

*La Malinche: Dance as Diplomacy*  
By Nadia Halim

For José Limón, “dance is a lingua franca common to all.”<sup>1</sup> This humanist perspective reflects his central tenet to produce work which translates and reconciles his hybrid identity as an immigrant artist. His first work on the Limón Dance Company, *La Malinche*, centers on a controversial Mexican historical figure, Malintzin, during the 16<sup>th</sup> century Spanish conquest of Mexico. As an interpreter to the Spanish conquistador Hernán Cortés, her shifting image as a traitor, temptress, and mother has solidified her place as an archetype in the art historic canon. Soon after the piece premiered in 1949, the Company was requested to travel internationally under the sponsorship of the State Department in a cultural diplomacy tour.<sup>2</sup> In 1954, *La Malinche* was the first dance to tour South America, promoting an “American postwar Good Neighbor Policy”<sup>3</sup> under the Eisenhower presidency. Within the context of cultural diplomacy, how is *La Malinche*, a retelling of a Mexican-Spanish colonial struggle, an “American” dance? In the choreography, Limón delineates the characters of El Conquistador, El Indio, and La Malinche through three distinct, racialized movement vocabularies. By referencing the company’s program notes from the 1955 State sponsored performance in Brazil, I argue that Limón’s homage to his Mexican heritage in a frame story dance serves the American diplomacy strategy by superseding the racial tensions of this colonialist narrative with a message of cultural hybridity.

*The Dance: Race and Movement Triangulation*

The triangulation of Limón’s movement motifs reveals the racial tension of *La Malinche*’s

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<sup>1</sup> Limón, José. “Mission & History.” *Limón*, [limon.org/about-us/foundation/](http://limon.org/about-us/foundation/).

<sup>2</sup> Patty Harrington Delaney on the historical context of Limón’s *La Malinche* in an interview conducted for the interactive DVD accessed at the Limón Dance Company archives. (Delaney, Ed. *La Malinche: Choreography by José Limón-An Interactive DVD*. Circle R Media, 2004.)

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*

character as one which oscillates between aligning with the Spanish El Conquistador and the Mexican-Indian El Indio. Limón's three solos for each of the characters defines racial affiliations through stylized movement vocabularies. The dance opens with an introduction of each character performing excerpts of their later extended solos. El Indio's extended, open arms and turned out footwork portrays an innocence and vulnerability to his character, yet he playfully yields an imaginary sword. As a depiction of an indigenous Mexican male, the character of El Indio transforms from the conquered to the revolutionary in the course of the dance. La Malinche assumes a similar posture, yet holds a single rose in her hand as a symbol of her devotion, treading carefully with small, quick footsteps around the stage. As a representation of Malintzin, the Nahuatl interpreter, she undergoes an emotionally charged journey as the partner to both El Indio and El Conquistador throughout the dance. El Conquistador grasps a cross-sword, a "double edged symbol of redemption and death,"<sup>4</sup> alluding to the promise of religious salvation delivered by the Spanish conquest of native land, as he boldly claims his spatial territory with wide lunges. The invisibility of El Indio's sword proves ineffective against El Conquistador's materialized weaponry, and the attacks leave El Indio kneeling in the far corner of the stage.

In the duet that follows, La Malinche too succumbs to El Conquistador's dominance, joining him in performing a European "stylized court dance, reminiscent of a pavane"<sup>5</sup>. Wrapped by El Conquistador in a long skirt, La Malinche is christened as the Spanish "Donna Marina," one of Cortés's mistresses. Following a lamenting solo, La Malinche wraps the trailing fabric of her skirt around El Indio's hunched shoulders as an apologetic offering. From this contour, reminiscent of a pieta, El Indio emerges as if birthed with life anew. He fends off La Malinche's desperate

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<sup>4</sup> Limón, José. "Repertory." *Limón*, [limon.org/about-us/foundation/](http://limon.org/about-us/foundation/).

<sup>5</sup> Delaney, Patty Harrington. "José Limón's 'La Malinche.'" *Dance Chronicle*, vol. 26, no. 3, 2003, pp. 282.

attempts for connection, refusing her as the prototypical mother of his mestizo race and casting off any symbols of his presumed father, El Conquistador. His subsequent solo departs from his earlier movement themes, commanding the stage with impressive floor work. Supporting himself on one knee while straining his arms upwards, he resembles historical iconography of the Nahuatl Feathered-Serpent deity, Quetzalcoatl. Like Malinche, Quetzalcoatl is a contentious figure in Mexican folklore, often depicted as the creator of men and the destroyer of the native Aztec civilization. As El Indio repeatedly lunges towards El Conquistador, Malinche joins him at his side, and the pair perform a “highly stylized folk dance...[continuing] to build their combined strength by repeating movement from the previous solo. They become more powerful as they move forward in time by circling each other, striking their thighs and gesturing toward El Conquistador”.<sup>6</sup> Their playful call and response duet is punctuated by striking movements of unison, as they successfully take down El Conquistador, gaining dominance through joined forces.

### *La Malinche: The Dance as Diplomacy*

How then is this reimagining of historical figures framed as an American cultural product? As the first dance company chosen to participate in President Eisenhower’s International Cultural Exchange Program in Latin America, the Limón Dance Company was tasked to curate “four different programs consisting of twelve to fifteen dance works from the Limón repertory, which represent purely an American developed art.”<sup>7</sup> In introducing *La Malinche* to audiences of government officials and members of the elite class in Rio, Brazil, Limón stated, “With all our

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<sup>6</sup> Ibid. pp 283.

<sup>7</sup> Sarah Stackhouse in an interview conducted for the interactive DVD on Limón’s *La Malinche* accessed at the Limón Dance Company archives. (Delaney, Ed. *La Malinche: Choreography by José Limón-An Interactive DVD*. Circle R Media, 2004.)

crudites, we are Americans. We are not afraid to declare ourselves, and have done so in our dance. The academic dance from Europe is not adequate to express what we have to say. We are trying to find a new language for American Dance.”<sup>8</sup> Although Limón’s own Mexican heritage and bilingual capabilities rendered his position as an immigrant artist conducive to the State’s diplomatic strategies, the focus on the dance of *La Malinche* as a characteristically “American” modern dance speaks to how racial mixing and cultural hybridity are framed as American. The new language Limón seeks to create breaks away from the formality and exclusivity of ballet precedents, and solidify a movement philosophy he and his peers such as Doris Humphrey and Martha Graham choose to cultivate in their own work.

In the program note of this performance on August 18, 1955, the dance is described as “the conquest of Mexico” in a form “set in terms of a group of strolling peasants coming into a village plaza, performing their dance-play, and marching on to the next village.”<sup>9</sup> The very form of the dance resembles the structure of a cultural diplomacy tour, in which tales of folklore are reproduced for various audiences. The “dance-play itself, half history and half folk lore,”<sup>10</sup> presented as part history open to retelling by outside parties and part Mexican cultural tradition which defined Limón’s own childhood memories. The description places Malintzin as the main character of this narrative dance-play, acknowledging her Mexican Indian racial identity as “native astuteness”<sup>11</sup> which aided Cortés in his conquests. Once “baptized Donna Marina,” she aided the “rule of Cortez” as a “great lady.”<sup>12</sup> The Spanish colonial regime, the character of El Conquistador

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<sup>8</sup> Ibid.

<sup>9</sup> 1955 Program Note of José Limón’s *La Malinche* during the International Cultural Exchange in Latin America accessed at the Limón Dance Company archives. (Thursday, August 18, 1955, 8:30pm. Limón Dance Company Archives, New York, NY.)

<sup>10</sup> Ibid.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid.

receives no moralizing description in this program. In turn, the transformation of La Malinche from the native Malintzin and honorary Spanish Donna Marina is neither denounced. Rather, the inevitability of colonial conquest at last overthrown by the enslaved populations is the expected order of events. Limón's Malinche follows the "popular legend arose that her repentant spirit returned to lament and to expiate her ancient treachery."<sup>13</sup> In light of this description, La Malinche's lamenting solo is performed not by the living Malintizin, but by the guilt-ridden conscience of her ghost who has returned to aid El Indio, the representation the generations of mestizos who lived under Spanish rule because of her work as an interpreter. Limón recasts La Malinche as a matriarchal figure worthy of sympathy and remembrance, whose legacy lies within the mixing of races and cultures of the mestizo race which populated Mexico post-colonialism.

### *La Malinche and Reconciliation*

The enigmatic resolution to *La Malinche* speaks to its mythical repeatability of this European colonialist narrative. The folkloric figure of Malinche has traversed national, racial, and cultural boundaries. During her life, she was known as Malintzin to her fellow Nahuatl people and as Donna Marina to her Spanish acquaintances. During post-war independent Mexico, her memory took on the name Malinche and with it, a reputation of being a traitor to her people. However, Limón's dance emphasizes her role between two races and cultures and her maternal role in the mestizo community. He claims her as a victim to circumstance, rather than racial affiliations, depicting her joining the hands of both El Conquistador and El Indio.

In the finale of *La Malinche*, after El Conquistador is left laying supine beside his erected cross-sword, La Malinche plucks her red rose from the sword and walks towards El Indio. Hesitant

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<sup>13</sup> Ibid.

to take her offering, he retreats from her advances, before taking her hand and the flower. The two are leaning apart from one another in a counterbalance, before a reprise of the opening music, composed by Norman Lloyd, begins to play. The three characters a movement reprise of the beginning, underscoring the cyclical nature of performer becoming and unbecoming a character. The trio exits as they once entered the space, in unison, clutching the symbols of religion, dominance, and loyalty with them. However, in the finale, the character El Indio exits not as the pre-colonial indigenous male figure, but rather as the prototypical Mestizo son of La Malinche's encounters with El Conquistador. His transformation in this chronological reading of the dance is exemplified in the shift in Limón's choreographic movement vocabulary.

Through three distinct, racialized movement vocabularies which characterize El Indio, El Conquistador, and La Malinche as either Spanish, Nahuatl, or Mestizo, Limón's *La Malinche* reimagines the 16<sup>th</sup> century Spanish conquests as a contemporaneous folktale. The Limón Dance Company's tour with President Eisenhower's International Cultural Exchange Program was unprecedented in that the State funded the dissemination of an immigrant artist's work as an American cultural production. In an attempt to engage with their Latin neighbors through a "Good Neighbor Policy," the State chose an archetypal colonialist story which humanist portrayals of each character as flawed is itself a diplomatic act. By depicting La Malinche as a victim to her patriarchal circumstances and aide to regaining the freedom of her people, Limón appeases the dominant Mexican and Mexican American views on La Malinche's contentious role in colonialist history. Influenced by the hybridity of his own Mexican American immigrant identity, Limón centers La Malinche as the prototypical mother of the new Mexican mestizo race while appealing to an ideal metaphor of America as a melting pot of race and cultures.

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