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# Mambo and the Maya

Anita Gonzalez

This essay is a descriptive analysis of a 2000 encounter with Mayan “mambo” dancing in a mountain community, an encounter that challenges assumptions about prevalent notions of exoticism, identity, and cultural authenticity. Traveling in Guatemala with a group of international scholars, I witnessed a public performance of the transnational mambo by costumed Guatemalans that was not mambo, not Mayan, and not social. Male performers, in celebration of Corpus Christi, dressed as Disney-style costume characters and executed routines to merengue music while nondancing participants watched the spectacle. This contradictory display of dancing encouraged me to reflect on the impact of popular social dance and to examine the complicated meanings communicated by performers who incorporate body-based art into indigenous social and economic paradigms. The performers’ unique interpretation of mambo dance within the context of a public Corpus Christi festival underscored discrepancies between institutional perceptions of the mambo and the popular reuse of dance motifs. At the same time, the performance, which used clowning as a mechanism to engage the audience, inverted the solemnity of the religious feast day.

Antigua is a highlands Guatemala town distinctly different from the tropical islands of the Caribbean. It is a colonial mountain village in the middle of what is marketed to foreign tourists as “the Mayan World.” The highlands mambo was danced by local youth of the town who staged their dance spectacle of as part of a daytime pre-Corpus Christi parade. A local church sponsored the street parade as a strategy to attract resi-

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dents to the forthcoming religious ceremonies in honor of the Holy Eucharist, or the symbolic body of Christ. Local teenagers wearing padded, hand-sewn suits that depicted cartoon characters like Dragonite, Pooh Bear, Ash, and Tigger entertained the crowd with pranks and pratfalls. While they danced, loud music blared from a rigged pickup truck that cruised slowly beside them. In many ways the performance inverted notions of cultural tourism, spectatorship, and insider/outsider. The dance event, labeled “mambo” by both the performers and the local spectators, was a fulcrum for balancing the interpretations and expectations of “us,” the observing North Americans, against the dreams and imaginations of “them,” the local community.

### **Inversion and Corpus Christi**

The mambo performance appeared at first to be contradictory. According to the *Catholic Encyclopedia*, during Corpus Christi “the minds of the faithful are expected to be occupied with thoughts of the Lord’s Passion.” This public display however, capitalized on irreverent humor. While observers like me expected religious solemnity, what we encountered was a carnivalesque display of bodies in public parade. There are many parallel examples of religious comedy. As Bakhtin describes in *Rabelais and His World*, the church feast often has comic aspects in which new meanings are expressed by the folk consciousness. Clowns and fools link carnival with ancient pagan festivities. In the temporary suspension of the real, a turnabout occurs that provides its own sense of “carnival logic,” a logic whereby the theatrical mask both reveals and plays with contradictions (Bakhtin 1984, 411). The Antigua mambo performance was in some ways subversively typical of Corpus Christi. The festivity has been used, both historically and in contemporary practice, as an occasion for sometimes irreverent dramatic displays and spectacles.

Since the sixteenth century, Corpus Christi in Central America and Mexico has remained aligned with public theatrical festivals. The first Corpus Christi spectacle occurred in 1539 when Franciscan priests staged an expansive outdoor pageant for thousands of indigenous observers in Tlaxcala, Mexico. “The Conquest of Jerusalem” used the entire city as an architectural space for the reenactment of an event that featured fifteen hundred indigenous “actors.” Building upon earlier indigenous processions that celebrated the summer solstice, citizens of Tlaxcala moved through the streets of the city, pausing at arches to honor the natural elements with singing, rituals, and flowers. Later, under the auspices of a mock battle, characters were able to perform indigenous dances that resulted in the conquest and the baptism of the entire populace. Multiple dramatic events were incorporated into a weeklong series of activities that surrounded the Corpus Christi. During the Tlaxcala festival, for example, the still extant text of the “Sacrifice of Abraham” was used as a visual and aural storytelling device to acquaint the Indians with biblical ideals. The staging of the spectacle imaginatively incorporated aspects of both indigenous and Spanish theatrical practices in an attempt to bridge the cultural divide (Harris 2000, 132–147; Partida 1992, 77–85).

Today local sites throughout Latin America reinterpret Corpus Christi through the

whims and eccentricities of local artists. Indian and *mestizo* (mixed-race) people are encouraged to perform indigenous songs and dances in honor of a Catholic holy day.<sup>1</sup> In Papantla, Veracruz, for example, the June dates are celebrated with *voladores* or flying men who descend from tall poles to surprise and excite local observers. In other places, like Oaxaca, indigene are encouraged to perform masques, parades, and Native American dances often based upon early contact and pre-Columbian rites. Corpus Christi achieved its status as an important holiday in Latin America partly because it coincides with the summer solstice, a time often celebrated by indigenous peoples of the Americas as an important yearly marker of the seasons. By emphasizing the Corpus Christi, missionaries and government officials were able to sanction the public rituals and displays that frequently accompanied the more “pagan” indigenous celebrations.

Even though Corpus Christi attempts to unify cultural constituencies within the celebrations, distinctions among socio-political groups often remain apparent. Therefore, in June 2000, there were several institutional paradigms that framed the stage and contributed to the overall impact of the Antigua mambo pageantry: (1) the local church that was the official sponsor of the event; (2) the expectations of tourists like me who were attracted to the event in the hopes of encountering “traditional” Guatemalan folk culture; (3) the local community encompassing Mayan day travelers from the highland communities and local *mestizo* town residents who observed and responded to the event; (4) the Disney culture apparent in the cartoon characters that hid the young male bodies and marked the dancers as commercially astute carnival figures; and (5) the absent and generalized Caribbean originators of the “mambo” music and dance style referenced in the street parade. By dancing a public otherness, the local Antigua boys were defining themselves through each of the various sets of outsiders. Ultimately, the event highlighted the complex merging of North American and Central American cultures in the village streets. Below I describe some of the social and historical constructs that I interpret as circumscribing the event.

### **Church Patronage**

The first institutional connection of the dance group was with the local Catholic church that sponsored the parade and arranged for the neighborhood youth to perform. The church helped to define the dancers by providing them with an organizational affiliation. While all observers may not have been aware of the sacred organization’s sponsorship, flyers were distributed and billboards were posted that labeled the event as a religious activity. Church affiliation legitimized the low-status mambo-dancing youth through a religious attachment. While Bakhtin writes that ecclesiastic carnival events are “a temporary suspension, both real and ideal, of hierarchical rank” (1984, 10), I maintain that the performance of this carnivalesque public spectacle rearticulated the social boundaries of local culture. The parade provided a space for the dancers to present themselves as an active and integral part of the predominantly middle-class Antigua community and at the same time displayed them as exotic novelties. Although the church publicly supported the mambo event, the performers were also using the reli-

gious group's reputation as a respectable organization to increase their own name recognition and marketability within the local area.

The church must have provided the truck, the parade permit, and the support team of coaches and dressers who accompanied the dancers. At each of seventeen different rest stations, the dancers were shepherded in and out of stores where volunteers served them sweets and drinks, away from the prying eyes of audience members who were gathered on the sidewalks. Without the rest stops the performers would have risked heatstroke or exhaustion on the hot summer day. At each pit stop, volunteers from the church (several of whom were masked) passed a tin can through the crowd to solicit donations. These charitable donations were later counted and divided among the dancers and the church supporters.

### **Tourist Expectations**

The institution of tourism also contributed to my reception of the dance event. I, like many others, came to Guatemala (as part of a National Endowment for the Humanities Summer Institute) to learn more about Mayan culture. Antigua, located in central Guatemala, is a home base for excursions into more remote highland Mayan communities and a convenient location for language learning and Mayan study tours. As a tourist destination the area emphasizes ecotourism and its attendant "inside" look at supposedly underdeveloped human communities. Cultural difference is reinforced by the landscape of Indian people emerging from the misty mountain cliffs. As Jane Desmond describes in her recent book about bodily display, the insitu site for people tourism promises "a distinctive, out-of-the-ordinary experience" (1999, 169).

My group consisted of college teachers from around the United States, many of whom had never traveled to Central America. Most members of the group arrived looking for "traditional" folklore and culture. Word had spread among the group (through the local organizers) that for Corpus Christi we would be privileged to view the parade of the *gigantes*, or giant figures. Most of us were expecting an ecotourism experience; perhaps we were expecting to see indigenous figures wearing brightly colored costumes or masked animistic dancers representing traditional Mayan beliefs. What we found were commercialized stuffed figures typical of Disneyland parades. The surprising inversion was somewhat disconcerting. Within the imagined landscape of "the Mayan World" and its presumed reflections of the indigenous past we found that the Disney Empire still prevailed.

We encountered the performance spectacle at its very beginning, when the *gigantes* were emerging from a restaurant. The first to exit the restaurant was a green masked figure, the character "The Mask" from the popular commercial movie (Fig. 1). He was followed by a monkey man, a white-caped fuzzy figure with a swinging monkey hanging from his body where a cross might have been (Fig. 2). Eventually, the other dancers appeared on the street to perform choreographed steps in line formations. While I was fascinated by this popular dance display, several of the Maya Institute participants were not. After the first dance sequence they sighed, shook their heads, and moved on to the



*Figure 1. The Mask and a clown emerge after a rest stop. Photo courtesy of the author.*



*Figure 2. Monkey Dancer. Photo courtesy of the author.*

market in search of what they considered to be more authentic indigenous folk expressions. Their reaction was similar to that of other sightseers who were disappointed by a parade of characters that tourists consider to be more typical of the United States than of Latin America.

The desire to locate indigenous cultural expressions within preconceptions about the “authentic” is not unusual. Since the advent of dance anthropology scholars have searched for a way to describe the shifting contexts of “native” performance. Even though the search for the indigenous “other” has been critiqued and refuted by both anthropologists and dance scholars, European American expectations must continually

be adjusted to accommodate the multiple and unexpected uses of dance.<sup>2</sup> Anthropologist Michel Trouillot writes:

The world that the anthropologist inherits has wiped out the empirical trace of the savage object. Coke bottles and cartridges now obscure the familiar tracks. To be sure one could invent the savage or create new savages within the West itself—solutions of this kind are increasingly appealing. The notion of pristine savagery, however, is now awkward. (Trouillot 1991, 35)

Yet even in its awkwardness, this notion of exotic otherness remains appealing to tourists and scholars who prefer to imagine their subjects as something different or apart from themselves so that they may be investigated with objective rationality. It is with an eye toward unraveling this notion of exoticism that I investigate the contradictory implications of this particular incidence of mambo dancing in Antigua. One clear implication of the transnational embodiment of dance is that each culture or community will transform the original form into something unique and usable to local practitioners. Art historian Henry Drewal states it most succinctly when he writes, “We make sense of our unsettled world in a field of multiple logics that are continually being negotiated by shifting positions and contingencies. These different positions reflect our multiple identities” (1992, 24).

Perhaps it requires a more nuanced analysis of cultural paradigms to appreciate the self-reflexive mechanisms that framed the Antigua mambo. I think that the tourists and others who observed the event helped to locate the mambo dancers as a part of the *mestizo* Guatemalan community. As I will show, the youths articulated their dancing as local, but also cosmopolitan. Because they were *the* carnivalesque prelude to Corpus Christi, they presented a contemporary and contradictory interpretation of exotic “otherness.” By proudly displaying their exotic plumage using North American commercial finery, they demonstrated to outsiders their unique representation of indigenous culture.

### **Mayan Theatrical Traditions**

Local residents who observed the parade formed another set of identifying markers for the mambo dancers. There were two sets of local observers: the middle-class *mestizo* town residents who owned businesses and lived in the houses along the parade route, and Mayan merchants from relatively isolated suburban communities who regularly gather at the town’s center to sell to the itinerant tourists. Mayan artisans come to Antigua to sell “folk artifacts” like *huipiles* (woven capelike shirts), hats, placemats, or fabric pieces that they weave in their communities. Since the conquest of the Central American highlands by Pedro de Alvarado in 1524, Spanish colonialists and their descendants have encouraged the Maya to report to centralized locations for commerce and census activities. The Spanish *encomienda* system required the various Mayan indigenous groups to pay tribute to the Viceroyalties (Spanish government officials) at a centrally located collection site. Contemporary Mayan presence in highland towns is a

direct result of a political containment practice that has continued for centuries (Lovell 1992, 58, 95–100).

Mayan participation in theatrical spectacle also has a long history. Classic Mayan performance has been extensively documented through ceramics, murals, monuments, and texts like the *Rabinal Achí*.<sup>3</sup> By far the most impressive aspect of the Maya was the scope and magnitude of their architecture. Mayan cities were expansive and covered many square miles of ground space. Public gathering spaces for rituals were concentrated around open plazas, and the vast plazas between the massive pyramid structures were fundamental spaces for staging cosmic reenactments. For example, some archaeologists describe the architectural vision of the Maya as one of “centering the world” around ceremonial space (Freidel, Schele, and Parker 1993, 123–172). Rituals with mass assemblages of onlookers occurred during the day as well as at night. Some were based upon calendar cycles, some marked the inauguration of rulers, and many commemorated military victories and the acquisition of captives. Analysis of architectural sites provides important evidence for reconstructing what may have constituted Mayan classical ritual performances. Unfortunately, the details of most of the ritual staging are unavailable and detailed reconstructions are now necessarily based upon conjecture. Nevertheless, architectural sites provide valuable evidence of the structural relationship between players and audience members at ritual sites.

The most complete piece of dramatic literature that we have from the classic Mayan period is the *Rabinal Achí* (1992), a ballet drama from the Quiché Maya of Guatemala, recorded by the Brasseur de Bourbourg in 1856. Brasseur saw a performance of the play and later, with the help of indigenous informants, wrote down the text. In the play, the Lord of Rabinal has captured the Mayan lord of the Quiché and made him a prisoner. In a series of rhetorical speeches the Quiché Lord calls upon his gods to help him to defend his honor in front of the conquering lord. Even though the *Rabinal Achí* was recorded centuries after the conquest, as a dramatic dialogue it allows historians to see how war and the taking of prisoners were linked with Mayan cultural life. Some notable elements documented in the text of the *Rabinal Achí* include the mixture of dance, drama, and music. Unlike European American drama, which tends to separate performance elements, indigenous performance, then as now, depends upon the interplay of sound and spectacle to connect the audience to the atmosphere of the play. The *Rabinal Achí* text includes references to dances and musical interludes that augment the actual text. The clothing and accoutrements of the Mayan lords and the dancing chorus are also described.

Mayan ritual performance expanded European and Euro-American notions of character impersonation to include representations of natural phenomena like maize or mountains or the underworld. Leaders like the thirteenth ruler of Copan (a lord whom Linda Schele calls 18 Rabbit God K) used performance spectacle to equate themselves with other worldly powers. In her book *Blood of Kings*, Schele writes extensively about Mayan deities and their impact on ritual performances (Schele and Miller 1986, 66–73, 134–143, 175–253). Lords or kings used dress and costuming to place themselves within a physical, metaphysical, and historical pantheon. They cleverly recorded their deeds and



their theatrical attire in monumental sculptures that allow modern scholars to witness the impact of ceremony design. Louis XIV, who impersonated the sun and the moon in his own public rituals at Versailles, would probably have appreciated the similarities between Mayan use of public architectural space and his own theatrical spectacles. The Antigua dancers of the year 2000 also impersonated otherworldly deities; in this case, deities appropriated from the Internet and filmic highway of media images. Their dramatic display framed within a Christian religious ceremony and performed on the urban streets in some ways alludes to much older performance paradigms.

Unfortunately, there is much less evidence about the popular theater traditions of the Maya. It is assumed by some scholars that events like the contemporary festival pageants of the Quiché Maya at Rabinal or the performances of the Tzotzil and Tzeltal Maya in Zinacantán are vestiges of earlier indigenous popular theater practices. Evidence from the Maya—early contact drawings, paintings, and verbal descriptions from today's Indians (the keepers of tribal memory)—suggest a continuing presence of dance ritual within the Mayan culture that extends from pre-Hispanic practices. Cherokee scholar Charlotte Heth acknowledges the continuity of Native American performance when she writes:

Dance still occupies an important position within many Indian groups that continue to practice the old religions and dances vital to their way of life. Because many dances and songs have spiritual and supernatural sources, they retain their original significance and value. (1992, 8)

As an example she explains how the weaving designs of Tzotzil and Tzeltal women connect them to a weavers' community and to a community's mythical history (Heth 1992, 43). However, without further collaboration with Mayan scholars and more familiarity with Mayan languages, it is difficult to trace the continuity of these performance styles.<sup>4</sup>

As I mentioned, the *mestizo* town residents were another component of the local audience. For them, the parade of the *gigantes* was entertainment reminding them of upcoming services to commemorate the "Body of Christ." Most observed the dancing with bemused silence, marveling at the ridiculous parody of Disney and the church. The spectators made no effort to join the dancers in their antics; instead, they watched the players cavort with reserve. Apparently local cultural decorum preferred passive observation to participatory involvement. As an African American familiar with mambo social dancing in the United States, I was moved to bounce and rock my hips to the party music emanating from the truck. When I did, the townspeople frowned as if I had interrupted the solemnity of the event. In retrospect, I realize that the dancers' articulated and polyrhythmic use of the torso subverted the reserved aesthetics of local dance styles, dance styles that by-and-large emphasize an erect and calm torso. In general, indigenous dances of the region feature contained movement, bowed heads and linear, flat-footed stepping patterns. My dance antics were perceived as inappropriate. Furthermore, a restrained decorum between spectator and participant is generally maintained in Latin American performance settings as a sign of respect to the perform-

ers. This reflects both a contemporary Indian acknowledgment of the sanctity of performance and an awareness of Spanish American etiquette that privileges the dancer as the expert practitioner who performs in front of a silent, but appreciative, audience.

### **The Disney Fool in Mayaland**

Disney aesthetics thrived within the mambo street display. The cartoon characters placed on display were an eclectic mix of commercial archetypes. Some, like the Pokémon characters Dragonite, Ash, Raichu, and Marowak, originated as video-game icons. Others were renditions of Disney characters like Pooh Bear and Tigger from *Winnie the Pooh*. The British contribution was the Teletubbies. But by far the most popular character in this masked display was the lively masked green figure that impersonated the main character of the movie *The Mask*. The actual identities of the creatures did not seem to have much importance to the audience; what was important was that they were recognizable cartoons or *caricaturas* from North America. In interviews that I conducted with the dancers after their performances, they said that the costumes were built from scratch, rather than purchased or augmented. Each performer chose a cartoon character they wanted to “act,” then worked to create a mask and costume that would represent that figure. Like clowns who create a persona, each mambo dancer worked to create a cartoon embodiment that would be presented through the driving pulse of mambo.

The performers were hidden beneath full-body outfits that disguised their facial features and replaced their performers’ bodies with cartoon personages. This, too, is a contemporary rendition of a much older practice. Masking or disguise of the performer has been an important component of Central American indigenous performances for centuries. The best-known example is the Moros and Cristianos dances, in which citizens portray the characters of Moors and Christians in an elaborate reenactment of the defeat of the Turkish Empire. Other masked dances include the Negritos dances of Veracruz, the Iguana dance of Guerrero, the Viejitos dance of Michoacan, and, in Guatemala, the Zinacantán festival dances (Ochoa Campos 1987; Pino Mimeji n.d; Harris 2000, 330; Heth 1992, 43–48). The use of comical masked dances was easily incorporated into Corpus Christi festivals that already featured clowns and fools. Disguise as United States cartoon characters, however, is a new twist on this type of indigenous practice. Perhaps it points to a two-pronged approach to cultural display: North American commercial symbols carry cultural capital (Bourdieu 1998, 73–77) and attract Guatemalans to recognizable cartoon characters; the masked figures continue the tradition of the carnival that is most frequently associated with Corpus Christi.

Disguise and music communicate foreignness, but with two different associations. While one layer of this disguise reveals a fascination with United States culture, another aspect of the disguise shows a social commentary on the form and function of mambo dancing within Mayan/*mestizo* culture. Mambo music and rousing dancing are associated with the Caribbean, a region whose tourist imagery highlights blackness, Santería, sexual expression, and rhythmic passions. Even though the Caribbean is geo-

graphically close to Antigua, it is located on the other side of the mountains and represents a frightening and foreign landscape. During colonial times, the Maya were transported to the Caribbean coast to be serf laborers in the coffee plantations (Lovell 1992, 118–139). Later, as the coffee and banana industry developed along the Atlantic coast, Mayan travelers would encounter English-speaking blacks with foreign cultural expressions. Mambo-like dancing with its hip gyrations and rhythmic step patterns alludes to this culture that is both exotic and threatening. At moments during the dance performance, the cartoon characters would leap beyond the nebulous border of the street curb and deliberately frighten the audience.

In one repeated shtick the character dressed as the white monkey-man and the green Mask character would circle one another, high-stepping in a square pattern while bouncing their heads and bodies in time to the music. Suddenly they would collide back to back, knocking off the Mask's green hat. Indignantly the Mask would amble out into the audience, purportedly searching for the offending perpetrator. With a hip gyration and a threatening wave he would gesture toward the crowd and then return to the center of the street to continue with his routine. The observers, when confronted, would back away, keeping their distance and showing a respectful awe for the characters. There was a sense of relief in the crowd when the other masked characters entered the street to join the duo in a tamer section of unison choreography.

This type of clowning, mocking, and burlesquing the audience is similar to the antics of the Pueblo clowns who use imitation, masking, and confrontational behavior to make fun of the tourists. In both cases the burlesque performers are young males who define their community by performing the outsider. Jill Sweet, in her insightful article about this phenomenon, maintains, "What is most important here is the human need to incorporate and make meaningful the other" (1989, 72). The Antigua mambo dancers, as in the Pueblo burlesque, are expressing what is Antiguan and what is not.

For me, one of the most interesting aspects of the Antigua mambo was the lack of participation by local observers. Unlike North American social mambo dances where practitioners respond to the musical cadences, the local *mestizo* and Mayan spectators watched the spectacle from the sidelines without a physical response. The music drew people to balconies and sidewalks to gawk at the costumed dancers, but not one hip moved in response to the pulsating beats. For the highland communities the percussive coastal music of the Caribbean resonates as foreign, different from the more sedate Spanish-influenced ballads and love songs. The dancing helped to establish local practice by placing it in high contrast to the traditions of the coastal, Caribbean other. The mambo performers' danced commentary on coastal types illustrated their familiarity with coastal customs while, at the same time, marking their cosmopolitan social status among the town residents.

### **Dancing the Mambo?**

A final element of self-identification for the mambo dancers was the dancing itself. The actual dance was a line-dance pattern accompanied by fast-paced merengue music



Figure 3. The group dances the mambo. Photo courtesy of the author.

(Fig. 3). This was not the mambo that I was familiar with from Eddie Torres of the Bronx. Neither was it the social dance that *cubanos* on the dance floor had taught me in the clubs of Veracruz and Mexico City. The dancers referred to themselves as mambo dancers because they regularly teach and practice what is called mambo dancing at a local community center. Although the youths thought of themselves as local specialists in Latino dance, their dance, in another cultural context like the United States, would not be considered mambo dancing at all. The dancing, from my perspective, identified them as non-Caribbean practitioners; their generalized understanding of the dance branded them as inlanders unfamiliar with the origins and social context of international mambo.

Mambo dancing is a transnational music style that originated in Cuba in the mid- to late-1940s and was later associated with Dámaso Pérez Prado, a Cuban musician who popularized the mambo beat through his 1950s recordings of a big band sound. Big band orchestras performed the music of Pérez Prado, who was also known as “el rey del mambo,” throughout the early- and mid-1950s (Giro 1993, 6768; Pérez Firmat 1997, 243–246). Yvonne Daniel notes in a footnote in her book *Rumba*:

Mambo is a popular Cuban dance creation of the 1940's. In Cuba, it has a specific movement sequence; it has a different movement sequence in the United States and elsewhere, as it was popularized internationally. (The popularized dance ver-

sion would be called a variant of *son* or salsa among Cuban dance and music specialists). (Daniel 1995, 168)<sup>5</sup>

In its transnational journey, mambo has evolved into an eclectic mixture of salsa and the more folkloric rumba that is danced in clubs and social settings worldwide.

Merengue music originated in Haiti and the Dominican Republic, first as an oppositional music style associated with rural Afro-Caribbean communities, and later as a national music style promoted by Rafael Trujillo.<sup>6</sup> As more Dominicans migrated to New York and other areas of the United States, merengue groups began to incorporate electronic bass and jazz instrumentation into the tunes. Eventually, distinct styles of folk and urban merengue developed (Austerlitz 1999). Today New York dancers from the Dominican Republic perform merengue as a fast-paced two-step locomotive dance that blends salsa partnering movements with breakaways of knee dips, turns, and fast spins.

The Antigua performers made no reference to merengue origins of their musical accompaniment. When asked about their dance style they insisted that they were performing mambo steps. Unlike the syncopated patterns of a mambo riff, the routine landed squarely on the downbeat of the music. It consisted of two side steps followed by a kick and a hip roll, and then a three step linear walk forward. A single back step resolved into a turn that was punctuated with a final pelvic thrust. Like a line dance, the entire pattern changed directions so that the padded figures could move through the squared floor pattern and sequentially face all audience members. With garish frozen smiles the characters executed the routine in parade formation, adding to their corps when each new character joined the parade from the restaurant/store oases. At each location they flirted with the crowd, performed a choreographed routine, collected money from the observers, then moved on, led by the pickup truck that carried the audio and loudspeaker equipment.

So why did the performers select mambo as a parade style? Why does mambo dance thrive in Antigua? When I consider the context and implications of the Antigua mambo, I conclude that the practice of “mambo dancing” in the highland town marked the dancing youth as specialists in a nonlocal lifestyle and culture. By this I mean that through their dancing, the disenfranchised youth gained cultural capital as cosmopolitans because they were familiar with one aspect of a non-Guatemalan, urban Caribbean culture. Latino dance is currently a global phenomenon that has attracted practitioners in Europe and the United States as well as Latin America. It is a transcontinental expression of cultural and physical fluency. Like leisure travel and margaritas, it implies a freedom of movement and an assumed mobility through a variegated cultural landscape. Cultural capital, for the Guatemalan youth (and indeed for many New York nightclub goers) is in knowing how to dance contemporary styles, in knowing how to dance New York salsa on the two. The Antigua performers were dancing the mambo in part because it accentuated their connection to a wider, more cosmopolitan world. For these dancers, the impact of their knowledge of an outside culture expressed through dance was magnified by their familiarity with United States commercial cul-

ture. This commercial expertise was apparent in their detailed reconstruction of cartoon costumes based upon the international media.

### Restoring Religious Solemnity

Ultimately, the Antigua mambo parade was merely a prelude to a more expansive commemoration of a religious sacred event. The following morning, in contrast to the antics of the day before, the same church youth gathered for a solemn processional through the streets led by the priest who carried a “host” on a velvet pillow. During this sacred event, audience members were invited to follow the caravan and to sing religious songs with the priests and the nuns. As they passed through the streets they would stop reverently at various stations to sing hymns that were accompanied by guitar. The morning spectacle also included women and girls who help to sing the harmonious melodies of the hymns. Now the secular antics of the previous day were neutralized by the participants’ studious commitment to upholding the doctrine of Christ. The juxtaposition of the sacred with the profane called attention to duality within human existence. Bakhtin writes: “the official feasts of the Middle Ages, whether ecclesiastic, feudal, or sponsored by the state, did not lead the people out of the existing world order and created no second life. On the contrary, they sanctioned the existing pattern of things and reinforced it” (1984, 9).

My interpretation of mambo dancing for Corpus Christi is that the employment of the mambo performers as a spectacle reinscribed the social order of the community. Foreign bodies, unusual disguises, and a carnival-like movement vocabulary all united in this instance to create a theatrical forum for galvanizing audiences. The secular mambo brought public awareness to the immediacy of an impending sacred event by placing the sacred in high relief from the profane grotesquerie of the dancing clowns. At the same time it underscored the importance of local tradition by placing these traditions in high relief from a background of exotic foreignness. The selected foreign motif, however, with its direct borrowing of United States popular media characters and its symbolic engagement with an Afro-Caribbean music style, also served as a theatrical affirmation of the cosmopolitan cache of the highland Maya youth.

### Notes

1. I use the word *indigenous* throughout this article to refer to songs and/or dances of the region that are usually informed by Indian or Native American performance styles.

2. For more recent discussions of encounters between anthropologists and the “other,” see the essays of James Clifford

and George Marcus (1986) in *Writing Culture*. Some contemporary dance scholars exploring the intersections of dance and anthropology include Jane Desmond (1997), Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett (1991), Olga Najera-Ramirez (1997), Kate Ramsey (1997), and Marta Savigliano (1995).

3. The play dramatizes an encounter between two Mayan lords after a battle.
4. Heth (1992) provides a brief discussion of the carnival at Zinacantán on pages 43–48.
5. In this footnote Daniel also refers readers to Boggs (1992) and Roberts (1979).
6. Rafael Trujillo was a dictator in the Dominican Republic who sought to popularize a sense of national pride through the promotion of merengue and the sponsorship of merengue events.

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