

Aztec Dance, Transnational Movements: Conquest of a Different Sort

This article explores the rapid growth of participation in Aztec dance in Mexico, the increasing transnational movement of Aztec dancers across national borders, and the mixed receptions experienced by dancers in their efforts to forge networks with indigenous communities on a global level. Examining a discourse of conquest that has been reinvigorated and recirculated over centuries, I suggest that such ideas may thwart Aztec dancers' alliance-building efforts and may raise important questions about indigenous identity, appropriation, and group boundaries.

IN CONTEMPORARY CENTRAL Mexico, Aztec dance, referred to as *la danza*, is a common and publicly visible activity, an accepted part of the fabric of everyday life in the country. On any given evening, dance troupes can be found practicing in public squares. During weekends and holidays, dancers in full attire with headdresses of long pheasant and peacock feathers swirl to the rhythmic beat of the drum with the rigorous turns, dips, and steps of the dance. These ritual dances regularly occupy settings as diverse as weekend markets and ancient archaeological sites. The dances are so familiar to the public in central Mexico that even at large fiestas, such as the annual festival in Querétaro, which attracts ten thousand dancers and hundreds of thousands of onlookers, they receive little media attention.

These performances are not produced solely for tourist consumption, and local participation in this revitalized indigenous religious practice is growing rapidly. While estimates from the 1940s suggest that approximately five thousand people in Mexico City were practitioners of this dance, by the 1990s this number had increased to ten to fifteen thousand in the city, with an estimated fifty thousand dancers in the Valley of Mexico (Rostas 1991:11, 17; Vento 1994:59). Mexican scholar Yolotl González Torres calls Aztec dance a "restoration movement" that is intended "to revive an idealized form of Mexica culture"—a sort of "neotribalism" (1996:11). A mix of performance, religious practice, and reclamations of an indigenous past, *la danza* is a social, political, and religious movement that holds considerable appeal for the Mexican imaginary.

My initial introduction to Aztec dance took place not in Mexico but at the Rosebud Sioux Indian Reservation in south-central South Dakota in the summer of 1992. It was here at an annual Sun Dance ceremony that I first met Duende Verde, a young,

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self-proclaimed Aztec dancer.¹ Over the next fourteen years, he returned again and again to South Dakota. I watched his family grow to include a companion and three children, two of whom were born at a Sun Dance. His participation was tentative at first. He began by observing the event, but eventually he became involved as a dancer in the Sun Dance. Over the years, he brought increasing numbers of Aztec dancers to this northern plains American Indian ritual. In 2000, in honor of the new millennium, members of *La Mesa de Tradición de la Virgen de la Soledad* (literally, “The table of the tradition of our Lady of Sorrows,” an Aztec dance troupe from Mexico) performed la danza during the rest breaks of a Sun Dance.² They did this inside the Sun Dance arena and at the request of the Lakota Sun Dance Chief. Duende Verde’s presence at the small South Dakota Sun Dance reflects a much larger movement of Aztec dancers, who regularly cross national borders to share their dance and participate in Native North American rituals.

Although Aztec dance has a long history of practice in the U.S. Southwest, troupes are now emerging in the large metropolitan areas of other regions, such as Minneapolis and Philadelphia. This is particularly the case in areas with substantial Chicano and/or Mexican immigrant communities, and dancers from Mexico frequently visit these destinations. The dance is becoming more publicly visible as well, and it is often performed both at American Indian events, such as ceremonies and powwows, and at multicultural festivals across the country. Aztec dancers in Mexico do not just travel north; they make trips to perform the dance in Europe and Asia. Further, Aztec dancers in Mexico invite and attract the participation of spiritual leaders from around the world.

The growth in the numbers of people participating in the dance and the interfaith networks that they forge suggests that there is an increased belief and interest in spiritual practices. This is in contrast to Néstor García Canclini’s argument in *Transforming Modernity: Popular Culture in Mexico* that, while tourist brochures may market Mexican people as particularly spiritual, in practice, religion is waning there and the rise of modernity is making popular culture increasingly secular (1993:97). The claims of Aztec dancers, however, tell another narrative—one of spiritual renewal. Participants say that the dance practice is necessary to create harmony between man and nature “by moving certain natural forces” (Shank 1974:58). Does the tremendous growth in the number of practitioners indicate an increasing belief in the spiritual, which García Canclini dismisses as empty of meaning?

While García Canclini raises questions about the motivation of these activities, Linda Bosniak speaks to their transnational movement. She observes that “cross-border relationships have always existed, but their intensity has accelerated to the point that most of us are embedded, irremediably, in various fields of interaction that traverse national borders” (2006:6). Bosniak points not only to goods, services, and information but also to people and religions. In this era of globalization, it is not surprising that Aztec dance and its dancers are circulating with greater frequency on the international scene. Broadly speaking, the dancers travel to places where they think that they will find people who will be receptive to the dance or its spiritual ideology, including countries with Mexican ethnic communities who are interested

in the dance itself or those where people are involved in similar spiritual practices or share a common history of oppression. Often these are indigenous communities.

These forays raise important questions. How are we to think about the increase in Aztec dance participation? How successful are these transnational alliance-building efforts on a practical, local level? Such questions about Aztec dance are connected with the concerns of my primary research, which focuses on the reclamation and revitalization of the Sun Dance ritual. I first became interested in Aztec dance when I learned that there are five annual Sun Dances in Mexico conducted by Aztec dance leaders. The majority of participants at these Sun Dances are also involved in *la danza*. Exploring this topic, I have had a range of research experiences with Aztec dancers, including fourteen years of brief but intense engagements with them at annual Sun Dances in South Dakota, regular correspondence with them, a one-month trip to Mexico in 2006 (during which I traveled with members of *La Mesa de Tradición de la Virgen de la Soledad*), and an extended visit in the spring of 2008 with a group of dancers who came to the Ohio State University campus.

The Sun Dance and Aztec dance are similar in a number of ways. Both have indigenous roots, both have seen revitalization and growth, and both are affected by globalization. But my research illuminates interesting contrasts in the identity politics of their practitioners. The majority of Aztec dancers that I have met self-identify as *mestizo* (Mexico's dominant identity), though I have met those who self-identified as members of Mexican indigenous groups as well, such as Maya and Chichimeca. I have never met a dancer that self-identified as Aztec, and participation in the dance does not signify a specifically Aztec identity. Nevertheless, dancing is described as expressing the participant's indigenous heritage, broadly conceived. This is very different from the American Indian situation in the United States, where claims to specific tribal identification are privileged and the field surrounding the politics of identity, in ritual performance and beyond, is highly contested. Although I did observe struggles over power and authority within groups, these were not associated with identity claims.

A second contrast emerges over the differing ways in which Aztec dancers and Sun Dancers conceptualize the notion of conquest. Where American Indians in the United States associate conquest with European and Euroamerican dominance, conquest has a more nuanced and complex meaning for Aztec dance participants. In *la danza*, conquest is a metaphor for valued qualities, in particular reciprocity and submission; it is conquest of a different sort. In this article, I will use these differing understandings about identity and conquest to complicate the ways that we think about Aztec dancers' participation in American Indian ceremony, their efforts to take these rituals back to Mexico, and the notions of appropriation and expropriation in general. Further, I will explore the question of whether Aztec dance's eclectic mix of spiritual interests should be considered a kind of "new age" practice.

I will begin by examining the literature about Aztec dance in its native country. This work is highly varied, including both ethnographic and historical research and approaches from anthropology and the history of religion. In today's Mexico, *la danza* is shaped by a specific history—a group of discourses about conquest, *mestizaje* (mestizo identity), and nationalism—and the recurring circulation of a particular set of symbols and practices. Examining these will help us understand the growth of

Aztec dance in Mexico and its transnational exchanges. In the second part of the article, I trace how a discourse of conquest permeates the dance practice. Not only is the dance referred to as the “dance of conquest,” but this notion is also one of the dance’s primary philosophies, and participants describe the embodied practice in these terms. In the third section of the article, I examine specific instances of border crossing. Dance participants consider the 1989 ritual led by the Dalai Lama, the 2007 ritual led by Arvol Looking Horse, and the growing numbers of visitors coming to Mexico to participate in *la danza* as examples of the successful result of their transnational efforts. Other interactions—such as the ejection of Aztec dancers from a Sun Dance in South Dakota in 2007, the appropriation of Native North American rituals by an Aztec spiritual leader at a gathering of indigenous spiritual leaders in 1997, and contestation over the presence of Aztec dancers at the United Nations Indigenous Day activities—point to the problematic aspects of these alliance-building efforts. I conclude by suggesting that the discourse of conquest is not intelligible to indigenous communities outside of Mexico, particularly the Lakota, because of differing historical and cultural contexts, and these differences explain why Aztec dancers often experience a mixed reception when they venture abroad.

La Danza de la Conquista (*The dance of conquest*)

One of the first things that my host Duende Verde said when I arrived in Mexico was that he was happy his conquest had finally been successful. Finding this statement odd, I asked for clarification. He explained that he had traveled to the Sun Dances in South Dakota for many years in order to initiate an obligation of reciprocity. In his Aztec dance practice, networks between communities are established when participants from one group travel to another to participate in the dance. Those from the host community are then obliged to travel to the visitors’ community to participate in their dance. These exchanges occur frequently and establish large networks of alliances between dance groups. Here, Duende Verde referred to this exchange as conquest.

The discourse of conquest has been associated with the history of Mexico since Spanish conquerors first read the words of the *Requerimiento* (the Requirement), a document outlining the justification of their invasion to the indigenous inhabitants that they encountered.³ As the *Requerimiento* articulated it, the physical, political, and economic subjugation of the indigenous people of the area was not enough for the Spanish; their conquest must also be one of religion as well. This declaration of the Catholic Church drew its charge and legitimacy from a sacred genealogy. The king and queen of Spain and the pope were designated as the final human authorities because they were the chosen descendants of the one true God, creator of Heaven and Earth. Declaring the land to be under divine dominion, the conquerors expected all its inhabitants to surrender without resistance to this supremacy.

Yet, a strong argument can be made that the concept of conquest was not introduced by the Spanish. In *Quetzalcoatl and the Irony of Empire*, historian of religions David Carrasco outlines a 1,500-year history of engagement with the mythic figure Quetzalcóatl/Kukulcán, “the supernatural source for the legitimation of military activity and the institutions of warfare,” by at least three distinct cultural groups in what is now

Mexico—the Toltec, Maya, and Aztec (2000:143). The Quetzalcóatl story has figured significantly in the narrative of the Spanish conquest, and Carrasco observes two lines of thought on this topic. The first links the defeat of the Aztec empire with their belief that Hernán Cortés was the mythic figure Quetzalcóatl returned.⁴ The second, led by Ralph Beal, argues that “the conquest of Tenochtitlán [the capital city of the Aztec] was less a conquest than it was a revolt of dominated peoples” (Carrasco 2000:224).⁵ From this perspective, the indigenous peoples who had been conquered by the Aztecs joined forces with the Spanish in order to overthrow their oppressors.

Carrasco proposes that the recurring circulation of symbols such as Quetzalcóatl/Kukulcán in Mexican culture points to a Mesoamerican practice of improvisation, innovation, and adaptation. This practice provides a lens for thinking about Aztec dance and the way that its practice today has been shaped, both by the Spanish conquest and by modernity. For example, a great deal of evidence from central Mexican archaeological sites and early ethnographic accounts suggests that the practice of dance, like the recurring symbol of Quetzalcóatl/Kukulcán, had circulated through multiple cultures for centuries as well.⁶ The earliest ethnographic accounts of dance in Aztec society come from Bernal Díaz del Castillo, a historian and member of Hernán Cortés’s earliest campaign, who describes, for example, the ritual dances the Aztecs performed for Moctezuma (Carrasco 2000:214). This suggests that dance was an important form of Aztec cultural expression at the time of conquest. While there would be little debate regarding the importance of these dances over a significant period of time prior to the Spanish conquest, scholars do not agree about either the impact of conquest on them or how today’s practices relate to those of the pre-Columbian era.

For example, some, such as González Torres, argue that the practices of the pre-conquest period were wiped out by Spanish imperialism. She writes that “the organised religion of the Mexica State and its astronomical, mathematical and historical knowledge disappeared,” and that the contemporary presence of these dance rituals is the result of a “revival of the spiritual values of the ancient Mexican culture” (1996:5) in response to “deep transformation[s] in Mexican society” over the last thirty years (1996:3). For González Torres, the contemporary dance does not demonstrate a continuity of practice; rather, it is a relatively recent phenomenon, a response to modernity. However, other scholars, with whom I concur, advance the idea that core elements of the dance—discourses, symbols, and practices—have a preconquest origin (Kurath 1946:387; Correa 2000:436). A number of mythologized historical events occurring during the decades immediately following the conquest—as well as ethnographic accounts from the colonial period and the revitalization of the practice during tumultuous historical eras (such as the War of Independence, the Mexican Revolution, and the social movements of the 1960s)—suggest that Aztec ritual dance was never fully eradicated. Rather, practices and symbols were revitalized and recirculated via the processes of adaptation, innovation, and improvisation that Carrasco sees in the persistence of Quetzalcóatl/Kukulcán. Space does not permit a full examination of this topic, but we can better place the dance in its historical context by examining key moments from this history.

Certainly, the most famous of the mytho-historical accounts is the narrative of the appearance in December 1531 of *la Virgen de Guadalupe* to Juan Diego, an indigenous man. La Virgen, an indigenized Mary figure, has become not only the icon of the

nation of Mexico but “the popular Queen of the Americas” (Dunnington 1997:8). The yearly December 12 festival for the Virgin at the Basilica of Guadalupe draws contemporary Aztec dancers to one of their annual pilgrimage sites. Another event that is less well known outside of Mexico is the battle of Calderón Pass, which also occurred in 1531. This event is associated with the naming of Aztec dance as “the dance of conquest” and was identified by one dance group that I visited in Mexico as the origins of their dance lineage. A number of scholars (Correa 2000:439; Rostas 1991:12; Taylor 2005) offer descriptions of this battle between the Christianized and pagan Indians. González Torres provides this narrative:

[A]t sunset there were still no victors or vanquished. Before the sun went down the horizon, darkness fell, and on high, in heaven a white and shining cross appeared, and at its side the apostle Santiago riding on a white horse. Astonished to see such wonder the combatants put down their arms and between embraces, they made a peace covenant and to the shout of ‘[É]l es dios’ (He is God), the Indians recognized the Christian cross as a symbol of their new faith, performing a dance as a proof of their veneration. (1996:20)

González Torres notes that, since then, these dances have been called “*la danza de conquista*” (dances of conquest) (1996:20). Four hundred seventy-five years later, the September 14 date of the battle is commemorated by a popular annual festival in Querétaro that draws huge numbers of dancers and Mexican spectators.

During the Mexican War of Independence (1810–21), a strong anti-Hispanic sentiment arose, and a significant movement focused on the retrieval of a preconquest past. For example, the popular “Indian-Aztec” lodge within the Rites of York, a Masonic organization, was founded in 1826 (González Torres 1996:5). Later, a distinct Mexican national identity coalesced during the Mexican Revolution (1910–20), when political leaders mobilized the concept of *la raza cósmica* (the cosmic race). Characteristic of this Mexican nationalism were the revitalization of an indigenous past, pride in the new mixed race (the mestizo), and a glorification of the culture’s spiritual and theological roots (Morris 1999:371). It is clear from works such as José Vasconcelos’s political tract, *La Raza Cosmica* ([1925] 1997), that revolutionary nationalists did not wish to recuperate Mexico’s indigeneity; rather, the mestizo was identified as a member of a new race destined to create a new civilization that would reflect the racial and spiritual uniqueness of the Mexican people. Indigeneity was seen as foundational to, yet distanced from, Mexican nationalism. González Torres describes this as a “schizophrenic situation” that “persists to the present” (1996:7). During this era, dance performances were promoted and some dance troupes were financially supported by the government. By the mid-twentieth century, the rituals of *la danza* were frequently noted by scholars such as Gertrude Prokosch Kurath, who observed that “[t]here are few Fiestas in Central Mexico without at least one group [of Aztec dancers]” (1946:387).

This broad array of evidence strongly suggests that the dance was never completely stamped out. It does not mean, however, that the practice remained unchanged. Each of these historical moments influenced the contemporary dance and can be seen in the variety of dance troupes and styles exhibited by contemporary

practitioners. For example, the dancers I visited made a distinction between *concheros* (dancers with the concha)—whom, in English-language interviews, they also referred to as “traditionals”—and the *culturales* (culturals). For them, the conchero or traditional practice is closely associated with the Catholic Church. The use of the *concha* (a guitarlike instrument introduced by the Spanish) and dance regalia modeled on monks’ robes (though more brightly colored than them) point to the influence of Spanish Catholicism on postconquest expressions. Yet, the dancers consider the knowledge transmitted by these practitioners to be “traditional” and most closely resembling that of the preconquest era. In contrast, the *culturales*, whom Rostas (1991) identifies as the “*Mexica*” (Mexicans), are associated with those who are reclaiming preconquest Aztec cultural practices (such as the regalia and use of the drum) that had been suppressed by the Spanish. But, as I have observed above, critiques have been made that reclamation has, in some cases, become re-invention and that these groups are not always “traditional.”

In contrast to dancers that I interviewed, González Torres (1996:8) identifies three different groups who practice Aztec dance: the *Movimiento Confederado Restaurador de Anáhuac* (MCRA; the movement to restore the confederation of Anáhuac), *la Tradición* (the tradition), and the *Reginos* (followers of Regina). She links the MCRA to federal cultural projects in the 1920s and 1930s designed to create a Mexican national identity and notes that many of the group’s public activities were sponsored by the government.⁷ This group is characterized by their disdain for the Spanish, and among their efforts of reclamation is the revitalization of the Náhuatl language. While not directly linked to the government, the other two groups are deeply implicated in the Mexican national project, explains González Torres. She describes members of *la Tradición* as concheros and, like the dancers with whom I spoke, claims they “have a very old tradition” (1996:20). Finally, González Torres connects the third group, the *Reginos*, to the work of author Antonio Velasco Piña, whose novels, in particular *Regina* (1988), are tremendously popular in Mexico. In these books, the protagonist Regina is born in Mexico but travels to Tibet as a child to learn about esoteric matters, knowledge, and practices, which she eventually brings back to Mexico. Her function, like that of the *Reginos*, is to open the spiritual *puertos* (ports/doors) around the Valley of Mexico in order to usher in the era when Mexico will take its rightful place as the spiritual center of the world (González Torres 1996:24).

While the accounts of both scholars and participants suggest that the distinctions among these three groups are clear, I found that in my fieldwork the lines were far blurrier. For example, one dance troupe under the direction of Captain Xochiyacuiatl (also known as Xóchitl) was described to me by numerous informants as exemplary of the conchero/traditional practice. Yet the members of the group speak of concepts associated with the MCRA and are building an altar at the foot of the Popocatepetl and Iztaccíhuatl mountains outside of Amecameca, the birthplace of the fictional Regina. Their efforts focus on opening the spiritual *puertos* at this location. Prior to groundbreaking at the Amecameca site, Xóchitl spent a decade leading dance ceremonies at Teotihuacán “to open *puertos*” of spiritual energy as described in the Regina narratives.

Xóchitl’s story also provides insight into the lives of many of the people who are

involved in the practice. Her name comes from Náhuatl, the language of the Aztecs. A retired school psychologist, she is well educated, multilingual, and from a middle-class background. She does not claim to be indigenous, but she self-identifies as mestiza. She frequently traverses the U.S./Mexico border and participates in Native American rituals (including the Sun Dance) during her visits. As part of her devotion to the practice, she consciously rejects aspects of capitalism, particularly the personal accumulation of goods and money, though she does engage with the market economy. She accepts invitations to the United States to speak about and demonstrate the dance, but she is also likely to be found cooking in a small Mexican restaurant owned by a family member in Texas. These diverse labors financially support the building of the spiritual center and altar at Amecameca and reflect the transnational movement of spiritual ideologies and practices. Although centered in the Aztec dance practice, the spiritual center houses two sweat lodges and the main altar includes icons of Aztec, Lakota, Hindu, and Tibetan origins. Xóchitl claims the dance practice is a “way of life” and that all of her efforts are devoted to it and to her deeply held belief in the power of the sacred.

*The Dance and Embodied Knowledge:
Conquest as Submission, Domination, and Reciprocity*

While this brief discussion of the historical contexts of Aztec dance points to a continuity of practice across centuries and cultures marked by conquest, mestizo identity, and nationalism, further examination of the dance itself and the embodied enactment of its related practices is necessary to understand its recurring symbols and practices. As Deidre Sklar argues, “embodied knowledge is as important as verbal knowledge in cultural communication” (1999:17). She notes the way that “[s]oma [body] and symbol weave together and act as mnemonics for each other in the emergent process of performance” and suggests that “[s]oma cannot be separated from symbol without robbing that meaning of power” (1999:18–9). In this section, I look at the important intersection between the embodied or somatic practice and the symbology of Aztec dance.

The ritual of the dance begins with the establishment of a center in the form of an altar. Sacred items and offerings (such as bread, fruit, and flowers) are smudged with the smoke of burning copal (a tree resin) and symbolically offered to the four cardinal directions (east, west, north, and south) before being placed on the altar. Once the altar has been set, dancers move into a formation of concentric circles facing it. A dance leader moves to the west of the altar and begins a sequence of dance steps, during which he/she approaches the altar, retreats several times, and marks the four directions by first the right and then the left foot. This opening sequence is performed at the beginning of each dance. The leader then moves into a series of steps for a particular dance, and the other dancers follow the movement. A dance may last from several minutes to as long as twenty to thirty minutes.

Several general observations can be made about these rituals. First, each sequence consists of a series of two dance patterns, which are first danced in one direction and then repeated in the opposite direction to make a series of four sets of movements.

Each dance is concluded by a repetition of the opening dance sequence. The leader then passes a rattle to another leader in the group, who begins yet another dance. This sequence of events repeats until the leaders determine that the dance is concluded, at which time the dancers circle around the altar, share words with each other, and partake of the offerings that have been divided among them.

The four directions and the circle are potent and related symbols repeatedly invoked during the dance and its associated practices. Practitioners suggest a relationship between the symbol of the four directions and that of the cross, and this similarity, they argue, facilitated the adaptation of the Christian symbol to the indigenous imagery. Historian William B. Taylor agrees. For example, he argues that the sign of the cross and its overlay with the four directions is central to the “cultural landscape” of indigenous people in central Mexico. He also relates the symbol to the concept of conquest and observes that the cross “is treated as a gift from God with which to conquer his enemies” (2005:967). In other words the symbolic similarity between the cross and the four directions facilitated the conversion process. This interpretation is supported by the discourse that circulates around mythologized historical events, such as the battle of Calderón Pass, discussed above.

Other symbols in the dance serve important purposes as well. For example, Inés Hernández-Ávila relates the symbol of the concentric circles to one of the primary purposes of the dance—the “reintegration of the [the parts of the] self and a reintegration of the self in relation to the community and to the cosmos” (2005:360). On an individual level, the dance operates as a vehicle for a dancer to attain a transcendent state. Susanna Rostas suggests that “metaphorically . . . [this] is a battle for inner ascendancy” (1991:11–2). Dancers frequently discuss the ways that their participation teaches them to sublimate their crass human desires and weaknesses to a spiritual power. Hernández-Ávila considers self-discipline as central to the practice and relates this to its name, *la danza de conquista*, which she says refers to the conquest of the lower self via a personal sacrifice to the dance (2005:370).

This notion of discipline also shapes the relationship between the self and the community. This is most clearly illustrated in the formation of dancers in concentric circles during the ritual, which can be seen as an example of what dance theorist Jane Desmond calls “kinesthetic semiotics” (1997:33). Desmond notes not only that the movement of dance “signals group affiliation” but also that the arrangement of bodies can also be a “physical embodiment of [the] social structures” of the group (1997:35–6). In *la danza*, participation in the dance identifies the individual dancer as a member of a particular dance troupe, referred to as a *mesa*. Each *mesa* carries a flag or banner (*estandarte*) that documents the name of the *mesa* and their particular genealogy, history, and patron saint and/or Aztec deity, as well as a motto that explains the underpinning philosophy of the dance practice: “*Conquista, Conformidad, Unión*” (Conquest, conformity, union).

Each *mesa* maintains a rigid hierarchy that is articulated in militaristic terms and establishes a chain of command. The general is the highest-ranking person within the group and has final authority. This position is predominately a hereditary one, transmitted from father to eldest son. A general may in fact oversee a number of *mesas* in a loosely formed confederation in which the practices of individual *mesas*

are overseen by captains. Captains generally earn their position as a result of extensive experience with and commitment to the practice. They are expected to have extensive knowledge about the songs, dances, and rituals and their spiritual meaning. Sergeants also earn their rank as a result of experience, and their task is to maintain discipline within the group. The remaining dancers are referred to as “soldiers of the light.” The physical location of a dancer’s body during the dance in this arrangement of concentric circles reflects that dancer’s position within the hierarchy. Those closest to the altar, which is at the center of the space, are individuals who have achieved a high rank within the mesa, while those furthest from it are lower ranking.

According to Hernández-Ávila’s model, the reintegration of the individual within the cosmos constitutes the final set of relationships evoked by the embodied practice of the dance. A central claim of the dancers is that the ritual opens the doors of energy fields, whereby communication with “other levels of the cosmovision” can take place (Correa 2000:449). Not only does the dance embody a specific symbology linking the movements to particular life cycles, deities, and stories, but the movements of the body also are claimed to unleash a particular energy that is necessary for the continuation of the cycles of life (González Torres 1996:12). It is this understanding of the purpose of the dance that motivates efforts to build networks of relations between mesas and the complex of ritual pilgrimages undertaken by dancers throughout the year.

The annual festival at Querétaro, which commemorates the battle at Calderón Pass, is an excellent example of the success that the dance practice has achieved in building networks of relationships within Mexico. As a result of what Hernández-Ávila calls a “system of *mutualismo* [mutualism]” (2005:369)—the practice that my host Verde referred to as “conquest”—the numbers of dancers drawn to this festival is staggering. I attended this festival in 2006 as an invited guest of a Chichimeca general, Don Manuel Rodríguez, one of the primary sponsors of the event. Rodríguez traces the lineage of his confederation of mesas to the 1531 battle and identifies their patron saint as none other than the apostle Santiago, whose apparition during the battle caused the indigenous people to lay down their arms. Santiago is the patron saint of both the conquest and the dance (González Torres 1996:23).

The ritual began at midnight on September 12 with an all-night vigil (*velorio*). During the night, dancers arrived, many of whom were from mesas engaging in this reciprocal understanding of conquest, and they were formally introduced to Don Rodríguez. This introductory ritual consisted of groups approaching and kneeling before the general as they awaited recognition. A speaker for each group related its genealogy and lineage and asked for permission to participate, ritually putting the group under the authority of the general. Gifts that the group brought (such as candles, fruit, fresh flowers, and breads) were offered while the general’s women ritual leaders smudged the group with copal. Permission to enter the dance was granted when the general offered the dancers a coded handshake, a clasping of hands around the thumbs; as each kissed the other’s hand, they sealed their mutual obligation.

Throughout the night, *alabanzas* (songs of praise) were sung to the accompaniment of the concha while offerings were made for the ritual. The primary offering, which was constructed throughout the night, was a large cross approximately eight feet wide

and twenty-five feet tall covered with *cucharilla* (xotol cactus leaves), loaves of bread, flowers, and fresh fruit. The proceedings were solemn, and although there was personal conversation as dancers greeted each other and caught up on the latest news, attention was focused on the songs and offerings. At dawn the dancers retired for a short rest.

In the morning, the dancers reconvened and moved into a processional formation in order to carry the main offering, the cross, to the local church. Taking place early on a weekday morning, the procession drew a considerable crowd of spectators, and the local police stopped traffic on the major city thoroughfares so the dancers could cross the streets without becoming separated. The *zócalo* (square) in front of the church was also filled with spectators, including local school groups. Upon its arrival, the cross was blessed with holy water by the parish priests and raised in front of the church.⁸

Dressed in full regalia, the dancers gathered on a local street that evening for a grand procession through downtown Querétaro. It was only at that gathering that I began to grasp how many dancers were involved in this ritual fiesta. Previously, I only had contact with the confederation I was visiting and was unaware that many other



Figure 1. Raising the Cross at Querétaro, September 2006.

federations were simultaneously participating in similar rituals. When arriving at the designated meeting point, I was overwhelmed by the number of dancers, whose appearance was credited to the networks of conquest. What appeared to be chaos was actually a well-organized event, with differing confederations gathering at prearranged locations. As the procession got underway, the confederations and mesas danced in their groups one after another, forming a line five to eight persons abreast that was over a mile long. Mesa leaders were charged with performing a variety of spiritual tasks for each group, such as opening, moving, or purifying energy. Like the concentric circles of the dance, the procession conveyed information about the hierarchy of the group. Leaders of the dance troupe were at the beginning of the lines and lower-ranking dancers were at the end of the group. The number of people who lined the route of the procession was larger still. As the participants weaved throughout the city streets, spectators armed with cameras and video cameras jumped out of the crowd to take pictures. The procession lasted about three and one half hours and ended at the main church and square, where the crosses had been raised earlier in the day. Each group finished by dancing into and through the church. Participants explained to me that this was a symbolic act of reconquest: the dancers were taking back power from the Catholic Church.

The following two days were spent in dance. Many mesas filled the square, spilling over onto side streets and alleys. From early morning until late at night, the differing confederations simultaneously conducted their individual ritual dances. The succession of dances lasted for many hours before dancers took a short break, after which they resumed dancing again. Every time a mesa entered or left the square, it repeated a processional routine that always included the reconquest of the church. The ritual concluded on September 14 as priests offered a special mass for the dancers.

The festival at Querétaro is one of the many that dancers attend. However, five fiestas hold particular significance for them. These comprise a ritual complex of annual pilgrimages to specific sacred sites. Participation at these festivals does not involve the reciprocity networks found at Querétaro but is rather the result of the dancer's individual *promesas* (pledges). Dancers are not the only participants in these pilgrimages, which coincide with popular Catholic religious commemorations and involve large numbers of Mexicans who are not involved in Aztec dance. The five sites form a circle around the Valley of Mexico; mapping a sacred geography by marking the center and four directions, the pilgrimages establish this area as a spiritual center of the world, both in the past and the future. As in the ceremonies discussed above, dancers articulate their participation in this ritual complex as the reconquest. Even if temporary, their reclamation of these sacred sites is experienced as a source of empowerment.

The first pilgrimage of the year is to *El Señor de Sacromonte* (Christ of the Sacred Mountain), a small mountaintop church in Amecameca, on the east side of the Valley of Mexico. The church houses a Christ image and the belongings of Fray Martín de Valencia, a famous Franciscan friar and one of the first priests to arrive in the area; these belongings are claimed to possess miraculous powers. The church is built upon an important Aztec site, a cave that is associated with the Aztec deity Tlaloc (González Torres 1999:7). The pilgrimage occurs in February and is associated with Ash Wednes-

day and Lent. The second pilgrimage takes place in late May or early June and is associated with Pentecost (a Christian feast celebrating the descent of the Holy Spirit to the Apostles). The destination is the site of the Christ of Chalma, and it establishes the southern point of the sacred pilgrimage cross. This site was once an Aztec cave where the Otomí lord Oztocteaté was worshipped. The image of this deity was reputed to have magical healing powers, but during the 1530s it was destroyed, and it is said that in its place appeared a cross with a black Christ (González Torres 1999:4–13). The numbers of people participating in this pilgrimage are exceeded only by those who journey to the Basilica de Guadalupe.

After establishing the first two cardinal points, on July 25 and 26, the dancers make their pilgrimage to the center, Tlatelolco, which at one time was the site of the great market of Tenochtitlán and today stands in the center of Mexico City. It is historically important as the site of two massacres. The first is connected with the final assault that Hernán Cortés mounted on the Aztecs, which began with a seven-month siege of the capital city; during the siege, the population's water and food were cut off. In August 1521, Cortés and his troops entered the city, razing it section by section. The final stand at Tenochtitlán was made under the direction of the Aztec ruler Cuauhtémoc in the district of Tlatelolco, where an estimated forty thousand Aztecs were killed. Tlatelolco is thus associated with the final mass violence of Spanish conquest. Four hundred and forty-seven years later, Tlatelolco was the site of yet another massacre. In the 1960s, student demonstrations erupted in Mexico City in reaction to worsening economic conditions. Ten days before the 1968 Olympics were scheduled to begin, police and militia entered the square at Tlatelolco and opened fire on the demonstrators, killing three hundred and wounding many more. Like the other pilgrimage sites, this one is sacred to Aztecs as well as Catholics. The Aztec sacred site dedicated to Xipe Totec, which Hernández-Ávila translates as "the ancient Sacred Being Who Accepts the Sacrifices of the Flesh," lies beneath one of the oldest Catholic churches, whose patron saint is Santiago (2005:371).

The fourth pilgrimage, which goes to the sanctuary of Our Lady of Los Remedios, occurs on September 10. This site is built on a hill in Naucalpan, now a suburb of Mexico City, on the western side of the valley. It is the first pilgrimage site that honors a female icon, the Virgin of Remedies, and it is associated with another historical event from the period of the Spanish conquest. On the night of June 30, 1520, just one year before the fall of Tenochtitlán, the Spanish were driven from the city in an event known as *la noche triste* (the sad night). The mytho-historical account of the event tells how the Spanish were saved that night by the Virgin. This intervention was credited to the icon of the Virgin that the Spanish carried with them, which was lost on the hill in Naucalpan as they were fleeing. This icon was found a decade later by an indigenous man, Juan Ce Cuautli. Numerous miracles are associated with the discovery of this icon, and a hermitage was built for it in 1550. González Torres notes that it was frequently taken to Mexico City during the seventeenth century to be displayed during processions. She observes that, for centuries, this Virgin was as popular as the Virgin of Guadalupe, if not more so (1999:8). This symbol began losing some of its appeal during the War of Independence because the Spanish, nicknaming her *La Conquistadora*, took the image and carried her into battle for protection.

The final pilgrimage of the year takes place on December 12 at the Basilica of Guadalupe and coincides with the national holiday honoring her. The famous basilica is located on the northern side of the Valley of Mexico and marks the site of the apparition of Guadalupe, which is also associated with the Aztec worship of Tonantzin, the earth goddess (Stone 1975:25). I have addressed the mytho-historical account of Guadalupe earlier in this article, and I will not repeat it here. I will emphasize, however, the significance of Guadalupe, who represents the apparition of the Virgin Mary in the Americas and is considered the patron of Mexico. Of the many festivals in the country, this is by far the largest.

Edith Turner identifies a number of characteristics that contribute to the “spiritual magnetism of a pilgrimage center” (2005:7146). These include sacred images, miracles of healing, sites of apparitions, and locations of historically significant events. Given these characteristics, the sites venerated by the Aztec dance pilgrimage complex are particularly potent and compelling. The images, miracles, apparitions, and significant events that circulate in regard to each site are important not only in Aztec cosmology but in Catholic cosmology as well. For example, each is a site where Spanish conquistadors built a church on top of an important Aztec site, a fact that the dancers know (Rostas 1991:6). Meanings are layered and interwoven over centuries and across cultures. Thus, these sites hold significance for both Catholics and indigenous people (Hernández-Ávila 2005:371). Each time a dance occurs at one of these sacred sites, participants consider this reclamation a reconquest of the site, even if it is temporary.

The discourse of conquest permeates the Aztec dance practice and operates in multiple registers: as domination, submission, and reciprocity. This thread of thought circulates via the stories (such as the mytho-historical narratives) and symbols (such as the cross and circle) that successfully connect preconquest Aztec culture with the experience of the Spanish conquest, the nation-state of Mexico, present-day social life, and the future. It shapes the individual’s relationship with the self, others (both within and outside of the community), and the cosmos. These are the sensibilities that shape dancers’ forays across national borders.

Transnational Movements and Mixed Receptions

Participants in the dance clearly conceptualize spirituality as an arena of power, and they understand their participation in the dance as a mechanism to both facilitate and consolidate this power. Analyzing the meaning of these practices in the colonial period, Taylor notes that “[t]he travels . . . of people to their shrines were meant to broadcast sacred energy from its dwelling places as well as to concentrate it there” (2005:968). According to Carrasco, the idea of Mexico as the spiritual center of the world is a recurring “millennial theme” that has both Aztec and Spanish origins (2000:205–40). It is this narrative that motivates the majority of the transnational movements by dancers. For the most part, these dancers are not engaged in a missionizing project. Their primary concern is to build networks of relationships that draw spiritual practitioners to Mexico to engage in ritual and ceremony, thus consolidating and broadcasting spiritual power from there. A secondary goal is to learn

the ritual practices of other indigenous groups, in order to refine and augment their own practice. The dancers believe that such rituals carry ancient knowledge and wisdom similar to their own.

In many cases, Aztec dancers consider the results of their efforts to be extremely successful. For example, on July 3, 1989, the Dalai Lama led a ritual at the Pyramid of the Sun (Teotihuacán) at the request of dance leaders, who claim that the purpose of the ceremony was to open a spiritual door at that location. In 1992, Tibetan monks conducted a similar ritual in Mexico City, which was attended by more than forty thousand people (González Torres 1996:25). As evidenced by the popularity of the Regina novels, the Tibetan connection is particularly appealing and important to the dancers. Numerous Native North American spiritual leaders have also conducted ceremonies in Mexico, including the Lakota spiritual leader Arvol Looking Horse. In 1996, Looking Horse began World Peace and Prayer Day, which is held annually on the summer solstice to pray for peace and healing for the earth. People come to sacred sites around the world to participate in this ceremony, and Looking Horse travels to one of these locations to conduct the ceremony personally. Since the inception of World Peace and Prayer Day, many Aztec dancers have flocked to sacred sites around Mexico, particularly Teotihuacán, in order to conduct rituals simultaneously with Looking Horse. In 2007, Looking Horse conducted the ceremonies at Teotihuacán, in response to invitations from dance leaders.

On what basis are the networks of relationships initiated and built? In order to address this question, I return to my first introduction to Aztec dance, when Duende Verde appeared at a Sun Dance in South Dakota in 1992. He cited the significance of this year, which marked the five-hundredth anniversary of Christopher Columbus's arrival in "the New World," as a primary motivation for his visit. For Duende Verde, histories of oppression shared by his people and Native Americans in the United States provided a basis upon which an alliance could be built, and he was quick to draw attention to the correspondences between Lakota and Aztec ritual practices and symbols. Both were long-standing oral traditions expressed through dance, song, and the drum, and the symbols of the four directions and the circle were central in each. He viewed the acts of smudging and making offerings, the common emphasis on the sun, and the sacrifice and discipline necessary to these spiritual practices as important similarities. These commonalities were the basis for his entrée into the world of Lakota ritual.

Another reason that Duende Verde went to South Dakota was to learn whether or not the practice of Sun Dance in Mexico had remained true to that of the Lakota. Twenty years earlier, a Lakota Chief and spiritual leader, Leonard Crow Dog, had traveled to Mexico and conducted a Sun Dance there. Since that time, numerous Aztec dancers had been participating in the ritual, and the one Sun Dance had grown and splintered into five annual dances. The period of the early 1970s, when Crow Dog first traveled to Mexico to conduct the Sun Dance, was an important time for indigenous movements in the Americas, because the emergence of new social movements was bringing marginalized groups to the attention of the general public (Omi and Winant 1994:4). A prominent feature of these social movements was the centrality of identity politics. Hernández-Ávila, herself a Chicana participant in the dance, links

the rise of interest in Aztec dance in the United States to the rise of the Chicano/a movement during the same years. She argues that the dance appealed to Chicanos/as because it “offered a mirror in which to see themselves connected to the north and the south, a reflection that allowed them to emerge from a categorical *mestizaje* to find their indigenous faces and hearts” (2005:365). Scholars such as González Torres (1996), Rostas (1991), and Vento (1994) also point to this time as one of change in la danza, whereby participation in the dance reflected an effort to assert an indigenous identity.

Large numbers of the Chicano/a participants that Hernández-Ávila writes about travel to Mexico, and many have taken up the dance, resulting in a tremendous growth of mesas in the United States. *The Eagle’s Children*, a 1993 film about the dance that was produced and directed by Bruce “Pacho” Lane, documents this transnational movement. In one segment filmed during the activities associated with the pilgrimage to Chalma, the seminal figure General Felipe Aranda speaks to the dancers of his confederation, *La Mesa de Tradición de la Virgen de la Soledad*.⁹ A translation of this speech is reproduced on the Web site of the film’s distributor:

Our gathering here at this shrine of Chalma is an inheritance left by our ancestors. They came here to fulfill the obligation which you are now learning. They taught us the pilgrimage to this shrine to venerate the great Lord of Chalma. As their children, or as their relations, we make this pilgrimage to remember their customs. We do not know how and when these customs began. We can only speak with certainty of things since the birth of General Don Florencio Gutiérrez and myself. We are pleased that Captain Don Andrés Segura is teaching you our traditions in the United States—distant places which we do not know. That is all I came to say. I take my leave of you, praying that our conquering souls of the four winds will illuminate you so that some day you will be given the Truth here at the shrine of Chalma. I wish you luck, and good spirits, and health, so that your group, and other groups in those lands which once were Mexico, will continue to grow, so that one day we may see with our own eyes, before we close them, the fruits of your labor in those sacred lands where our brothers also live. He is god, my brothers. (“*The Eagle’s Children*” n.d.)

Aranda’s speech alludes to a sacred duty, a task that the dancers are meant to fulfill and that will affect not only their personal lives but also the energies of the cosmos. His acknowledgment of one of his captains, Andrés Segura, recognizes the movement of the dance between Mexico and the United States. Here, he is signaling a connection to a distant past that predates conquest and calls into being a future when Mexico will reemerge as the spiritual center of the world.

While Aranda does not explicitly reference the idea that he and those who travel to the ritual have a shared identity as indigenous peoples, it is clear that this concept underlies his speech and is the basis for these transnational networks. Indeed, as scholars such as Hernández-Ávila point out, this indigenous identity is the source of much of the dance’s appeal. González Torres argues that many dancers are consciously constructing such an identity for themselves, “although they are so [i.e., they are indigenous] neither by religion nor race” (1996:5). In other words, from González Torres’s perspective, the mestizo ethnicity is not an indigenous one, and

the dominance of Catholicism over centuries precludes any claims to a religious connection for it. Participating in Aztec dance thus provides some contemporary Mexicans with a way to reclaim their indigenous heritage. Alliances built under the rubric of indigeneity often experience fissures, and this plays out in Aztec dance as well. As I have observed above, many of the participants in Aztec dance are *mestizo*, an identity that was developed under the nationalist movement as a rejection of both Spanish and indigenous heritage in favor of claims about a new cosmic race. Coming from such a background, dancers are sometimes rejected by members of contemporary indigenous communities, who consider identity a matter of both cultural affiliation and biological descent. It is important to note that I never observed this rejection within Mexico and that the accounts of this distinction only seem to come into play as the dancers cross national borders.

For example, Sylvia Escárcega describes tense relations resulting from the presence of Aztec dancers at the United Nations' indigenous peoples conference. One group that regularly attends the event is a dance mesa whose members have lived in Europe since the mid-1990s and seek the return of Moctezuma's headdress to Mexico. She explains that other Mexican indigenous representatives

discreetly laugh about their [the Aztec dancer's] claims [to an indigenous identity] and question their reasons . . . [for their] struggle and for staying in Europe. . . . They criticize them for the images of the Mexican indigenous peoples [that they] portrayed [here], their use of indigenous arts and knowledge, and their lifestyle, but, moreover, for the object of their struggle: Moctezuma's headdress instead of democracy and social justice. The *concheros* [Aztec dancers] are not allowed to participate in the festivities to celebrate the UN Indigenous Day during the meetings. . . . They do not have legitimate claims in the views of many . . . because they do not come from any actual indigenous community. (Escárcega 2003:13–4)

According to Escárcega, the dancers are only grudgingly accepted on the periphery of the global indigenous movement, which seeks human rights and social justice for native peoples. Those in the movement consider the Aztec dancers to be *mestizos*, people who enjoy a hegemonic position in Mexico, and there is a strong sentiment that the dancers are intruding by making claims to the limited resources that "authentic" indigenous people are struggling to obtain.

A different set of concerns emerged during my work for this article, when a dance contact from Mexico sent me the link to an on-line video, *Fire on the Mountain*, which had only recently been released. This film documents the 1997 gathering of indigenous spiritual leaders that took place at the Karma Ling Buddhist monastery in the French Alps. For ten days, "shamans from five continents" performed their rituals for one another and discussed their "common concerns" (Cherniak 2006). The event had been organized to coincide with a visit from the Dalai Lama, and the final day of the gathering included an interfaith ceremony, with representatives from the world's dominant religions, the Dalai Lama, and the indigenous leaders.

The interactions and communications that took place here are representative of a particular indigenous discourse that has emerged during the era of globalization

and transnational movement. In the video, each group expressed concerns about the future of their respective cultures, which they perceived as being jeopardized by an encroaching modernity that marginalizes and oppresses them. Shared concerns about the future, based on a history of oppression and violence, served to create a potent bond of affinity among the participants. A counterdiscourse that responds to dominant cultural ideologies, the unity expressed at this gathering was intensified by a perception that the participants' beliefs, symbols, and practices have much in common. These sentiments are similar to those expressed by Duende Verde and many other Aztec dancers during trips to South Dakota.

Watching the film, I focused on Tlakaelel, the representative Mexican shaman, because I had heard his name on more than one occasion in relation to *la danza*. Identified as Tolteca Chichimeca in the film, Tlakaelel speaks about the arrival of the Europeans five hundred years earlier and how the culture of his people and their way of life were drastically altered as a result. The Europeans, he says, were "cruel with our forefathers." They imposed their own Christian religion, while calling the practices of the indigenous inhabitants savage and ignorant. But there was always resistance, he explains. A transcription of an interview with Tlakaelel is superimposed over images of him performing a ceremony, but the ceremony that he conducts is not *la danza* or any other ritual indigenous to Mexico. Rather, it is a Lakota pipe ceremony, accompanied by a Lakota four-directions song (Cherniak 2006). Later in the film, Tlakaelel is shown conducting yet another ceremony; this too is of Lakota origin and involves a perfectly replicated Lakota altar. Those unfamiliar with Mexican or Lakota ceremonies would probably assume that the ritual was of indigenous Mexican origin.

Watching the video, I was taken aback by what I considered to be a particularly serious example of spiritual appropriation, and a recent e-mail exchange that I had with Maria, the friend who had sent me the link to the video, speaks to this issue.¹⁰ Maria is a young Danish woman whose partner, Luis, is Mexican and an Aztec dancer.¹¹ We began to correspond after they had hosted a mutual friend—Wanbli, a Lakota Sun Dance leader and ceremonial singer—during his travels in Mexico. We met face-to-face for the first time in 2005 at the Sun Dance in South Dakota. Frequently traveling between Denmark, American Indian reservations in the United States, and Mexico, Maria and Luis exemplify the sorts of transnational travelers that are key to Aztec dance. I include here the exact text of her reply to my message, as an illustration of the kind of communications—and miscommunications—that are taking place among Aztec dancers and participants in other indigenous ceremonies:

-hmmm, so funny i say the exact same thing [about the video representing a form of spiritual appropriation]

She goes on to say that she must explain the broader situation.

-Tlakaelel, who smoke[s] the Pibe [a sacred Pipe associated with the Lakota people, but is used in rituals by numerous other Native North American tribal groups] is a Mexican Sundancer (and he along with Christino, the son of Don Faustino whos[e]

our Grandfather at the Sacred Mountain) brought back many Sundances near Mexico city (also the one we have at the Sacred Mountain) -and Christino was send by his father to the Lakota people in Arizona for many years when he was around 15 years old (he's 43 i think today)—so we and the mexican in the movie have adopted many Lakota ways (the Pibe etc.)—eventhough the Aztecas (Mexicas) used Pibes too. . . . all sundancers in Mexico (who i know of get a Pibe when they have danced 4 years)

one Sundance before the one we had in the Mountain this july needed singers, so many sundancers from our group (and me) went and sing Lakota Sundance songs to help them out. . . —so more and more mexicans sing Lakota songs. —so its “normal” i guess:-) —and nice for Wanbli too;-)

—only one sundance in Mexico i hear of want to only have Mexica (Nahuatl language) songs. . . .

—well, there seemed to be 3 different North American tribes present in the meeting: (—Mohawk i remeber) so i thought that these 3 had made an agreement to share their ceremony in Lakota language as to unify the 3 and i also thought that maybe Lakota was the most spoken language of all tribes and that was why??? —maybe u or Wanbli knows if that could be the case!!! —but it was very nice video/meeting and i hope they'll continue the work to unify the natural people of the world so they stand stronger!!!!

This e-mail points to three erroneous assumptions common to those engaged in the appropriation of Native North American spiritual practices. First, the Lakotas (Sioux) are frequently viewed as emblematic of Native North American Indians. Outsiders wrongly assume that they are the largest Native Americans group and that their language and cultural practices are universal. Second, the adoption of Lakota practices (such as the pipe, songs, and ritual) is considered an acceptable practice by outsider appropriators. Third, there is a core notion that the ritual beliefs and practices of indigenous groups, or “natural people,” are universally shared.

The sentiments expressed in Maria's message are emblematic of a broader pattern, and I observed this appropriation of Lakota ceremony frequently while I was in Mexico. Numerous elders and high-ranking members of *la danza* had sweat lodges and conducted stylized Lakota sweat rituals. The majority of the dancers that I met had either participated in Lakota-style Sun Dances held in Mexico or had traveled to the United States to participate in various Lakota Sun Dances held throughout the West and Southwest. Reminiscent of Carrasco's view that Mesoamerican culture is defined by improvisation, innovation, and adaptation, Maria's e-mail conveys the sentiment that the adoption of the practices of others is normal and natural.

Such borrowings may be problematic and evoke resentment from the people whose practices are being appropriated. In spite of Aztec dancers' claims of a common indigenous heritage and their embrace of Lakota ritual, they are not always welcomed when arriving at Lakota ceremonies in South Dakota. For example, tensions that had been mounting for several years surrounding Aztec dancers' participation in the ritual erupted at a summer 2006 Sun Dance that I attended. When Duende Verde arrived at the event, his companion had gone into premature labor, which was triggered by her grueling overland trip from Mexico City to South Dakota. Five years earlier, she had

given birth to their first child at another Sun Dance, and she was determined to repeat her experience with this pregnancy. The Aztec dancers at the event viewed the imminent arrival of a newborn on sacred ground as a particularly auspicious sign. However, a vocal faction of the participants at the Sun Dance did not hold the same opinion. As the day wore on and the birth approached, numerous Lakotas came to the camp, alternately cajoling and threatening the Aztec dancers and urging them to leave. A local midwife with over twenty years of experience refused to help with the birth. The Lakota participants called the local hospital and asked that an ambulance be sent to the grounds to take the woman there, which she refused. Things settled down when the majority of Sun Dancers left the grounds for the Sun Dance tree. While they were gone, a healthy baby boy was born. Those of us who had known this family for years hoped that the drama had passed, but this did not happen.

The next morning was the first day of the Sun Dance. The Sun Dance chief, who is in his eighties and whose health was deteriorating, was too weak to leave his house.¹² The first round of dancing began without him, and a number of people entered the camp of the Aztec dancers and forcibly removed the still-recovering mother, newborn child, and her other children from the camp. They explained that the spilling of blood on the grounds (as a result of the birth) had made the medicine man ill. Upon hearing that his companion and children had been removed, Duende Verde and several other dancers quit the dance and left the grounds. They were horrified that they had offended the Lakota people. In fact, the Aztec dancers had for years failed to recognize a strong and vocal segment of participants in the Lakota ritual who viewed them as outsiders and intruders.

Conclusions

Scholars of religion and social change Manuel Vásquez and Marie Friedmann Marquardt argue that, while many people have predicted that globalization would make religion less important in social life, the opposite is actually occurring. Particularly important in contemporary forms of religious life are what they call the “little religions,” sets of beliefs and practices that are “lived extra-institutionally” and emphasize embodiment and the senses. According to Vásquez and Marquardt, these little religions have a transformative power because the practitioner feels empowered by the practice (2003:6, 228). This is an apt description of the Aztec dance, and it helps explain its growth in Mexico. All of the dancers with whom I have spoken referred to the sense of strength and purpose that they receive as a result of their practice. Aspects of *la danza* that are articulated through the multiple meanings of conquest (reciprocity, discipline, commitment, sacrifice, and submission to authority) are perceived as practical guidelines for negotiating the travails of life as well as for providing a model for dancers’ relationships to others and to the cosmos.

In contrast to García Canclini’s view of Mexicans’ diminishing spirituality, Aztec dancers are deeply invested in their belief that their practice has spiritual impact. This line of thought enjoys a lengthy genealogy that can be traced not only to the pre-conquest Aztecs but also to their predecessors in the Mesoamerican landscape. These rituals, it is thought, are considered necessary not just to maintain balance and har-

mony in the world but for the continuation of life itself. As we have seen, the symbolic production and circulation of this spiritual ideology has been consistently renewed over millennia and mobilized during eras of significant change and great social transformations, such as the Spanish conquest and the Mexican revolution.

Although Aztec dance remains a marginal practice in Mexico, it seems to serve the Mexican public imaginary as a reminder of their indigenous past. This heritage, as Hernández-Ávila observes, is perceived as heart centered, in contrast to what are seen as the intellectually centered traditions of the West (2005:365). Her comparison illuminates the way that the practice is viewed as operating as a form of cultural resistance. The preponderance of mythologized historical accounts from the decades following the fall of Tenochtitlán, which are recirculated via the practice, suggests that the negotiations of cultural change as a result of the Spanish conquest are still ongoing. And declarations of reclaiming sacred sites once important to Mesoamerican cosmology and conquered by the Spanish Catholic conquistadors point to a shifting, revisionist historical narrative. While at one time the Spanish conquest was considered complete, Aztec dancers show that this is not so, and their acts of reconquest generate a new sense of agency. For example, they focus on the ways in which Catholicism has been indigenized in Mexico, not the ways in which Mexico has been catholicized.¹³ Clearly, the practitioners of the dance and the practices of other indigenous people in Mexico have left their indelible mark on this major world religion.

For many, the discourse of conquest connotes a militaristic imagery of dominance. However, in the dancers' view, one of its primary characteristics is reciprocity, what Hernández-Ávila calls *mutualismo* (2005:369). These understandings may seem to be in tension, but this does not seem to be the case for participants. I suggest that this is due in large part to the distinct historical processes of Mexico. Pre-Columbian history locates the Aztec as an imperial power, but the Spanish conquest subjugated the Aztec as well as all other indigenous people in Mesoamerica. The resulting miscegenation was taken up and reemphasized during the revolution as Mexican nationalist pride, and it depended on a broadly construed indigenous past to differentiate the new nation from its predecessor and reject Spanish dominance. Thus, the claimed mestizo identity of many of the dancers codes them as having indigenous ancestry, and participation in *la danza* pays homage to this ancestry.

While the growth of Aztec dance in Mexico may seem to suggest that the practice has a bright future there, the dancers' forays into the broader world of transnational social and religious movements have met with mixed responses. As we have seen, the purpose of these global movements by dancers is to build a strong network of spiritual practitioners who will open and consolidate the spiritual power centers in Mexico. Some of the border crossings that the Aztec dancers have encouraged have been particularly successful, with prominent spiritual leaders engaging in interfaith dialogue and practice. They have also found sympathetic adherents among Chicano/a communities across the globe (Hernández-Ávila 2005). In these cases, the practice becomes a vehicle for the immigrant community members to express their identity. However, the reception of Aztec dancers in indigenous communities outside of Mexico is often mixed, which I would argue is a result of differing understandings of conquest and the vague indigenous ancestry of many of the participants.

While claims of commonalities among indigenous peoples are based on shared histories of oppression and marginalization and the perceived similarities of their spiritual practices and symbols, such claims are not always strong enough to bridge gaps between groups. As we saw, indigenous representatives from Mexico at the UN conference viewed Aztec dancers as mestizos—as members of Mexico’s dominant ethnicity. As such, these practitioners are represented as outsiders to the human-rights and liberation discourse of the indigenous peoples’ coalition and, in fact, are often considered perpetrators of the abuses being discussed. These accusations spread widely and are known in Native American communities in the United States. In such communities, particularly among the Lakotas, there is a great deal of tension over the issue of who can and cannot participate in ritual practices. The expropriation of Lakota ritual by outsiders shows how the development of a transnational repertoire of sacred rituals can be offensive to those from whom it originated. Indeed, Native American scholars such as Andrea Smith argue that “[t]he assumption that Native knowledge is for the taking” is yet another example of cultural genocide (2005:123). In such a climate, the Aztec dancers’ practice of adopting and improvising the ritual practices of others contributes to their marginalized and unwelcome status.

The ideology of conquest that permeates the Aztec dance practice suggests that the transnational movement of the dancers is not likely to end any time soon. Although, in 2007, Aztec dancers stayed away from the Sun Dance from which Duende Verde’s family was removed the previous year, they were already making plans to bring another, larger group for the next year. Vásquez and Marquardt predict that the growing Hispanic population is going to change the face of religion in the Americas. While their work focuses on the dominant forms of Christianity, the growing transnationalism of indigenized practices such as Aztec dance suggests that the face of Native American religious practices in the United States may be changing as well.

Notes

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1. *Duende Verde* is the name this young man has given himself and the one by which other dancers know him. He has explained to me that his got his name from a character in a popular Spanish novel and that it means “green clown.”

The Sun Dance is an annual religious ritual historically practiced by various tribal groups such as the Cheyennes, Crows, Kiowas, Dakotas, and Lakotas. U.S. federal legislation prohibited this dance and other religious practices for three decades (1904–34). It was reclaimed and revitalized during the 1960s and today is one of the fastest-growing indigenous rituals in the United States. In the event, dancers abstain from food and water for several days as they dance facing the sun. For some, the ritual’s ultimate act is a form of piercing in which the body is cut and pegs are inserted through the skin. The participant dances until the skin breaks.

2. Here, I follow the conventions of capitalization used by the dancers as they write the name of their troupe.

3. See Seed (1995:69) for a rendering of the text in English and discussion of the many translations of this document.
4. See Carrasco (2000:205–40) for a close discussion of this debate.
5. See Wolf (1959:159–60) for a discussion of Ralph Beals's analysis.
6. See Looper (2009) for a discussion of archaeological evidence of dance within the Mayan context.
7. Such projects were described in detail by Kurath (1946) and Stone (1975).
8. My research did not investigate how the priests might interpret the dance, but it was clear from my observations that the practice of la danza was accepted, at least to some degree, by the local churches, as they are a major player in these festivities.
9. Aranda passed away several years after this filming, and his son, Cuatémoc, is now the general of the group.
10. A number of Native American scholars have addressed the issue of spiritual appropriation and located it as a technique of imperialism. See, for example, Smith (2005:119–35), Whitt (1998:139–71), and Trask (1993).
11. I have used pseudonyms to protect the identity of these research participants.
12. The Sun Dance grounds are built on the chief's land, and his home is within close proximity.
13. See Vásquez and Marquardt (2003).

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