958: 48).

Since the mid 1970’s, both Conchero and Mexica forms of Aztec dance have grown in popularity in the Southwestern United States and Mexico (Murguia 2002: 206). The last 30 odd years have seen an increase in the number of participants, the scale and frequency of Aztec dance ceremonies and the volume and variety of presentation venues of this dance form in the San Francisco Bay Area (Murguia 2002: 201; Shay 2006: 84).

The increased popularity of Aztec dance in the San Francisco Bay Area is largely traced to a few factors. The first is attributed to the influence of two individuals: dance maestro Florencio Yescas during the 1970’s to mid 1980’s, and another maestro in the Chicano (Mexican American) community, Andres Segura from the 1970’s through the mid 1990’s. Both of these dance teachers were from, and learned Aztec dance in Mexico (Murguia 2002: 201; Shay 2006: 81, 84; Haly 1996: 531).

Secondly, the concurrent rise of the Chicano civil rights movement was a crucial influence in the proliferation of Aztec dance. This occurred as Chicanos searched for their cultural roots, and at the same time were resisting U.S. narratives that ignored, minimized, or erased the cultural contributions and history of Chicanos and Mexicans in the United States (Quinones 1990: 140). A third factor can be identified as contributing to the increased popularity of Aztec dance: the identification among some Chicanos with the place and idea of, Aztlan. Aztlan is where the Aztecs originated before settling in the Valley of Mexico (contemporary Mexico City). It is

claimed by several Chicano and Native American scholars to be the present day Southwestern United States (Rodriguez 2008: 121; Alurista 1970; Forbes 1962).

In the tracing of their heritage to the Aztec homeland of Aztlan, two post-colonial Chicano political aims are met. First, in identifying the original homeland of the Aztecs as the American Southwest, Chicanos are embracing a pan-Indian identity as relatives of federally recognized Native Americans in the Southwestern United States (Maestas 2003: 438-9). Secondly, locating their heritage to Aztlan lends credibility to their claims of prior habitation of the United States compared to all subsequent European derived populations (Vento 1994: 62). This is a direct counter to anti-immigrant sentiment directed toward Mexicans which has continued to wax and wane yet never disappears, throughout U.S. history.

Lois Marie Jaeck describes how Aztec dance is utilized as a socio-political signifier, “Whose evolution and popularity has been blatantly linked to a social movement, [reflecting] Mexican American(s) struggle for social recognition, equality, and justice” (2003: 44). One of the primary meanings of Aztec dance, described by Alonso Milvet, is that it “represents a quest for solutions to social/economic inequities” (2004: 231).

Contemporary U.S.-based Aztec dance groups consist of members of all ages (Shay 2006: 84). In the U.S. and Mexico the dance form is chiefly undertaken in practices, ceremonies, or community events (such as pow wows, political events, or holiday celebrations) and any interested individual can participate. Outside of Mexico, it is primarily a phenomenon of the Southwestern U.S., where a large Mexican American population resides. Since the 1990’s, it has sprung up in locations with pockets of Mexican American communities, such as towns and cities in Oregon, Washington State, New York, and Minnesota.

Aztec dance continues to be practiced in Mexico. A “legitimate” dance group in Mexico is one that has a “mesa” (“table”; a leadership body of a few members). A group with a mesa necessarily has the following: an “estandarte” (“standard”; a flag with symbols of the group’s name and meaning, such as a coat of arms); a “palabra” (“word”; the right to conduct oratory at a ceremony); a “capitan” (“captain”; a leader of a dance group recognized by colleagues); a “patron” (“boss”; a recognized, senior sponsor who can attest to the integrity of the capitan and the group); an “Alferez” (“lieutenant”; an individual that holds the group’s estandarte); “sargentos” (“sergeants”; individual dancers that keep order within the dance circle, such as how far apart dancers are to dance, and whom may enter and exit the dance space); a “malinche⁹” (no translation exists; an adult female who insures the ceremonial tree sap, called “copal,” or sage, continues to burn for the duration of a ceremony) (Aguilar 1994: 1-3; Rodriguez 2004: 93).

I turn now to Texomazatl’s perspectives on Aztec dance. In brief, he perceives Aztec dance as a pre-Columbian phenomenon that has survived since the Conquest as best it could (including through its Conchero form), at times being practiced in secrecy or with hidden meanings.¹⁰

Texomazatl’s understanding of the history and continuity of Aztec dance was born from the hours of discussion with, and lectures he attended by Aztec dance teachers based in both the United States and Mexico.¹¹ He was taught through these teachers that many outwardly Catholic symbols and icons carried hidden Mexica symbolism and meaning beneath. An example Texomazatl uses is the Virgin of Guadalupe, a sacred icon revered by Catholics in Mexico and the Southwestern U.S. He explained that this icon’s pre-Conquest form was the Mexica deity called “Tonantzin,” a symbol of the earth and its abundance. Texomazatl was taught by his dance teachers that The Virgin of Guadalupe held great importance to a vanquished Mexica people

⁹ Also called a “Popocihualt” (woman of the fire).

¹⁰Texomazatl interview January 7, 2007

¹¹Texomazatl interview March 18, 2007

unwilling to forsake their reverence to her original manifestation as the earth goddess. Another example he invoked is that of “All Saints Day” celebrated by the Catholic Church in Mexico from November 1-2. This holiday coincided with pre-Columbian harvest celebrations (and the Aztec acceptance of death as a component in life) by inviting the spirits of loved ones who have passed away to re-visit the living for a day (cf. Butler 2000: 89).

Texomazatl explained¹² in one interview how Aztec dance in its Conchero form publicly survived as an Aztec-Catholic syncretization after the Conquest. Dancers were compelled by the Spaniards “to say ‘El es Dios,’ (He is God) before and after they danced,” so that their allegiance to Christianity was repetitively and publicly demonstrated. By vocalizing a belief (either affected or sincere) in a Christian god, dancers were permitted by Spanish colonizers to continue these pagan dances. This was a deliberate strategy by the Aztecs for the survival of Aztec dance.

In the same interview, Texomazatl elaborates¹³ upon how Mexica Aztec dance differs from Conchero style Aztec dance. Christian songs are not sung (though some ceremonies feature songs in the Aztec language, Nahuatl) mandolins are not played; dance outfits tend to be more colorful and utilize flashier materials (such as Mylar and other iridescent materials), with larger feathered headdresses; and decorative paint is sometimes worn on the face and/or body (painted faces of pre-Conquest dancers are described on page 47 in *The Dances of Anahuac* by Marti and Kurath). In Mexica ceremonies, the altars and the items upon them are pre-Hispanic, and prayers and/or narrative is often at least partially conducted in Nahuatl. Both Mexica and Conchero dances have the same musical beats and stated meanings, with many of the same basic steps, yet the manner in which they are danced differs. Mexica dances are quicker, more athletic, and

¹² Texomazatl interview March 18, 2007

¹³ Texomazatl interview March 18, 2007

feature more virtuosity of steps (such as jumps, leaps, hard-stops, and body thrusts) than their Conchero counterparts.

Aztec dance continues to be in part a ceremonial activity. Ceremonial meanings in the U.S. mirror those in Mexico. They are undertaken as a form of thanksgiving to the different manifestations of the natural world. A dance group gains a level of status and legitimacy if it is able to conduct a ceremony. Once it does so, it is expected to continue conducting the ceremony yearly.¹⁴ Ceremonies provide the largest venue for Aztec performances, sometimes including more than 150 dancers.

The world of Bay Area Aztec dance is a rich environment that centers upon dance ceremonies (Murguia 2002: 202). These ceremonies take place roughly every 4-6 weeks, and celebrate different meaningful dates within the Aztec Calendar. The ceremonies are attended by local and visiting dance groups. Aztec dance ceremonies are day-long events, with 4-6 hours of continual, rigorous dancing the norm (excepting a half hour break in the middle). Typically, the Aztec dance ceremony includes altars with ceremonially significant items, onlookers, and sanctioned vendors. Novices to the ceremonial dance world pass out water and fruit to dancers while they are still inside the dance circle, and also help with food preparation and clean-up. A communal dinner always follows a ceremony; a breakfast occasionally precedes it.¹⁵ The ceremonial Aztec dance world has its own handshake, terminology, nicknames for group leaders, standards for behavior (in and outside of the ceremony), procedures for conducting and participating in a ceremony, standards for dance outfits and regalia, and news announcements (such as new, split, or moving dance groups; announcements of births, deaths, or significant illnesses of members; political and/or social announcements). Babies are blessed, the dead are remembered, honoring

¹⁴ Texomazatl interview January 7, 2007

¹⁵ Texomazatl interview January 7, 2007

specific elements of the natural world (such as rain and the snow pack) takes place, males and females become acknowledged as young adults, people sit at a one of (usually) five designated altars¹⁶ to become healed of ailments.

Ceremonies in the United States reflect the typical Mexican mesa structure described earlier, with usually one or two groups sponsoring a ceremony, using their own mesa(s) to organize and conduct it.¹⁷ Most of the dance groups in the U.S. continue to have leaders who were born in Mexico and serve as teachers. U.S. groups gain a higher social acceptance at ceremonies (and while traveling and dancing in Mexico), if they are under the guidance of dance lineages from Mexico. It is a legitimization of sorts for a dance group to be able to claim affiliation with an established Mexican group.¹⁸

There are a number of other differences between contemporary Aztec dance and its ancestral forms. Dance ceremonies are shorter and the clothing materials are different than those of pre-Conquest times. In the United States, women are sometimes drummers and dance groups are more likely to be led by leaders who are not born into a dance lineage.¹⁹ In contrast, most Mexican groups are organized around dance lineages that trace their roots back to pre-Conquest times (Aguilar 1994: 1).

¹⁶ Texomazatl interview January 7, 2007

¹⁷ Texomazatl interview January 6, 2007

¹⁸ Texomazatl interview March 7, 2007

¹⁹ Texomazatl interview January 7, 2007

CHAPTER 4: TEXOMAZATL THE DANCER

Texomazatl was born in 1960 and raised in San Jose, California, as David Vargas. His father's family was from Durango, Guanajuato, Mexico, and his mother's family is from Holstein, Germany. Texomazatl's father encouraged him to explore his indigenous Aztec heritage.²⁰

At age 18, Texomazatl viewed Aztec dancers for the first time on a television broadcast from Stanford University. He was intrigued by this dance form. In August 1984 he saw another Aztec dance group, named "Xitlalli" (brilliant star), performing at a political event, the Chicano Moratorium, in San Francisco. He recalls being "captivated watching them, the sound of their ankle rattles, every dance step [executed], everything they narrated between dances," was fascinating to him. Texomazatl was "struck by the beauty of the dances." Nevertheless, not until he saw their public performances two more times did he talk to the members of Xitlalli, and consequently was invited to their dance class.²¹ Texomazatl began to attend dance classes with Xitlalli in a community center in the Mission District of San Francisco. The class was open to anyone interested in Aztec dance. He found that although there were a number of people practicing, it was only a select number who were invited in to perform with the actual group. The class was conducted in Spanish, which made it difficult for Texomazatl to feel completely at ease, since he was not a fluent Spanish speaker. His dance teacher, Maquil Xochitl, was an Otomi Native from Mexico.

Texomazatl earnestly began to learn dances and drum beats, and after only a few practices he was asked to do an informal public performance, when other dancers in Xitlalli, at the last minute, were not able to perform. Texomazatl was disarmed by this request, but obliged, and

²⁰ Texomazatl interview January 6, 2007

²¹ Texomazatl interview January 6, 2007

attempted to “keep up” with the other dancers. Texomazatl felt surprised by being asked to perform at such an early stage as a student, yet it also inspired him to learn as much as he could, since not only did he love to dance, he soon realized that he enjoyed performing as well. Between 1984-1986 Texomazatl learned 15 dances and was progressing in the classes operated by Xitlalli, yet he began to feel held back.²² He had practiced the dances at home and had become, in his own estimation, a competent drummer. Nevertheless, he was not yet selected to drum at practices or performances. He enjoyed dancing with Xitlalli, but began to long for the chance to dance and drum with a new group.²³

In 1986, Texomazatl saw an Aztec dance group, “Xipe Totec” (new life), performing at Fort Mason in San Francisco in a cultural event. He instantly realized this was the group he had seen on television when he was 18. This particular troupe had “a professional presentational style. They had authentic looking and aesthetically pleasing outfits. The dances were more physically demanding²⁴ [than Xitlalli’s]. After speaking at length with the teacher, Florencio Yescas, Texomazatl was invited to attend a Xipe Totec practice, but since the group was based in Los Angeles, it proved impossible.

Six months after witnessing Xipe Totec’s inspiring performance, Texomazatl heard that Florencio Yescas had died, and one of his two lead dancers, Gerardo Salinas, had recently moved to San Francisco. Texomazatl visited a dance class Gerardo had begun, and noticed the dancers were predominantly men. This may have been due to the fact that this group danced faster and more athletically than Xitlalli. Another difference was that, “They had more flashy outfits and wore longer feathers than Xitlalli. The drumming was also louder and faster.” After a time, Texomazatl left Xitlalli and joined Xipe Totec. He noted how his new teacher, Gerardo, was

²² Texomazatl interview March 7, 2007

²³ Texomazatl interview January 6, 2007

²⁴ Texomazatl interview January 6, 2007

“dark complexioned and in physical shape.”²⁵ Texomazatl felt that this helped the aesthetic of his dance, bringing a more “authentic” Aztec image to their dance performances. Texomazatl himself had long hair, was in good physical shape, and dark complexioned as well, so he believed his image would also help the “aesthetic and the authenticity”²⁶ of the troupe also. All of the dancers in Xipe Totec were from Mexico. Texomazatl felt camaraderie with the other male dancers, who were mostly in their 20’s and 30’s. He was invigorated by the lively pace in which they executed the dances and felt honored to be allowed to drum. Audience reception of Xipe Totec appeared to Texomazatl as “much better than to Xitlalli, since Gerardo’s group was faster, flashier, and louder.”²⁷

In the two and a half years (1986-1988) Texomazatl danced with Xipe Totec, he had increased his repertoire of dances to 30. However, he was commuting 50 miles from his home in San Jose to their practices and performances, a grueling 4-5 times a week. He also began to feel limited by a group that conducted classes mostly in Spanish. When Gerardo offered him a chance to teach students in San Jose, Texomazatl seized the opportunity, and in 1989 created his own dance group.²⁸

Texomazatl’s students in San Jose were predominantly Chicanos, and his class was conducted mostly in English (with Spanish and Nahuatl words interspersed). The name of his group, Tezkatlipoka, was created in honor of the “energy of the night.” In Aztec mythology, one of the manifestations of Tezkatlipoka is the jaguar. In the night sky, it is evidenced in the stars which represent the spots on a jaguar, a nocturnal animal.²⁹ Texomazatl continued to teach his dance

²⁵ Texomazatl interview January 6, 2007

²⁶ Texomazatl interview January 6, 2007

²⁷ Texomazatl interview January 7, 2007

²⁸ Texomazatl interview March 7, 2007

²⁹ Texomazatl interview March 7, 2007

class from 1989 until the present. His former wife was a co-teacher with him from 1996 until 2007.

When Texomazatl formed his group in 1989, most of the Aztec dance groups in the United States were led by, and taught to, Mexican immigrants. Today the situation has changed, with a majority of the dancers Chicanos. Yet the teachers and leaders of dance groups are still predominantly from Mexico.³⁰

³⁰ Texomazatl interview March 7, 2007

CHAPTER 5: A PERFORMING DANCER

Travel and meeting people constitute a large part of Texomazatl's experience as a dancer. Performing excursions have helped him network with future business contacts on numerous occasions. While continuing to teach a dance class with his wife, Texomazatl was contacted in 2002 by an entertainment contractor based in Los Angeles concerning a traveling cultural educational show called "Festival of Cultures,"³¹ by Green Meadows Cultural Events, Inc. The stated aim of Green Meadows Productions³² is that "learning can be fun." Through a balance of education, entertainment, and a "hands on" learning experience, a productive learning environment is offered to children and adults. This for-profit educational show was geared toward school-age children.³³ The contractor, Ted (Texomazatl kept Ted's last name anonymous) heard about Texomazatl's dance repertoire and sought him out to replace another Aztec dance group he had previously contracted. Soon after, Texomazatl signed a contract with Green Meadows, and toured with the company for close to five years.³⁴ His presentations with Green Meadows occurred around the traditional American elementary school calendar, typically between September and June.

At the time Texomazatl was on tour (from 2002-2006), Green Meadows sponsored Southwest, California, and National tours. Green Meadows was (and continues as) an outdoor show with four different cultures represented. Usually these included performers representing an African culture, a US-based Native American culture, a European culture, and either an Asian, or another Native American culture such as the Aztec. The cultural diversity of the performers aimed at exposing audiences to the diversity within contemporary American society. Each of the

³¹ The current name of the show presenting Aztec dance is "Native Lands," (see website in footnote 32).

³² Stated in the website, www.greenmeadowsevents.com/nl/nl_home.htm. March 1, 2009.

³³ Texomazatl interview March 4, 2007

³⁴ Texomazatl interview March 4, 2007

four different acts spent 25 minutes performing, four times a day between 10am and 1:15 pm. Each performing act was required to be educational and entertaining, and to foster participation with the audiences.

The performers staged their presentations outdoors in public or county parks. The performance site was usually staged in an outdoor arena, with performers executing their presentation in a circle or oval of short-cropped grass, or bare earth. Bleachers for up to roughly 200 spectators surrounded the performance area on one side. Behind the stage area was a backdrop of teepees, in which performers prepared for their presentations.³⁵

Texomazatl's Aztec dance touring troupe consisted of himself and between one and three other dancers. These dancers were either members of the class he taught, or different California Aztec dance groups. Texomazatl insisted upon professional standards for himself and his contracted dancers while on tour. He required that they must, "stay in shape for the performances, give themselves adequate rest and food and have a positive, patient attitude toward travel and the rigors of two to four performances a day."³⁶

Texomazatl believes the narrative that accompanies his dance performance is crucial to audience understanding of Aztec culture. As part of conveying to the audience the continuity of Aztec culture, Texomazatl notes that he always greeted the audience in Nahuatl, and enlisted them into the performance by coaching them to respond by echoing specific Nahuatl words. In one interview, he recited a typical introduction of his dance performance:³⁷

During the course of our program, we're going to talk about our musical instruments, about how it is that the traditions you see here in front of you have been passed on to us. Also, I want to let you know that this is a reflection of Mexican culture from an Indigenous perspective. There are many different areas

³⁵ Texomazatl interview March 4, 2007

³⁶ Texomazatl interview March 4, 2007

³⁷ Texomazatl interview March 4, 2007

of Mexico, and this is one of the very large tribes represented here today. It was very strong at the time the Europeans first came to our land.

Entrada

After his greeting, Texomazatl described an “Entrada” (Entrance Dance) that began the performance. The Entrada³⁸ is a snakelike weaving dance that represents the ancient pilgrimage of the Aztec people from their original homeland (believed by many scholars to be the American Southwest) to the Valley of Tenochtitlan³⁹ (modern day Mexico City). The Entrada ends with the dancers standing, statuesquely in a line, facing east. Next, the dancers completed a movement called the “Honoring of the Four Directions,” a ritual that is carried out before every dance performance, ceremony, and some dance classes. In the beginning of this movement, a conch shell was blown as the drum played a steady, two-count beat. The dancers lifted one arm into the air and faced each of the cardinal directions for a count of eight. They proceeded to face the sky, with one hand (holding feathers, a rattle, or a feather shield) uplifted toward the sky. After turning counterclockwise and kneeling to the ground (with both hands touching the ground), their last movement was in reverence to “Tonantzin,” the Mother Earth.

The performance set always consisted of three additional dances plus a participatory dance, called the “Friendship Dance.” The specific dances chosen varied depending on Texomazatl’s particular preference, or were influenced by weather and grounds conditions. A cold and/or drizzly day, for instance, might inspire him to do a more restrained dance such as “Tonantzin” (Mother Earth Dance). The two main dances that were always performed were the “Fire Dance” (Fuego) and “Aguila Blanca” (White Eagle Dance). The three that were interchangeable at the

³⁸ Kurath (1946: 389) describes Conchero dancers performing this dance, but doesn’t mention the ending part which honors the four cardinal directions.

³⁹ See Cooper (1997: 25-6, 29) for a discussion of the origin of the Aztecs.

end of the presentation were “Tonantzin,” “Xipe Totec” (New Life) and “Cascabeles” (The Rattlesnake’s Rattle Dance).

An integral part of Texomazatl’s performance was an explanation of who the dancers were, what their names meant, and the meanings of dances. He elaborated:⁴⁰

We told the audience that our dances reflected natural themes of nature, such as [natural] elements, animals, teaching philosophies, mathematical formulas [through the calendar]. After we explained that to them, it only seemed proper that we would give them something [the dance] that they could look at, and they would be able to interpret our explanations. The audience could then respond by thinking, ‘Wow, this is exactly what they said their dance is about.’

In a similar fashion, each dance introduced audiences to facets of Aztec culture and cosmology, as follows:

The Fire Dance

In his introduction to the “Fire Dance,” Texomazatl offered an in depth explanation of the four natural elements in Aztec doctrine (fire, earth, air, water).⁴¹

When we did the Fire Dance, I would always say, ‘There are four elements that we are told to live with, in harmony. Our ancestors left us this lesson: Live in harmony with these four elements because we’re all in contact with them. It [was] an indigenous cultural perspective about the elements, but also, at the same time what was delivered was the concept of ecology.’

The message is how strong nature is, and how we have to learn to live with nature in harmony just like our ancestors did. Then I was sure to tell them that all ancient people, in their own land, knew of these concepts, and lived in harmony with nature. So I’d say, ‘All you kids, you’re all native people. You may come from Ireland, Cambodia, Africa, and England. You’re all native people from those lands. Your ancestors had all this knowledge.’

After this explanation, Texomazatl and his troupe danced the Fire Dance. The dance itself is very dramatic, utilizing a lit fire in a ceramic “sumhador” (a ceramic vessel that holds burning

⁴⁰ Texomazatl interview March 4, 2007

⁴¹ Texomazatl interview March 4, 2007

carbon disks and sage) that cast off flames as Texomazatl and his dancers danced around it, hovering legs, hands, and feet over the fire. The dance ended with the main dancer thrusting a bare foot into the fire, thereby extinguishing it, accompanied by counter-clockwise spinning dancers, and a crescendo of drumming and flute playing.⁴²

Aguila Blanca

The next dance presented was “Aguila Blanca,” the White Eagle Dance. Texomazatl explains the significance of this dance:⁴³

This dance is about balance and duality. I tell the audience that everything in nature has a duality to it. There are animals that come out only in the day and others that come out only in the night.’

I’d say, ‘This next dance portrays a symbolic battle between the day and the night. Because a jaguar is nocturnal, whereas an eagle hunts in the day.’ So if they’re real young kids, I explain it to their level [of development]. I basically talk about the opposites of nocturnal and diurnal. And that neither [the eagle nor the jaguar] is more important. I’d introduce the dance by saying, ‘This is the dance representing balance.’ Then we’d do the dance, and [due to the explanation] they would love it and understand the significance of it. I’d tell them that the eagle is called [in Nahuatl] “cuahtli” and the jaguar is “ocelotl.”

Aguila Blanca is a very athletic, quick-paced dance, with many spinning movements, and bodily movement that mimics an open winged eagle diving intensely toward its prey, and a jaguar prancing toward its prey in agile and determined concentration. There is an instance near the end of the dance when the eagle dancer almost defeats the jaguar dancer by standing with both feet on the motionless jaguar, head facing toward the sky, wings spread out in victory. But when the eagle jumps off the jaguar, the jaguar dancer raises up, dancing again in defiance. The dance ends with both of the creatures spinning rapidly and stopping in a statuesque pose of a scene of battle, both warriors’ arms outstretched, as if to wound the other.

A similar dance is described by Kurath in an excerpt from the translated Florentine Codex:

⁴² Texomazatl interview March 4, 2007

⁴³ Texomazatl interview March 4, 2007

The ocelot [jaguar] (costumed warrior)...followed by the eagle (costumed warrior), and another ocelot and eagle [dance together]. All four acted as if fighting...they came out dancing...they went looking from side to side; they went up leaping and fighting (Kurath 1964: 128)

Tonantzin

“Tonantzin” was often included in Texomazatl’s performances.⁴⁴ It is a dance in reverence of Mother Earth. Tonantzin is considered the being that brings life to the natural world in the form of the vegetation that surrounds us. She brings sustenance to humans and living creatures of the world. Texomazatl describes Tonantzin as the provider of the natural resources to protect human beings from the elements, as well.⁴⁵

Physically, Tonantzin is a less demanding dance than the others presented in the set. It is a graceful, medium paced dance. Arm and torso movements in Tonantzin mimic the sprouting of vegetation. Several turns and bodily gestures acknowledging the four cardinal directions are components of the dance. It ends with dancers coming out of a turn and kneeling on one knee, arms outstretched to the side as the head and torso are bowing towards the earth beneath.

The Friendship Dance

At the end of a Green Meadows performance, Texomazatl presented the “Friendship Dance,”⁴⁶ a contemporary dance that he learned from his teachers. It is a dance that is usually only enacted for public performances. The dance is an amalgam of dance movements from the “Permiso,” (a very short dance which is an introduction to all other dances at ceremonies and presentations) and the “Entrada” (mentioned above). The Friendship Dance builds excitement in audiences by involving all interested onlookers. Volunteers from the audience hold hands and begin to move rapidly around each other like a large coiled moving snake. The dance ends with

⁴⁴ Texomazatl interview March 18, 2007

⁴⁵ Texomazatl interview March 18, 2007

⁴⁶ Texomazatl interview March 4, 2007

participants holding hands while fanning out in a large circle, then quickly running toward each other while cheering and yelling.

Finishing the performance, Texomazatl and his dancers would complete the “Honoring of the Four Directions” and perform the “Entrada” to exit the dance space.

Refining the Performance

After Texomazatl and his troupe had danced for a time in the Green Meadows Show, the manager, Ted, wanted to introduce a degree of playful rivalry between a few of the acts. He soon enlisted the “Aztecs” to compete against the “Native Americans” in a theatrical display of agility and strength. This rivalry was created to excite the audience and (through drawing attention to the similarities and differences between the Aztecs and Native Americans from the U.S.) to serve an educational purpose as well.⁴⁷ Texomazatl would enlist one side of the audience to be “his Aztecs.” The other side of the audience would be “claimed” by the Native American performer. Intermittently, audience members from each side would cheer as they threw spears through the Native American Hoop Dancer’s hoop to show support for either the “Aztecs” or the Native American performer.⁴⁸ Comedy was also a part of the act. An example is when Texomazatl taunted his Native American colleague by reminding him that corn was agriculturally harvested for the first time in the Oaxaca region of Mexico between 5,000-7,000 years ago, not in what would later become the Southwestern U. S.⁴⁹ The Native American performer responded by picking up a clump of grass, throwing it through a hoop and calling it, “lettuce for his Mexican

⁴⁷ This part of the Green Meadows presentation was called “The Americas Program.” Texomazatl interview March 4, 2007

⁴⁸ Texomazatl interview March 4, 2007

⁴⁹ This claim is substantiated in an article by Sluyter and Dominguez, see references.

taco!”⁵⁰ Having the sense of humor that he does, Texomazatl didn’t mind this comedic aspect of the show.

When he began performing with Green Meadows, a Native American dancer and flautist (whose name Texomazatl wishes to remain anonymous) who was part of the tour offered Texomazatl ideas about how to interact with and build excitement in the audience. He was a third generation Native American performer whose grandfather had been a performer in Buffalo Bill’s “Wild West Show” at the turn of the century. Under Ted’s guidance, Texomazatl learned several dramatic and staging techniques, including how to use his regalia and props (such as a feathered shield or a rattle) to hold the audience’s attention when it began to wane. Texomazatl reflects on these performance tips.⁵¹

I owe him so much. Mostly from him, with some of my boss’ silly ideas, and my own ingenuity and passion for wanting to teach these kids something, and having fun while doing it, it all evolved into being what it is, and what it was.

Working with Green Meadows taught him specific methods of dance presentation. Some of these methods were: the spacing of dancers within the staging area; facing the audience at all times; gesturing with arms, body, and head; offering memorized and expressive verbal descriptions of dances; making eye contact with, and maintaining physical proximity to audience members; and enlisting individual audience participation in a few instances during each performance.⁵²

Texomazatl danced under contract with Green Meadows Productions until 2006. While on tour, his former wife continued to teach dance classes to his San Jose, California, dance group (which she co-managed until 2007). During that time this group continued to host a yearly

⁵⁰ Texomazatl interview March 4, 2007

⁵¹ Texomazatl interview March 18, 2007

⁵² Texomazatl interview March 4, 2007

ceremony in San Jose as well (called Quetzalcoatl). As of mid-2009, Texomazatl continues to teach free Aztec dance and drumming classes to the public in San Jose.

CHAPTER 6: IDENTITY AS A CULTURAL PERFORMER

Texomazatl considers himself a traditional dancer.⁵³ This entails that he: regularly attends dance classes (as a teacher), encourages and supports other dancers in his class, and is a contributing member of a dance group (through performing, participating in workshops, and helping out in dance class). He characterizes his identity as a dancer as, “A cultural educator using the arts, through the use of a very unique and exact type of program.”

Texomazatl balances his dance activity in the four realms of dance identified by him: ceremonial dance; practice dance (as a teacher of, or a visitor to dance classes); educational dance (with audiences); and performance dance (with less emphasis on long explanation of dances, and more on the exhibitory performance). These four realms are intertwined, and cannot be fully disconnected from each other, regardless of the venue or circumstances. For example, as an educational dancer, before audiences, Texomazatl also interjects elements of a ceremony, such as the honoring of the four directions and the burning of copal (ceremonial incense made from tree sap). Additionally, as a practice dancer, he may dance expressively, as in a live performance, in order for his students to be exposed to the techniques expected of a competent dancer. Prior to performing a dance in class or before an audience, he may slowly model a step and explain how it has a specific meaning in the narrative of a dance. The explanation and modeling are slowly danced since the performed step may not be recognizable due to the quickness of its execution.

As an individual who made his livelihood from dance for over ten years, most of Texomazatl’s performances have highlighted him as an educational dancer. He is proud of this

⁵³ Pre-Hispanic Aztec dance was taught in formal schools called “Ahmecatls.” Learning Aztec dance (with its many protocols and steps) was considered a serious endeavor, which needed to be taught in a structured environment. Texomazatl explained that a traditional dancer doesn’t simply do Aztec dance for money, but needs to be involved in both ceremonies and the perpetuation of the dance tradition by passing it on to others (Texomazatl interview March 4, 2007).

fact. As a dancer, he's performed at different types of events: From a Nike Corporation cultural sensitivity event in Memphis, Tennessee, to a Native American basketball tournament in North Dakota. Texomazatl acknowledges that some of the venues in which he's performed have showcased him more as a performing artist than as an educator.⁵⁴

Even amidst performance venues that he deems superficial (in the portrayal of, and/or atmosphere in which the dance takes place), he infuses purpose and dignity into performances of Aztec dance to an audience of onlookers who either lack knowledge of Aztec history and culture, or have been exposed to only the most dated and sensationalistic stereotypes of the Aztecs (such as portrayals of Aztecs as human-sacrifice crazed, butchers). He describes dancing at one such engagement in San Jose, California:⁵⁵

A couple of weeks ago [March 2007], we danced at the Marriot Hotel. It was called, "One Night in Cancun." [It was a special entertainment event that] had something to do with the fact that "Apocalypto" [a motion picture featuring Mayans directed by Mel Gibson] came out, so they wanted to have a Mayan theme [since there were no known Mayan performing troupes in the Bay Area to hire, the producers of the show felt Aztec dancers would be a sufficient substitute!]."

It was an entertainment type of thing. It was nice, and it was a little commercial because they made some cheesy statues that were on stage...that if it had not been for the dim lights, would not have looked good! They had a little pyramid...But even amidst that atmosphere, I still felt that we represented well. Even in the midst of these cheesy statues, and the [generic] indigenous pyramid, I still felt that we got our message across. That message is, 'Hey, we're still here!' [Meaning his indigenous Mexican heritage had prevailed, in spite of its suppression from the time of the conquest].

They [performance organizers] could have contacted some agency that would bring in some phony dancers who have no link to the past of our ancestors, who could have tried to pull it off. Like some modern day dancers that would make some carnival type regalia...But they never would have been able to pull it off, or orchestrate or replicate what it is we bring.

⁵⁴ Texomazatl interview March 18, 2007

⁵⁵ Texomazatl interview March 18, 2007

Texomazatl felt even under such sensationalizing circumstances, he and his troupe represented Aztec dance in a dignified, historically accurate manner. He was an honest representation of a practicing Aztec dancer, not a for-profit improviser.

Performing Aztec dance in an event that showcased Mayan identity situated Texomazatl and his troupe into the realm of a generic, pre-Columbian, Mesoamerican identity. His identity transformed into a site of ambiguity when he and his dance group danced for the “Cancun” event that should have presented Mayan, not Aztec dance. In this instance it appears the promoters of the presentation were more concerned with offering a sensationalized example of Native American dance (exoticism) rather than making an attempt to promote understanding of the Maya, or any Mesoamerican culture, for that matter. As Texomazatl educated the “Cancun” audience about his culture and the differences and similarities it has and had with the Maya, important questions emerged. Did Texomazatl’s intent in educating audiences about Aztec culture in the performance negate the fact that producers, through the hiring of Aztec dancers, misrepresented Mayan culture? Do such culture swapping performances reinforce stereotypes of indigenous peoples as interchangeable and exotic others? The answer to the second question is affirmative, but not comprehensively so. This is due to the fact that Texomazatl’s narrative began by explaining to the audience exactly what Aztec dance is, and that it is not Mayan dance. Yet the fact that Texomazatl describes the miniature pyramids on stage as “cheesy” hints at an ambivalence toward dancing for such events.

Aztec dancers exist in an ambiguous situation, due to both Catholic elements that persist within many ceremonies and the performance conditions under which various presentations take place (mentioned above). The Conchero form of dance is currently outnumbered by both numbers of Mexica (Catholic-free) and Aztec dancers (who dance exhibiting a mixture of:

predominantly Mexica traditions, with hints of Catholic influences).⁵⁶ Texomazatl's self concept is an Aztec dancer, with leanings toward a Mexica identity.

A Dancer as Warrior Analogy

In the United States, the general public often equates professionally performed dance (such as that which is showcased by dance repertoires) as graceful, agile, sensitive works. They are expected to convey the human condition with sensitivity and artfulness. In contrast, Texomazatl's self concept as a dancer may at first seem surprising. He characterizes himself as a "warrior."

Given these four different realms of dance, an ensayo [practice] dancer, ceremonial, educational/school dancing, and a traveling performer, during all these different dynamics of dancing, I see myself, and I see my brothers and sisters and family and friends as modern day warriors. The battle that we meet today is first and foremost, within ourselves. It's the awareness that we are indigenous people.

We're aware of the psychological and cultural conquest of our ancestors, which we find ourselves still experiencing because of the language we're speaking, the foods we're eating, and the types of music we listen and dance to. Modern dance and modern foods, they reflect in many ways the cultural conquest of our ancestors. So the first battle is within ourselves to reclaim our identity, of which stems way back before the Europeans first came to this continent.

To get in touch with [our identity] as warriors, the armas or weaponry that we use are: music, dancing, history, arts and crafts including the making of our traditional regalia. It's also the understanding through the studying and learning from different Aztec teachers the Aztec calendar, or "Tonal Mexioytl." First we have to get ourselves healthy.

With a modern day warrior, the battle is fighting the ignorance within ourselves, and educating ourselves. Not just by ourselves, [but by] getting educated by others. As I mentioned, we have teachers. We use the music, the dancing, teaching workshops and lectures to help teach others and share with others.⁵⁷

In his awareness of his cultural roots, and engagement in Aztec traditions (including dance), Texomazatl notes how his displayed sense of cultural consciousness influenced perceptions of

⁵⁶ Texomazatl interview March 18, 2007

⁵⁷ Texomazatl interview March 18, 2007

Latinos by others. It also often ignited the curiosity of non-Latino audience members into their own cultural heritage. He elaborates:

Society many times has said, “You’re Spanish, you’re Latino,” and categorizes us all in the same boat as Puerto Ricans and Cubans and even people from Spain! Whenever we’re called Hispanics and Latinos, it does, whether anyone realizes it or not, those kinds of words and identities and the accepting of them: psychologically, spiritually, and historically, disconnect us from [our] heritage. It downplays and takes away from the greatness of our ancestral culture, and our inheritance, which is geographical.⁵⁸

So it is a battle of sorts, to reclaim his indigenous heritage under a hegemonic U.S. influence that historically has not acknowledged this heritage (Rodriguez 2008: 116). He continues:

As far as modern day warriors, we use all of these things to make ourselves healthy, without degrading ourselves. Also, we use these armas to teach people who are not from our background, to understand that, and see us as indigenous people.

Mariangela Rodriguez likewise reflects on how, in Aztec dance, the body is used as a tool in a larger struggle for social change and spiritual harmony:

The body is an instrument of battle with which order is restored amid chaos. The dancers are warriors and their musical instruments are their weapons; they fight while dancing and through prayer, religious harmony is restored (1999: 76).

The narrative accompanying dance presentations are an additional “weapon,” as are the spoken or echoed Aztec words that the audience members say. Texomazatl adds:

We know where we’re from, where we’re at, and where we’re going. Which is an old saying, but it’s very true. Onlookers from other cultures see us and realize, ‘Wow, look, they’ve recovered their identities, look at how it’s been positive [for them].’ They may then say, ‘Could it be that I could benefit by learning more about my cultural identity?’

⁵⁸ Texomazatl interview March 18, 2007

The “dancer as warrior” analogy is evidenced concretely as well. Male Aztec dancers often dance with feathered simulated shields and “markanas” (simulated pre-Conquest battle axes) as part of their traje.⁵⁹

Dance as a Counter to the Colonial Legacy

Texomazatl’s interest in dance was formed in part, in reaction to the U.S. educational system’s ignoring and/or minimizing both the contributions of Mexican Americans in the U.S. and the Aztecs in Mexico. As a counter to both the “invisibility” of his heritage as a Mexican American, and the misrepresentation of Aztec identity, an important part of his identity is a cultural educator through performance dance. Texomazatl accomplishes this educative role formally through performances enacted specifically for audiences, such as the “Green Meadows” presentations. Informally he carries out this role by teaching free dance classes. Through the presentation of Aztec dance to the public (including individuals who are descendants of the Aztecs), Texomazatl is educating the general public about the Aztec culture, which has often been maligned in public consciousness in the United States. The persistently negative reputation of the Aztecs creates a challenge in the positive representation of his culture.

Several scholars have argued that dance can function as a vehicle to a more enlightened world through the sharing of one’s knowledge and history. Stated succinctly, by Australian anthropologist Rosita Henry: “People both individually and collectively are able to intervene in their own histories through performance” (Henry 2000: 322). Using an example of Yanyuwa dancers (from Borroloola of the Northern Territory of Australia) engaged in teaching their dance steps and songs to Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australian educators, Elizabeth Mackinlay forwards an observation that is substantiated in Texomazatl’s performing experience. For the

⁵⁹ However, some male dancers choose to dance with feathers, a rattle, or a staff in hand. These components of their traje are a personal choice.

Yanyuwa women, the performance becomes one that is not about being put on display as singing and dancing objects, but rather a process of developing a relationship with others to share knowledge through a collective performative experience (2005: 138). Even if viewed as mostly a spectacle for entertainment, indigenous dancers/performers continue to be the possessors of their dance. They are the embodiment of this possession every time they perform (Magowan 2000: 317).

The power of the performance as a site of transformation by, and for, both the individual and community cannot be underestimated. Jill Dolan (2006: 519-520) states that:

Performances create citizens and engage democracy as a participatory forum in which ideas and possibilities for social equity and justice are shared. And, (they) can articulate a common future, one that's more just and equitable, with more chances to contribute to the making of culture.

This hints that instead of being merely “consumers” of culture, the audiences Texomazatl performs before, might possibly be implicated in the continuity/resurrection of Aztec culture by virtue of being spectators.⁶⁰ Moreover, Texomazatl asserts that an aim of his is to transform audiences into agents for the inclusion of Aztec culture into the multi-cultural American landscape through their actions: cheering along with him and his troupe, echoing Aztec words and phrases, and dancing simplified Aztec dance movements in the “Friendship Dance.” Audience participation in a dance performance enlists onlookers as perpetuators of the particular culture. Their participation in the act makes it impossible for them to be simply “consumers” of the culture (Magowan 2000: 316). The participatory actions by audiences enable Texomazatl's performances to resist being labeled a “spectacle” or an “object.” Also, by incorporating the

⁶⁰ Jennifer Kramer offers a parallel with this view: The audience, by virtue of being a witness, is implicated in the continuity of culture when she writes about Nuxalk identity as a First Nation people being strengthened by the act of “outsiders” (non-aboriginal people) witnessing their art (2006: 101-2).

audience into his performances Texomazatl is able to transcend the “viewer” and the “viewed” inequity in power, because with audience participation, these lines become blurred.

Texomazatl’s focus on the constructive aspects of Aztec culture informs the specific narrative he presents to audiences. He describes some examples of his narrative at Green Meadows performances.⁶¹

I would talk about Aztec grade schools, Ahlmecatli’s, where kids would learn to sing, dance, and learn mathematics, astronomy, and agriculture. [He’d also explain] How the Aztecs had many libraries, and how many of them were burned down by invading Spanish armies. I’d say, ‘Of course we do speak Spanish because we were forced to, but we do still speak our language, and many of you speak the Aztec language, did you know that?’ And I’d use examples of Nahuatl words that became used in Spanish, and then used in English, such as “tomato,” “chocolate,” and avocado.” Then I’d have them repeat new words.

In sharing his culture and projecting a positive image of his heritage, he reflects on how his performance techniques have not only been influenced by other performers, but by his own experiences of interacting with a variety of peoples, in a diversity of locales:⁶²

My beliefs and the foundations of my teachings have been forged by the influences of my experience of thousands of miles of traveling, before thousands of students. It was for these children that come to learn something in these performances. It wasn’t about money, because the money could not compensate for being out there in 20 degree [Fahrenheit] weather, and wearing the traditional Aztec regalia [which does not cover much of the legs or chest], doing “Aguila Blanca” [a particularly rigorous dance] for these kids while it’s raining.

Regarding the use of expressive motions and moves in his dance steps, and adding a degree of athleticism and power to them, Texomazatl elaborates upon how his engagement with Aztec dance reflects his pride in the continuity, resurgence, and revitalization of not only Mexica dance, but Aztec pedagogy as well. Every dance step employed represents not only Texomazatl’s love of the dance itself, but an exacting attention to the different steps therein. He sees the

⁶¹ Texomazatl interview March 18, 2007

⁶² Texomazatl interview March 18, 2007

expressiveness in dance steps as a crucial part of being a master dancer. His critique of “un” or “under” expressive dancers follows:⁶³

Many times [at ceremonies] I see the steps being [danced] half way. They are being done downtroddenly. Or very submissively. They’re not using their arms, they’re carrying a beautiful shield and a beautiful rattle but their arms are just swinging from their sides like they’re in a concentration camp! They’re still dragging their cross saying, ‘El es Dios.’ [Concheros continue to this day to say “El es Dios” throughout their dance ceremonies].⁶⁴ I won’t let that affect me. I’m going to let my spirit and my heart feel free and dance!

The influence of dance itself, as a powerful medium of communication, must also be considered. Dance is capable of conveying statements which one may not be at liberty to imply or loudly announce due to cultural constraints (Friedman 1976: 118). Texomazatl has the advantage of including a meaningfully explanatory narrative with his dance presentation. Yet what he doesn’t vocally proclaim to audiences, he announces in powerful steps, leaps, turns, balance and stillness.

As acknowledged by Texomazatl, at times his group dances for events that may be perceived as superficial examples of cultural exchange (such as the “One Night in Cancun” event mentioned earlier). A question arises in such instances of cultural performance: In what ways do such presentations hinder, or aid in the public perception of Aztec identity? Texomazatl’s answer: In his awareness and connection to ancestral traditions and by simply surviving, unscathed and vibrant for an audience to witness, this was enough to aid in the positive public perception of Aztec identity. Regardless of the paper mâché statues he danced among and the commercial venue danced within (at the “Cancun” event), a central message conveyed was that his identity has survived 500 years of cultural oppression and invisibility.⁶⁵ Fred Myers (2002: 268) draws a parallel with the example of how Aboriginal Australian performance (through

⁶³ Texomazatl interview March 18, 2007

⁶⁴ See page 12.

⁶⁵ Texomazatl interview March 18, 2007

painting in front of audiences) is a self-determinative assertion of their survival and existence. Julie Cruikshank furthers this discussion by asserting how public performances of indigenous culture should be perceived as “tangible forms of social action,” which illustrate the social agency of the performers (1997: 56, 66).

Texomazatl reveals to audiences in his performance at venues such as the Marriot, and to a lesser extent at more educational events such as the Green Meadows presentations, is only a glimpse into the sub-cultural Aztec Dance community. The unequal ratio between hidden and visible aspects of culture is a reality in cultural performances (Murray 2000: 350). An Aztec dance ceremony, since it is a fairly large gathering of dancers, their dance groups and their families, usually is held in a city park or other public recreational space. Its participants (dancers, elders, caretakers of the five altars) are invited in to dance in a partitioned off circle. Inside this circle, different speakers can be heard only by dancers inside (there are no microphones). This narrative is an important ceremonial component. Although onlookers can witness dance ceremonies, the meanings of the dances and ceremonial narrative remain hidden. Aztec dance ceremonies are lively events in which dance groups and individuals oftentimes interact for full-day (or evening and full-day; or two-day) ceremonies. These locally organized and sponsored ceremonies typically take place roughly eight or more times a year.

The Aztec dance community reveals only a glimpse of its enormity and complexity when a performance is presented to the public. What the audience sees is arguably a de-contextualized expression of Aztec dance, as this dance form originates from and survived as a ritual activity, not an entertainment undertaking. As in any community, dancers do not form a monolithic culture in which individuals can be viewed as “interchangeable units” (Najera Ramirez 1999: 185). Aztec dancers exist along a spectrum ranging from those who only dance in ceremonies, to

those who seldom or never do so, and instead only practice, attend indigenous gatherings (such as pow wows and political events) or perform.

In the United States, cultural performers (such as Texomazatl) who earn a salary for their work are at times confronted from within their particular culture and without with the criticism that they're "selling" their culture, or are at the least, estranging it from its "authenticity." This is due in part to the fact that in the U.S., work is viewed as something profane and mundane. Work is framed as the opposite of religion, spirituality, or political aims (Tuttle 2001: 116).⁶⁶ Nevertheless, as evidenced in his performance, Texomazatl's work reflects his spirituality and political consciousness as a Mexican American.

Paige Raibmon has stated how "authenticity" (in the case of Northwest Coast aboriginal peoples), "Is a powerful and shifting set of ideas that worked in a variety of ways toward a variety of ends." She also reflects on the use of the idea of the authentic by colonized peoples as a way to secure wage labor, and/or land rights or land use privileges (Raibmon 2006: 3). Colonizing populations have invoked the label's use as a contrast to their own claims of modernity and civilization, and the rights and privileges accorded them therein. Perceptions of authenticity have a history of entrapping colonized people into a dubious predicament: If they were viewed as authentic, they were considered part of a past that had no role in the present, yet if they were not deemed authentic, they were seen as assimilated and no longer having a role in future society (Raibmon 2006: 9; Ram 2000: 359-360).

When Texomazatl describes the physical features of members of a dance group he joined, he describes how their long, dark hair, bronzed skin, athletic physiques and indigenous facial

⁶⁶ I, as an Aztec dancer who has performed for audiences, never felt used as a "commodity" or "spectacle." I have felt more exploited and objectified while working at a cookie shop in the early 90's. I have felt honored to able to enjoy a dance my ancestors were prohibited from performing.

characteristics, were an alluring, “authentic”⁶⁷ representation of an Aztec dancer. His conceptualization of an “authentic” physical Aztec identity is a display of resistance with past (and continuing) Mexican ideals of physical attractiveness being equated with fairer skinned, Spanish individuals (Batalla 1996: 55-6). This imagined “authentic Aztec” rendering is akin to the “black is beautiful” concept that emerged in the 1960’s-70’s in response to racism in the U.S. Yet the imagined “authentic Aztec” identity doesn’t allow much acknowledgement of individuals of Aztec ancestry who are fairer skinned or are of “mixed” ancestry. Therefore, the notion of “authenticity” cannot be fully liberated from the identity trap that it inevitably becomes.

Related to the framing of “authentic” and “inauthentic” as a binary, is the concept of “traditional” and “non-traditional.” As Peter Toner relates in an analysis of modern day Yolgnu performance in Australia (2005: 30), the construction of indigenous performance as traditional or non-traditional, is problematic and not resolvable due to an essential question: Exactly when (or under what conditions) does “traditional” end, and “non-traditional” begin? Though the meanings associated with, and the dance steps Texomazatl uses may be centuries old, these are also in a continuous state of intermittently subtle and obvious change.⁶⁸

Texomazatl’s challenge as a presenter is to rehabilitate the “past tense” public perceptions of what a Conquest-era Aztec was, with an understanding of what a modern day Aztec is and how the two are entangled. In presenting his performance as an educational endeavor between

⁶⁷ Texomazatl’s term, from interview January 6, 2007

⁶⁸ The cultures of all peoples, through time and space are in a state of continual change. While doing Aztec dance, I have been asked by cynical audience members if the materials in my traje were “traditional.” My answer was one I learned from Texomazatl: No. But I would explain to these individuals that the pre-Conquest Aztecs used the most striking and aesthetically pleasing materials they had available at the time, as we contemporary dancers continue to, in contemporary times.

cultures, Texomazatl's Aztec dance performance can be viewed as a form of communication, not as a commodity or an artifact (Tuttle 2001: 100).

As of 2009, Texomazatl continues to attend ceremonies on weekends, teach classes once a week and to stage public performances. Dance class is the site where a new cadre of dancers continually emerge (Alvarez 2005: 50). He reflects on the structure and aims of his classes, which in this 2007 interview mirror his aims of today:⁶⁹

Our practice is structured more like a class, yet we have the copal [tree sap incense, used ceremonially] and we'll also open and close with a palabra [spoken word by each class member at the end of class-a norm at ceremonies], and honoring the [four] cardinal points. Its [his practice structure and ideals] based on what I learned from a folklorico [folkloric dance] teacher: Teach at a good pace, make it interesting, make the steps exact, make sure everyone understands what it is you're trying to get them to do, and try to be a good role model so that they'll [the students] be thinking, 'This is easy, I'll try this.'

When asked about his future aspirations for Aztec Dance, Texomazatl reiterates his dreams of cultural empowerment within his community, and the education of all segments of society about his culture. He continues to be inspired by educating audiences about his heritage. Texomazatl's pragmatic dreams and aspirations include concrete examples of educational endeavor. He elaborates:⁷⁰ "We're now seeing more dancers put together gatherings where we have workshops and speakers. We're going to need to bring in some new speakers, not the same ones with the same messages...."

The gatherings he envisions would be attended mostly by members of the Aztec dance community. Such gatherings usually are held in public locations (such as colleges) and are open to the public to attend.⁷¹ He also sees dance as a vehicle for self knowledge and liberation from a hegemonizing narrative that had as its aim the erasure of Indigenous Mexican collective memory

⁶⁹ Texomazatl interview March 18, 2007

⁷⁰ Texomazatl interview March 7, 2007

⁷¹ Texomazatl interview March 7, 2007

(Batalla 1996: 17-18). Ultimately:⁷² “We’re beyond saying ‘El es Dios’ for another 500 years...I’m hopeful that’s going to propel us into a healthy future.”

⁷² Texomazatl interview March 18, 2007

CHAPTER 7: CONCLUSION

Using specific examples of Texomazatl's experience, this work has considered how cultural revitalization grows in an environment of political invisibility, assimilation and the resulting quest for social recognition. Aztec dance, as manifested through performances, ceremonies, and dance classes, serves to reclaim and relive a subsumed past. The imperialistic legacy of a self-imagined homogenous U.S. culture is challenged and defied by an indigenous (Aztec dance) performance.

The questions raised in the Introduction have been reiterated from within and between the lines of Texomazatl's narrative, and presentations. An all-encompassing question, as it relates to Texomazatl's experience in presenting Aztec dance, has been guiding my research: What is the relationship between performance and power? Several layers of answers have been discovered. The most important of these concern the venues performed at, specific audiences performed before, and the conditions under which this cultural-educative experience takes place⁷³ which all indicate how Texomazatl's performances are framed within the physical, temporal, and commercial boundaries of Western norms.

This thesis suggests that hegemonic influence is countered in a variety of ways within and by the performance itself. First, Texomazatl conveys his dances' meanings and additional narrative using both past and present tenses. Most of his narrative is spoken in the present tense, a fact that should be noted in a narrative concerning an Aztec art form, since "Aztec" in the U.S. public imagination is usually equated with the past. Secondly, the enlisting of the audiences' participation shatters the performer-audience (object-viewer) dichotomy. He thus enlists the audience in a counter-hegemonic act.

⁷³ Including wage labor, performances that transpire at scheduled intervals and within an arena that cements the audience-performer dichotomy.

In the Introduction I asked: In what ways is Texomazatl's Aztec dance performance employed as an "alternative space for struggle" and "a tactic of intervention"? As Texomazatl clearly describes, ceremonial and performance Aztec dancers engage in dances that both concretely (through steps, and movement) and figuratively (through the act of dance itself), symbolize battle. This battle is between: humans themselves; humans and animals or natural elements; and between animals. It is also a battle within the dancer him/herself-between both the positive and negative influences that reside within. Additionally, the dancer-as-warrior is battling past injustices and the historical invisibility as a Mexican-American existing in a hegemonizing (U.S.) landscape. In this respect Texomazatl's performances can be read as a specific tactic of intervention to propel the cultural empowerment of the Chicano/Mexican community in the U.S. It should also be read as a battling of negative influences within this community.

The dancer as warrior analogy is apt when referring to a militaristic state society (the Aztec Empire). The imagery of dancing with shields and "markanas" (simulated obsidian battle axes) adds to this. Texomazatl made it a point to distinguish himself from those who danced in a weak and uninspired way. One wonders how much of this emphasis on the physical power of Aztec dance signifies a metaphorical show of cultural strength of one's continuing culture and resistance to official narratives of its complete demise.

Aztec dance thus illuminates the way an ethnic dance performance simultaneously resists yet reproduces the power structure inflicted upon it since the Conquest. In the first instance it is a dance of the vanquished, which were not foreseen to continue these outlawed traditions. However, simultaneously it is the dance of an imperialistic civilization known for subjugating surrounding peoples before the Spanish arrived. In this way it resonates with the Western power structure which has existed for 500 years in the Western Hemisphere. This fact may hold an

allure to Chicanos searching for a politically powerful identity in reaction to the marginalized position they've historically held in society. The lure of historical political/military might may also be a manifestation of Chicanos' Western-tinged perception of large-scale, state societies as more advanced and desirable to be associated with than smaller scale, perhaps tribal ones.

I have also explored the question concerning why "superficial" demonstrations of ethnic dance take place. The example was Texomazatl's dancing for the "One Night in Cancun" event. Practicing as a performance dancer occasionally brought Texomazatl into a cloudy intersection between imagined and realized identities. The event illustrates bell hooks' quote in the Introduction concerning how the presentation of culture can seemingly be trivialized or de-contextualized "out of necessity for survival in an oppressive world" (hooks 1995: 210). Such performances cannot be defined in terms of black and white definitions of the exploitation of identity for profit. They instead represent multiple loci at once: sites of the reinforcing of stereotypes, locations of liberation from mute representations of the past, and nexuses of contestation and possibility. Ultimately, cultural performers cannot control the constructions of identity that audiences inscribe upon them. Yet a dancer such as Texomazatl may control how he views himself as a presenter of Aztec dance, and the educationally crucial narrative that accompanies his dance.

Texomazatl's performances of Aztec dance support culture building in several ways: First, Nahuatl vocabulary is taught and spoken in a present tense form. Secondly, specific steps and their epistemologies are "broken down" (into smaller parts) and modeled for the audience, as mythology is taught which relates to specific dances. Additionally, Texomazatl's explanation of Aztec cosmology and philosophy is presented in terms applicable within American culture (explanations of "balances" in life as they pertain to environmentalism, etc.). Finally, his

presentation of Aztec dance as a continuing endeavor is in its own right a “culture building” activity.

This thesis also investigated the question of how physical ethnic image in performance challenges or reproduces hegemony. Texomazatl’s concern with the “authenticity” of the ethnic and physical appearance of the members of the second group he joined, at first glance appears to be a self-stereotyping, marketable fetishization of indigenous performers, and likely a means of securing “gigs.” Yet his note of the group’s “authentic” appearance should be interpreted as an act of resistance to, and contestation of, historical (and contemporary) Hispanic ideals of attractiveness and what “power” looks like in its Western manifestation. The strong, bronzed, long-haired warrior is a forceful counterpoint to Mexico’s and the Hispanic world’s imaginings of the weak, barefooted, frail (and possibly malnourished) “indigena” (indigenous person).

In sum, this thesis has examined how the performance of ethnic dance accommodates and contests hegemonic domination. It is necessarily limited, addressed mainly to the hegemonic environments and norms under which Texomazatl performs. There is also a publicly unknown (excepting certain ceremonial elements that are part of a public presentation) yet rich and crucial side of Texomazatl’s dance that exists independent of the number or type of public performances he performs in. It is this larger tradition that sustains and inspires him. Audiences remain largely unaware that he gives them only the smaller morsels of a banquet he regularly relishes, “la danza Azteca.”

In their struggle to survive, colonized people often adopt a strategic approach of disguising/hiding, and finally only partially revealing their traditions. The act of disguising/hiding, and even ending a cultural tradition for a time, for it to emerge later, illustrates the twinned accommodation and contestation of hegemonic forces. Aztec dance is a prime

example, with its survival through its Conchero manifestation (accommodation) and its liberation through Mexica style Aztec dance (contestation). Richard Rodriguez (1992: 24) alludes to this paradoxical strategy of survival:

“The Indian (of Mexico) stands in the same relationship to modernity as she did to Spain-willing to disappear in order to ensure her inclusion in time; refusing to absent herself from the future.”

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