

The choreography of history and belonging in Tamara Cubas' works

Written by Lucía Naser

In contemporary dance, the interest in discussing the history and present of colonialism and nationalism has increased in the last decade. This has led to new aesthetic and political approaches, and also to dialogues, cooperation and disagreements with other dance traditions such as folk dances. Often dialogues have turned into disputes concerning the legitimacy of dancing issues related to national or local identities. In Uruguay, where the national history has been culturally and racially whitewashed – racial diversity being underrepresented in the collective imaginaries about the Uruguayan population – the entrance of these topics on the public arena of debates is an important moment which represents significant transformations in political subjectivities and their ways of expression; both inside and outside the artistic field.

Tamara Cubas is co-director of the collective Perro Rabioso (meaning “raging dog”). Born in Uruguay, she followed her parents' exile during the Uruguayan dictatorship (1973–1985) and as a consequence she grew up in Havana before coming back to her homeland. A long-duration project, *La Patria Persona*, demonstrates some of the characteristic traits of Cubas' work: the

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indiscernible tie between the personal and the public, the political and the aesthetical, the personal and the national, the public and the private. But also the non-dissociative way in which she thinks the proper and the alien, focussing instead on the complex relations between their components. Through an appropriationist aesthetic, Cubas choreographically approaches issues related to national and personal identities, undoing them and reframing some of their main components in an intercultural and transhistorical tissue of references. For instance, in *Actos de Amor Perdidos* (2010) and *Puto Gallo Conquistador* (2014), many references to the past are brought up through a benjaminian frame that looks at the ruins of history - instead of at its monuments - and which attempts to build critical non-hegemonic narratives about the past, feeding the present through a contemporaneous practice of memory. While AAP delves into the symbolic realm of nationalism and homeland, PGC intends to think about colonization from the figure of the conqueror and the (im)possibilities of facing him up. The complexity of this confrontation and deconstruction has to do with the transformations of the colonial regime over the past centuries and its mixing with other forms and agents of power which strengthened its resilience and reproduction, reproducing at the same moment subalternity.

The questionless “other” in me - thought by authors such as Jean Luc Nancy, Emmanuel Levinas, Maurice Blanchot, Jacques Derrida, among others - is easy to identify as far as the foreign, the conqueror, the enemy are involved. But the issue gets more complex when the questions are oriented

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towards that blurry line where the “me”, the “we” and the “them” are impossible to fathom, and are no less frequently taken for granted. Cubas’ works not only try to think about the “others” who are constructed by hegemonic forces, but also the “others” of the self-empowering, decolonial processes too often lead by local, white, heterosexual, middle-class, cultural elites.

Stirring the ruins: *Actos de Amor Perdidos*

Most of Perro Rabioso’s work presents explicit references to contemporary politics, addressing the implications of military coups, repression, democracy’s thresholds, Uruguayan identity, colonialism and pan-Latin Americanism.

Mixing references to icons of local cultural identity with scenes and materials borrowed from other choreographers’ pieces, Cubas proposes alternative ways of thinking the relation with the “others” (other as colonizers or as dictators), no longer conceiving this “others” from an unsurmountable distance but on the contrary, as being an inherent part of the *self*. *Actos de Amor Perdidos* is a piece that integrates the project *LPP*, an archive practice in which memory is exercised simultaneously from the personal, the public and the political realms. The piece was created one year after a referendum took place in Uruguay concerning the implementation of the Amnesty Law on dictatorship crimes. As Cubas’ family was directly affected by the imprisonments and disappearances under the military

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regime, this resolution prompted her desire to build her own
personal history, her personal homeland.

AAP is a statement about the impossibility of leaving the past behind, about its continual reappearance, and about the need of questioning the relation with it as a way of knowing oneself.

The past comes back as a specter that refuses to go away: *LPP* has no interest in documentation as truth, or in the objective transmission of facts, but rather in finding sensible ways of relating with reality, building a transitable base of documents which could be open to different readings, as a way of understanding and intervening in the past. The piece is well described through the term proposed by Eleonora Fabiao when she talks about the principles and methodologies of a “performative historiography”; a way of making up a precarious history which departs from the ruins, from the fragments, from the vulnerability of what can never be accessed completely (2012).

Mixing references from the national past, the personal-family past and the past of contemporary dance, Cubas creates a complex tissue of memories presented in subsequent acts. Family prison experiences, repression codes, military ways of censorship and persecution, Cubas’ real family counting the disappeared people, the use of a clandestine hand-language made up in prison to communicate between cells. Along the piece, the acts that explicitly address issues from the political past are

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mingled with others consisting in fragments of other
dance pieces: *ATP* from Cubas, *Braindance* from Gilles
Jobin, *Laughing Hole* from La Ribot, etc. Thinking of the
past as something permanently being built in the present,
Cubas is interested in a way of thinking the archive as a
practice. This practice is organized within a dramaturgical
structure that resembles a photographic album: each page
makes us access memories of different kinds, some of them are
recognizable in their collective manner, others may awake
empathy but belong to the artist's personal archive. The
dancers mingle with the technicians who also enter and exit
the stage, participating in the preparation between scenes
but also making part of the choreographic action. This
blurring of the difference between the performance and its
making, between the performers and the rest, posits a
metalinguistic reflection about who are recognized as main
characters of history and who are those (workers in this
case) who make history run but are often made invisible or
excluded from it.

Looking at the conqueror's face: *Puto Gallo Conquistador*

If in *LPP* and *AAP* Cubas delves into the personal and
local pasts and presents focusing mostly on the
Uruguayan dictatorship as foundational event, *PGC* sees
cultural identity issues in a colonization-perspective.

There are many artists interested in exploring and
staging issues related to the past and present of
coloniality. In dialogue with authors such as
Andrade, Hardy, Mignolo or Rolnik, Cubas

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understanding is that colonization, up to this
stage of its development, creates a perspective,
creates orders and determines game rules to which
certain indigenous populations were able to adapt
while others were annihilated because they did not
submit to them, such as in the Uruguayan case. The
questions posed by Cubas and others interested in
deconstructing colonial power regard the fact that
all too often, the self-imagination of the
colonized tends to reproduce the colonial gaze.
The historical character of that cultural dynamic
points out the relevance of thinking about
colonialism in the present. *PGC* delves into these questions
on the past and present of colonization processes: through
an ambiguous aesthetic the bodies grow from the indigenous
stereotype' representation to a monstrous border in which
the "human" loses its form. Colonization and civilization
are not cast as antagonistic in this piece but are
implicitly thought as accomplices. The colonizer civilizes
as a way of possessing and also of being able to classify
and legitimize/de-legitimize the "others". In its
self-recognition processes, the colonized replicates or
discusses these parameters of inward and outward
recognition. Cubas proposes a critical perspective which
manages to challenge the many introjected forces of
colonization.

Recently many pieces have revealed the way in which the
self-understanding and identity of the colonized tends
to replicate the image that the colonizer has imprinted
In the case of *PGC* the initial image suggesting the presence
of Charrúas works as a bait that is immediately taken away

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and turned into another thing. The beginning makes us
remember this extinct tribe, which in Uruguay represents a hidden part of the national history due to a whitewashing process which invested in the imaginary of the nation as European. Differently from countries such as Brazil or Argentina, where racial and ethnic diversity are part of contemporary life, the extermination of the native population in Uruguay makes the non-European history of our culture and society almost invisible.

The bodies in *PGC* appear statical before they turn into animal guttural uncivilized presences that seem to be taking everything with them once the tremors begin to take place. The piece consists of the constant emergence of movement patterns that instead of developing continuously, are constantly replaced by new ones, negotiating between the collective contagium and the individual dissent. The five performers – Natalia Viroga, Javier Olivera, Santiago Turenne, Maite Santibañez, Sergio Muñoz – compound a group by force of aggregation and similarity, but not of coordination or agreement. The group does not achieve any concerted action: their “we” is a shared time-space more than a shared identity mark or a clear cohesion bondage. While the relation among them is dehumanized, the choreography is based on animalized movement, trance, collective rituals of possession. Destruction, disappearance and reemergence seem to be key words to describe the discourse and metadiscourse of the piece.

The theatre is covered by a huge scenography which amplifies

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the difference in scale of the human body when compared with architecture, magnifying the submission of human individual strength in front of imperialist constructions (the theatre being one of them). After the initial scenes are performed by this quadruped and unclassifiable group, the ground begins to show its instability which will increase until the bodies go underground. The piece ends up with the destruction of the scene from below. After a spectacular fall of the theatre ceiling and of the black box in which most of the piece has developed, we witness the re-emergence from below of these bodies who now carry aphasic expressions and lost gazes.

Being commissioned by a Portuguese curator, this piece reflects on colonization from an understanding of “the proper” as a hybrid flux of experiences more than a stable entity or identity. “I’m only interested in what is not mine” says the most famous statement of the *Anthropophagus Manifest* (Andrade 1928). In *PGC* ethnic and historical icons move in a dry sea of tissue and are reinscribed in a dynamic stage which changes its shape, bodies and functions: from being a ground it becomes a hideout; from static and exhibitionist bodies they become almost monstrous beings, or as if in trance, deprived of language or articulation; from the cowboy tradition of *boleadoras* to the electronic beat of the soundtrack, and from the ancestrality of the assassinated indians to the present condition of these contemporary bodies. *PGC* seems to perceive that colonization will not be over through the affirmation of national belongings nor through national

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identities but that it can be deactivated or

re-actualized in the narratives we build about our past and present. Ambiguity is then a concept that better characterizes the space where colonialism (and the attempts of deconstructing its forces) works today, being no longer possible to trace clear boundaries between colonizers and colonized, subjects and powers, dominators and dominated. However the task of thinking about them is a responsibility that does not dissolve in this ambiguity and paradoxes, but must be responsibly carried forward into the future. PGC is not interested in defining nor defending a national or closed “we”, is not relying on the affirmation of a Latinoamerican or Uruguayan identity as a way of challenging the colonization powers. Perceiving that those same delimitations are traced in a way that favours the isolation of the conquered as the “other” of the European and civilized “we”, Cubas piece inhabits an ambiguous territory in which the exclusionary logic is replaced by the devorative, “anthropophagic” dynamic: it eats the enemy as a ritual of assimilation of what is not “proper” and in that way produces the expansion of the proper beyond the area delimited by the dominant forces.

The devoration of references and strategies gives place to an eclectic and sometimes chaotic language, in which the mix of ingredients, temporalities and discursive logics are sampled to give way to complex and unclassifiable configurations.

Two choreographic ways for an endless reinvention of histories: experience and fiction as historiographic

While *AAP* brings different significative symbols to compound a heterogeneous universe of discontinuities, *PGC* creates diverse significations from the proposition of a fictional universe. While in the former we see discontinuity, break of representation and a rough, performative and non metaphorical relation to the historical and mnemorial materials manipulated; the latter invites us to enter a distorted reality through a choreographic, scenographic visual and auditive intervention. *PGC* also excludes - differently from *AAP* - the possibility of the audience participation in the development of the action.

PGC is a closed system built up over the foundations of theatrical conventions and a unitary structure as a (dance) piece, while *AAP* is explicitly a discourse that works through contiguity, through difference - through dissipation as Foucault (1972) would say.

In *AAP* we can access different cells of Cuba's memory. They are organized in a way that suggests their belonging to a wider group; to the endless realm of memory practice and reinvention. In *PGC* a certain cryptic and ominous atmosphere encloses and frames during almost the entire piece the events and bodies which *take place*. However, in the end this frame breaks down and oppresses and hides the bodies of the performance. Then the setting becomes alive through the underneath movements of the humans now confused with and within

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the scenographic structure which one moment ago was
framing the representation. The mutation of these
bodies after being eaten by or having ate their own
(fictional) world, suggests the change of the
previous order that becomes another after the
disappearance of the distance between subjects and
objects. Both bodies and stage lose their
recognizable form to turn into *others*: those are the others
that this work searches for.

The purpose of approaching these two pieces and facing
their ways of thinking on the power relations implicated
in personal, national, aesthetic “pasts” and presents, is
found in their intimate dialogue with history and the
critical mode of historiography they perform through
different arrangements of documents, relations, bodily
explorations, etc. If their procedures and questions are
different, we may also recognize a shared profane and
profanative practice of historiography which is interested
in reactivating the pasts more than in storing them. In
Cubas’ work the archive is not to be fixed and saved but to
be kept alive.

In a text about *LPP* Cubas writes:

*Maybe the archive can be a way of establishing some sort of
relation with that past full of situations, acts, and
passages that are generally excluded, although the desire of
relating with them remains, reappears and insists. (...) the
gap which mediates between reality and its representation
through language or image is acknowledged, opening different
possibilities for representing the real and its memories.*

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~~The archive is therefore a way of relating with the past,~~
all the while considering the appearances that it produces in the present. The logic which organizes the archive of AAP is affective and not scientific, is historical but not objective, is personal but not for that reason private, is not worried about originals because it looks at history as a dialectical process of self-transformations and recycling.

If following Foucault in *The Archeology of Knowledge* we consider that the archive is something that does not store but acts, and that it is not some sort of deposit but a system, and that history is what comes out of the construction and organization of archives, choreography seems to be a promising way of relating with it. Among other things, in Tamara Cubas and Perro Rabioso's work we see how contemporary dance, while it has grown away from its appropriation by the nation-state and its ideological forces, has not given up its participation in the reflection on the formative processes of national cultural identity, and the extent to which the nationalist matrix attaches bodies to places.

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[1] To read more about LPP in

Perro Rabioso's web access: <http://www.perrorabioso.com/node/2576>.

[2] In an article on the will to archive and reenactments - so *in vogue* in contemporary art of the present-, André Lepecki discuss that this will is not mainly impulsed by a nostalgic need to re connect with the past but most of all this desire refers "to a capacity to identify in a past work still non-exhausted creative fields of "impalpable possibilities" (...) these fields that "concern the possible" (Massumi 2002, 93), are always present in any past work and are that which re-enactments activate. " (Lepecki Will to Archive... 31). Going back to look forward, this piece performatively questions the legitimacy of those authorized as history makers and tellers and also the standards by which history is considered as true or false, as private or public, as personal or political. "I create images so the public can relate with them from their own universes" says Cubas and extending this choreographic invitation to us.

[3] From now on "AAP" for *Actos de Amor Perdidos* and "PGC" for *Puto Gallo Conquistador*.

[4] Release and press available in: <http://www.perrorabioso.com/PutoGalloConquistador>.

[5] To name a few among many: Marcelo Evelin (*Matadouro, Bull Dancing, De repente fica tudo preto de gente*), Lia Rodrigues (trilogia *Pororoca, Piracema y Pindorama*), or the southafrican Robyn Orlin (*At the same time we were pointing a finger at you, we realised we were pointing three at ourselves...*).

[6] Charrúas were a tribe of american indians who originally inhabited the territories now known as Uruguai, the Argentinian provinces Entre Ríos, Santa Fe and Corrientes as well as the Brazilian state of Río Grande del Sur.

[7] The Anthropophagic Movement comes to life in 1928 through the publication of the manifest written by Oswald de Andrade in the *Revista de Antropofagia* in San Pablo, which took up debates already raised during the *Semana de Arte Moderna* (1922) in which many intellectuals claimed for a reevaluation of brazilian identity, departing from the methaphor of cannibalism. This methaphor signals the way in which the primitive, the amerindian, the civilized cannibal and the actual brazilian devours the alien culture and appropriates it, transforming it at the same time without guilt.

[8] Source: <http://www.perrorabioso.com/node/2576>.

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