



The Conquistador, the Missionary, the Spattered Migrant, the Warrior Women

“Frontera / Border: A Living Monument” by Amanda Piña

Text: Nicole Haitzinger

“Frontera / Border – A Living Monument” is the most recent work in the series “Endangered Human Movements”, by Amanda Piña. Nicole Haitzinger has accompanied the project for several years, and gives us an insight into its background.

“Frontera / Border – A Living Monument” begins with a performed foreword: a group forms into a living monument: the pose of the conquistador appears, then dissolves into the mass of bodies until a missionary can be seen turning into sinisterly calm river with a dangerous undercurrent. Someone crossing it gets wet. The river transforms into the figure of armed warrior women. The statue of the ruler – in European modernity usually male, upright and standing on a pedestal – appears as the reference figure of colonial history; the moving bodies melt it away in a decolonial gesture. The monument as the larger-than-life copy of a man isn’t toppled swiftly in an insurrection but rather subjected to an ongoing performance of small but effective gestures of resistance. While the warrior women, whose stage presence recalls the feminist performance of Lasteris, address the audience head on, a figure from elsewhere starts up the matlachines, a dance of conquest brought from Europe in the early colonial period and practised in Latin America. Amanda Piña’s staging presents a succession of two struc-

turally and motivically interwoven, present-day variations of this dance form, which has been practised, transformed and adapted for four hundred years. After the hallucinogenic appearance of forty-eight figures in various constellations, Rodrigo de la Torres begins a highly energetic version of the dance from a border region in Northern Mexico where drug trafficking is rife. But where does this dance, which is continually being socio-culturally and politically reinterpreted, actually come from, what functions does it have and how did it become a gesture of resistance?

Matlachines: cultural souvenir from colonial European modernity

The ‘danza de moros y cristianos’ trope spread as a cultural souvenir of the conquistadors during the reign of the Hapsburg Emperor Charles V in the early modern period. This parodistic dance contains the sediment of the Hapsburgian collective trauma of the Islamic conquest of the Iberian peninsula. In its extremely successful and popular staging of a reconquest, Christians fight against Muslims and win, always. The model of fighting and winning was transferred to the New World and adapted accordingly. In its new function the dance was intended to subdue the local ‘infidels’ and expedite their conversion. Its primary aim was to legitimate Christianisation through an apparently equal contest; it was secondly a military display, and thirdly intended to illustrate the technical superiority of the colonisers.





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The original cast of the matlachines consisted of the monarca (the last Aztec ruler, Moctezuma), Malinche (the translator and Aztec mistress of the conquistador Herman Cortés, frequently reinterpreted as the wife/daughter of Moctezuma) an abuelo (an ancestor) a bull (as representative of Cortés and Europe) and 10–14 danzantes (dancers). They were arranged in two competing groups, Aztek ‘infidels’ and Catholic Christians, wearing costumes made of a variety of coloured bands, a headdress decorated with eagle feathers, and carrying maracas and triangular wooden fans. In a final struggle with the bull, in which ‘good’ at last triumphs over ‘evil’, Moctezuma and his retinue convert to Christianity. As a ‘danza de conquista’, the matlachines is still performed at festivities by both Hispanic and indigenous communities. Why? Popular indigenous variants appropriate the dance and charge it with a story of their own: Moctezuma resurrects as a long-awaited warrior with his comrades, and together with Malinche, now recoded as his consort, liberates the Americas from the shackles of the colonising powers.

Com-possession: figures as intensity of world experience

Amanda Piña’s staging of the matlachines is characterised by her own artistic handwriting. Two things are interwoven here: firstly a very precise choreographic structure, spelled out and declined, with a certain similarity to the entrée format of the French ballet de cour, which dramaturgically sequences the entrances of comparable figures in various formations; this choreographic reference secondly enables the development of figures that highlight indigenous worlds of thought and imagination as opposed to a representative model of anthropomorph-

ised characters established in Europe since the Enlightenment. Amanda Piña calls this appearance of figures and this way of choreographing ‘com-possession’, following Rolando Vásquez’s essay ‘Vistas of Modernity. Decolonial Aesthetics And The end Of The Contemporary’. The ensemble of a dozen performers embodies forty-eight figures, who are named according to their appearance: el mordido por la serpiente (the snake-bitten), la muerte (death), las queervoras (the queer transfeminine), la serpiente con dos lenguas (the snake with two tongues/languages), la cabra (the goat), el éscorpion (the scorpion), el conquistador (the conqueror). The Habsburgs appear along with Jesus or the Mexican–US–American writer and activist Gloria Anzaldúa, the horse or the great river. These figures are perceptibly outlined, but in no way indicate roles. They are more directly connected with sensory impressions and give rise to ambiguity. Here we might agree with Deleuze, writing about the figures of Francis Bacon: “The Figure [...] acts immediately upon the nervous system [...], whereas abstract form is addressed to the head” (Gilles Deleuze, *Francis Bacon: The Logic of Sensation*, trans. Daniel W. Smith, 2003, p. 34). This impression is strengthened by a soundscape by Christian Müller that closely matches the choreography. Following sound motifs, the figures frontally approach the audience one after the other, individually and in groups, in continually repeated movements, before exiting and reappearing in other formations. The tempo gradually increases, and the initially realistic figures with punk attitude and gangsta fashion become sinister, at first imperceptibly, then with increased intensity. The boundary between theatre and the world goes astray.

Choreography breaking down boundaries

“Frontera / Border: A Living Monument” closes with a choreography by Rodrigo de la Torres. It was created in the Mexican border town of Matamoros, where it is practised as a socio-cultural expression of resistance. Matamoros is well known as the twin town of Brownsville, Texas, and also as one of the world’s most dangerous centres of the drug trade. Every week forty young men rehearse a contemporary and pop-culturally reappropriated version of the matlachines, this ‘danza de conquista’, in public. Indigenous practices, colonial narratives, hip hop, pop culture and spirituality are all reflected in this dance. It should be understood a gesture of temporary community above and beyond the hierarchic organisation of the drug cartels and the longing for the US-American green card: “They don’t hold a weapon – just a shaker in their hand – Green white, red, the colors of my land” (quote from a hip hop from Matamoros, author unknown). The dance adopts a male physicality that is clearly distinct from the toxic body politics of the military and patriarchally organised culture of the drug cartels. The dancers’ bodies serve as a kind of symbolic shield in this violent border region. The choreography pieces together three- to four-minute phrases in which, as Rodrigo de la Torres explains, “the energy continually mounts, like in a video game, up to the physical limit, until it reaches a break, which introduces a

one-minute walk.” In their public appearances the performers wear self-made aprons of plastic bands, sequins and images of the Catholic saints. In “Frontera / Border: A Living Monument” three aspects undergo a queering in their transfer to performers from various socio-cultural contexts and with different physical characteristics: the dance in its function as a protective shield, the highly energised assemblage of movement phrases and walks, and the upcycled costumes that provide a source of identity and community. So the hidden score of the historical matlachines reveals a broad subversive potential that goes beyond definitive attributions of gender, origin or dance technique.

It is possible to see Amanda Piña’s staging as a performative manifesto on the incomplete decolonisation of dance. It raises existential questions: Who is well-disposed towards me? Who is prepared to betray me? Who is close to me, and who is remote? Principles of inclusion and exclusion are reinterpreted politically and aesthetically, systemic inequalities exposed through reference to current crises. The staging continually breaks down boundaries: different threads are interwoven as a structural and aesthetic principle; the hierarchies and dichotomies of dance cultures are dissolved, though without obliterating the particular contexts, conflict-laden scenarios and myths of a globalised, neo-liberal and neo-colonial world. 🗨️



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Amanda Piña
Frontera | Border – A Living Monument
 Haus der Statistik | 20.–22.8. | 20:00 | 90 min | Deutschlandpremiere

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 Haus der Statistik | 20.–22.8. | 15:00 – 23:00
 Eintritt frei | Ausstellung