

Book Reviews

Scolieri, Paul A. (2013) *Dancing the New World: Aztecs, Spaniards, and the Choreography of Conquest*, The University of Texas Press (Austin, TX), xi + 227 pp. \$55.00 hbk.

Paul Scolieri studies an aspect of Conquest history that scholars have tended to neglect: Spanish encounters with New World indigenous dance. Through an analysis of visual and written representations of this phenomenon, Scolieri concludes that the documents reveal more about the European world and Europeans' perceptions of indigenous populations than about Mexica dances at the time of first contact.

The author focuses on Tenochtitlán – though he gets there by way of the Caribbean *areíto* – where conquistadors and chroniclers witnessed the Mexicas' many dance practices. After the encounter and during the Conquest, Europeans saw and wrote about Aztec religious and martial dances, which they analysed through their own conceptions of performance, political ritual and social hierarchy. The representations that Scolieri studies, albeit 'ambivalent, ambiguous, fictionalised, and sometimes outright deceptive' (p. 152) are clear evidence of the value of dance for the European understanding of the New World.

Scolieri begins with a grammatical deconstruction of the term *areíto* as it relates to Europeans' conceptions of dance, though chroniclers used it flexibly to mean almost any indigenous musical expression. Analysing documents written by Columbus, Vespucci and several chroniclers, the author concludes that the belief that this indigenous practice was a means of memorialising the past responded directly to the Europeans' preoccupations with history, overlooking the many rituals for which it was originally performed – burial ceremonies, game-playing and political strategy. The *areíto* was the first dance form that the Spanish encountered in the Americas, producing preconceptions about indigenous ritual with which the Spanish arrived in Mexico-Tenochtitlan.

Chapters 2 and 3 focus on the writings of friars Toribio de Benavente 'Motolinía' and Bernardino de Sahagún, respectively; they wrote extensively about choreography and music and the social context for Mexica dances. Scolieri also deconstructs texts by Motolinía's imitators to locate the moment when this chronicler's eyewitness accounts were transformed, by these 'counterfeiters', from proof of the indigenous peoples' potential for civility to evidence of their complete abandonment of their 'barbaric' past.

The book's climax comes in Chapter 4, with the narration and analysis of the 1520 Festival of Toxcatl, when conquistadors killed thousands of noble Mexicas. The massacre marked the beginning of the armed confrontations between Aztecs and Spanish that ended with the fall of Tenochtitlan. Like a detective, Scolieri seeks clues, hearsay, misrepresentation, repetition and falsification to clarify the events leading to the massacre. His main goal, however, is to unveil what the indigenous dances, performed during the festival, meant for the Spanish who witnessed them and who, according to several sources, felt threatened. Whether or not Scolieri's argument regarding the centrality of the Toxcatl massacre in the formation of Spanish ideas about the New World is correct,

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his contribution to understanding the imagery of the Indian in Europe is undeniable. Ultimately, the statements of participants, witnesses, chroniclers and Mexica nobles regarding the importance of Toxcatl itself and the horrors of the massacre reveal fundamental aspects of indigenous ritual, of its meaning for the different actors involved and its continuing significance years after the conquest.

Chapter 5 examines the role of dance in the 'Formation of New Spain', focusing particularly on the ways that Church authorities regulated and controlled dance; it also analyses the foundation of Church-sponsored festivals. Scolieri unveils the tension produced by the ambivalence that Catholic authorities felt toward indigenous dances: Sign of Christian devotion? Persistence of ancient idolatry? For Jesuit missionaries, dancing was both a means and an end: conversion could be achieved through dance; at the same time dance itself became a providential sign of that conversion.

This is a book about transformation, mainly about the intellectual revolution that occurred through contact between Europeans and indigenous populations. But it also deals with transformations in dance practice. Although the author focuses on the documents defining European ways of thinking about the New World, he also locates the moments when indigenous dances changed from religious and political performances to a tool for the entertainment of European elites.

Scolieri's book is a welcome contribution to the history of pre-Hispanic America, the Conquest and the formation of the 'New World', and to the history of political rituals, ceremonies and 'invented traditions', explaining the role of dance as an 'embodied practice' of power. Traditional historians may feel the author's use of performance and deconstructive theories occasionally excessive. That caveat aside, Scolieri's beautiful prose conveys the value of dancers within the political, economic and symbolic life of Europe and the New World, revealing that, despite differences in practice, Spanish and Mexicas shared the understanding that dance played a fundamental role in the formation, maintenance, and representation of power.

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