Dancing into Whiteness: A Look at José Limón’s Performance in Atlanta in 1953 and Cold War America

Adri Rosario

HIS 295: The Historian’s Craft

Mercer University

December 7th, 2019
When I started my history research project, my goal was simply to find *anything* that had to do with Latinx people living in the South. Just *anything*. My very sophisticated methodology to do this was to search the word Hispanic in an online archive of *The Atlanta Journal Constitution*. So when I found a news article about a dancer named José Limón performing in Atlanta in the 1950s, I thought, “Perfect, I know absolutely nothing about this man, this is exactly what I should do for my very important research project.” And so I did. I thought that I could probably find someone being racist against this Mexican man, but that’s not what ended up happening. I actually learned a lot about race, but before I explain that, let me tell *you* who José Limón was.

José Limón and his company performed at the Atlanta Woman’s Club auditorium as part of an Atlanta Music Club series on March 30th, 1953.¹ In 1953, Jim Crow culture entrenched the South. White Southern legislators created a legal racial binary that determined where people went to school, what jobs they could take, and at what restaurants they could eat. The binary was black and white. Limón was Mexican. A focus on the 1953 Atlanta performance begs the question: if Limón was not black and not white, then what was he?

Well, let’s look at his background. Limón was born in Culiacán, Mexico in 1908. He immigrated to the United States at age eight, fleeing the dangers of the Mexican Revolution and began school in Tucson, Arizona. After studying in California, he followed his artistic passions and sought a dance career in New York. There he studied and became who some called “The World’s Greatest Dancer.” From age 21, he danced until he was drafted into World War II. Limón danced during his service, and when he returned, he formed the Jose Limón Dance Company. He choreographed many dances which reflected his Mexican heritage. Other works of

his subverted well-developed social constructs. He was not afraid of controversy. *La Malinche* focused on the Spanish conquest of Mexico, and his famous *The Moor’s Pavane* took on Shakespeare’s provocative play which featured an interracial couple.2

The topics of these dances may not seem too radical to us today, but Limón performed both of these dances in 1950s Atlanta. How did he present such provocative shows in the Jim Crow South? Let’s look at how we can answer this question. First we must be clear that in 1953, Limón performed all over the United States, not just the South, and newspaper articles revealed the advantage of his Mexican identity. Then we must look at Limón’s work abroad. Just the next year, in 1954, the dance board chose Limón to participate in Eisenhower’s Fund for the Arts program which sent artists abroad to advocate for the United States’ image during the Cold War. This brought me to the question, why choose Limón? At the time, black Americans across the US faced a strikingly different reality to Mexicans in the US. Through my research, I have discovered that Limón’s identity allowed him to interweave himself through the complexities of 1950’s America. His Mexican racial identity, lying between black and white, leaned enough towards white to allow him to both perform in Atlanta and to become a malleable tool for the United States’ cultural diplomacy during the Cold War. It may seem like the questions about Atlanta and about the Cold War are worlds apart, but it is actually very important to connect Jim Crow to the Cold War.

You see, historians have focused on Limón’s participation in the Eisenhower tours in order to illustrate how Limón’s presence attempted to change the United States’ materialistic image.3 The Cold War, however, did not exist in a historical vacuum and neither did Jim Crow.

---


They influenced each other. Communist powers consistently scrutinized the United States for its racist laws. The Cold War shed a spotlight on the United States’ hypocrisy in fighting for a democracy while also oppressing a large segment of its population.⁴ Therefore, choosing a Mexican man for the dance program was no accident. But if a battle existed against the US’s racist image, why not choose a black dancer? While historians have well-documented the effect of Limón’s tours on foreign policy, they have missed how Jim Crow affected the Cold War. A look at Limón in 1953 reveals that connection.

Let’s begin with race across the United States.

We can look to the law to begin. José Limón was legally white. Both Limón’s census and military records listed him as white.⁵ The census had yet to include a separate section for ethnicity, a controversial move it made in the 40’s and 50’s used to identify heterogeneous Latinx populations.⁶ In fact, only one official document listed him as being of both Mexican race and Mexican nationality.⁷ What was it? Limón’s intent for citizenship, something Limón filled out himself. While Limón’s view of himself conflicted with the government’s classification of

---

⁴ Timothy B Tyson. *Radio Free Dixie*. (Robert F. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1999), 119. Tyson explored many moments where international press highlighted United States racial strife. In the 1950s, Communist countries often published articles like the one about “The Kissing Case” in Monroe, NC where two African American boys were arrested for allegedly kissing a white girl: “In the Communist Bloc, the press seized upon the story as compelling proof that American democracy was a sham.”


⁷ The National Archives at Philadelphia; Philadelphia, Pennsylvania; NAI Title: *Declarations of Intention for Citizenship, 1/19/1842 - 10/29/1959*; NAI Number: 4713410; Record Group Title: *Records of District Courts of the United States, 1685-2009*; Record Group Number: 21
his race, Limón’s whiteness protected him. He gained an advantage in his “whiteness” that black Americans were not afforded.

White did not, of course, accurately describe Limón. Limón was often characterized as Mestizo, a racial category David Hollinger described as being of both “Caucasian and Indian” blood. Limón’s father was of French and Spanish lineage and his mother of Spanish and Mexican lineage. Limón, was thus, mestizo. Yet, Limón defined himself as neither white nor Mestizo. As I mentioned earlier, Limón listed himself as Mexican. It was the culmination of his identities, i.e. his legal whiteness, his mestizo categorization, and his personal Mexican identity that allowed Limón to traverse cultural and political boundaries black people rarely traversed.

Let’s look at how he benefitted from these identities. We can finally return to the source that started this whole project. An author from The Atlanta Journal and Constitution announced the March 30th, 1953 Limón performance at the Atlanta Woman’s Club in the Arts section of the newspaper (That is to say it was a feature, not breaking news). The author not only mentioned Limón’s great fame as a dancer but also Limón’s strong “Aztec features.” As we saw earlier other news articles about Limón performances throughout the US did not. In Dance Is a Moment: A Portrait of José Limón in Words and Pictures, the authors noted that Limón was mestizo, but they used the term Indian instead of Aztec. Limón himself wrote in An Unfinished Memoir, that his mother’s family had “a dash of Indian blood, which was not too apparent and which they did their best to forget.” Even in Mexico, Mexicans distanced themselves from anything but a European heritage. Yet, this Atlanta author championed Limón’s indigenous,

---

8 Hollinger, 1375.
9 Woodford, et al., 2.
10 The National Archives at Philadelphia; Philadelphia, Pennsylvania; NAI Title: Declarations of Intention for Citizenship, 1/19/1842 - 10/29/1959; NAI Number: 4713410; Record Group Title: Records of District Courts of the United States, 1685-2009; Record Group Number: 21
specifically Aztec, features when biographers and Limón himself did not. Unfortunately, I cannot go back and ask the author why he did this, which would make this whole thing a lot easier. The author may have fetishized Limón—designated him special because of an exotic feature. But what is relevant is that the author did not suggest anything inherently negative in Limón’s origin. Thus, Limón secured a place in the Jim Crow South as a novelty, even if that place was temporary. And Limón took advantage of that space.

Limón’s choice of works in Atlanta further illustrated his racial privileges. For one, Limón did not shy away from including race themes in his dances. Limón’s La Malinche was based on the historical events of Cortez’s conquest of the Aztecs and his relationship with Malintzin, later known as Doña Marina. The dance focused on three main characters: El Conquistador, El Indio, and La Malinche (Doña Marina). Limón expressed provocative themes including the mix of Spanish and Mexican culture, the relationship of conquistadors to indigenous people, and the role of gender. The dance was also provocative in casting. The original show starred Jose Limón as El Indio and Lucas Hoving as El Conquistador. The two men quite literally resembled Limón’s social commentary. A dance critic, Ann Murphy noted, “As a pair, they not only embodied physical and temperamental opposites, they manifested the poles of American society—the dark-skinned exotic indigenous man and the fair European who, through a kind cultural primogeniture, would always be welcome.”12

The original cast was still intact when Limón and his company performed in the Atlanta Music Club in 1953. The imagery brought a mirror to the racial binary of the South. A program from the event listed the original dancers and also provided background on the show, explaining La Malinche’s journey from enabling Cortez to reconciliation with El Indio. The description

concluded, “Here is portrayed the tragedy of Everyman when he is caught in the pattern of tragic living. The ballet is therefore timeless in its implications.”

Um… how vague could you be? The word “implications” signaled to the audience before the show started that Limón’s piece had an agenda. Yet, “implications” and the “Everyman” were vague concepts, and the loose vocabulary resulted in loose interpretations of the dance in newspaper reviews. For example, the review from The Atlanta Journal mentioned “modern subtleties” of “absorbing interest,” and claimed that the choreographers “knew definitely the meaning of the modern idiom.” What is “the modern idiom”? Is it modern dance? Is it those “implications” that the program was talking about? The author almost mimicked the description given by the program as he eluded to a potential controversy (“implications”) the show may highlight but did not actually explain what

Other reviews also demonstrated that Limón’s commentary on race did not leave a lasting impression like one might expect. A review from The Atlanta Constitution gave a brief report of the event and mentioned that the company’s performance was “not in keeping with other attractions of this particular series.”

Limón’s The Moor’s Pavane also invited the audience to a commentary on race. This commentary also failed to leave a mark. The dance was based on Shakespeare’s Othello which featured an interracial couple. Limón was able to bring such a controversial play to the South because of his white privilege. According to The Northside News reviewer, The Moor’s Pavane apparently “generally pleased.”

This is when looking at what is not in the sources is so important. For Limón to perform this dance and receive a review no deeper than “generally pleased” suggested the comments on racial binaries did not provoke a reaction to a Southern audience who lived so strictly within them.

---

13 Atlanta Music Club records, MSS 404, Box 18, Folder 6 Kenan Research Center at the Atlanta History Center.
14 Atlanta Music Club records, MSS 404, OS box 3.106, Kenan Research Center at the Atlanta History Center.
Limón’s lack of controversy in Southern reviews meant Limón’s works were “safe” to export. After all, Georgian reviewers were only left with a note on “modern subtleties” of “absorbing interest.” Limón had entered and exited a Jim Crow arena without a mark. Thus, Limón must have been safe to send to “fight” the Cold War in South America. In Melinda Copel’s dissertation, “The State Department Sponsored Tours of José Limón and His Modern Dance Company, 1954 and 1957: Modern Dance, Diplomacy, and the Cold War,” she analyzed Limón’s dances and why they were chosen for the tours. Copel revealed that La Malinche’s political implications could be dimmed abroad just as they were in Atlanta. Dance critic Doris Hering claimed, “You can look behind La Malinche for political implications, or you can view it as a little peasant playlet. Either way, it is clear, honest, and solidly constructed.” Although going further to mention the actual potential room for racial commentary, Hering’s review was similar to those of Atlanta reviewers.

What did this mean for Limón as he entered the next year, 1954, with a trip to South America as part of Eisenhower’s cultural diplomacy program? Limón’s identity not only made him attractive in the Jim Crow South, but it also made him attractive for Cold War diplomacy. In her book, Dance for Export: Cultural Diplomacy and the Cold War Naima Prevots pointed out that one reason the Dance Panel chose Limón was because of his Mexican background. His ability to speak Spanish superficially translated to an ability to transcend cultures. His identity was critical to accomplish the United States’ goal with the program: to get rid of the idea that the United States was so materialistic it had no place for the arts. Although, if that was their only

---

15 Copel, 185.
16 Prevots, Starting Out.
17 Prevots, On the Home Front. Prevots explained how this claim to, as the Kennedy Center of the Arts did not exist until after the dance programs. Beforehand, there was no comparable establishment to symbolize government support for the arts.
goal, any dancer would have sufficed. While Limón was accepted into the program, the panel rejected both Native American and black artists. By choosing Limón, the United States maintained its Jim Crow racial boundaries while still appearing racially progressive to a foreign audience.

In 1956, Limón demonstrated a limited understanding of race himself. That year, Limón wrote *Emperor Jones*, a dance centered on an African American escaped convict. An African American did not play the main character. Limón did. Limón and his dancers used dark makeup to portray African Americans on stage. Limón’s whiteness, therefore, meant success. While he challenged racial barriers in his works, he also directly benefitted from them. Limón could not have reached all of these audiences without a degree of privilege: his Mexican identity gave him a Cold War role that African Americans could not play. He even gave himself African American roles that African Americans could not play. His legal and cultural whiteness coupled with a minority status demonstrated the anti-blackness of the United States in 1953.

When I came to this conclusion, I was wondering why it had struck a cord. Then I remembered I have been spending a lot of time on twitter. It’s not a bad thing, I have actually learned a lot about race on the platform. My research reminded me of one story. Recently, Gina Rodriguez, a famous Puerto Rican actress, was scrutinized for lip-syncing the N-word in a social media post. In a second apology—her first fell flat—Rodriguez referred to a “community of color.” Christina Tucker’s op-ed on NBC news argued the danger in the vagueness of that term.

---

18 Copel, 176.
19 Ibid, 201-213.
Essentially, Rodriguez’s mistake lied in suggesting that all people of color share the same history and experience. In her logic, that shared history allowed her to claim something that belonged to the black community. Rodriguez, like Limón, may not have had any bad intentions. She did not exclude anyone, but she did insert herself into a history that was not her own. Her move diluted the history itself. As Limón actively diluted black stories, he showed that the Latinx experience was not synonymous with the black experience. Artists of color should bear Limón’s example in mind as they may dance, sing, act or even stumble into whiteness themselves.

Bibliography

Alden, Amy. *The Atlanta Constitution* (1946-1984); Jan 15, 1950; ProQuest Historical Newspapers: The Atlanta Constitution pg. SM34


Atlanta Music Club records, MSS 404, Box 18, Folder 6 Kenan Research Center at the Atlanta History Center.

Atlanta Music Club records, MSS 404, OS box 3.106, Kenan Research Center at the Atlanta History Center.


“Dance Troupe Here March 5.” *The Eugene Guard* (Eugene, OR), Mar 3, 1953. www.newspapers.com


Original data: National Archives and Records Administration. Electronic Army Serial Number Merged File, 1938-1946 [Archival Database]; ARC: 1263923. World War II Army Enlistment Records; Records of the National Archives and Records Administration, Record Group 64; National Archives at College Park. College Park, Maryland, U.S.A


“Limon Dancers To Give Recital.” The Times (San Mateo, CA), Mar 13, 1953. www.newspapers.com


“Nine O’Clocks Give Annual Ball.” The Atlanta Constitution (Atlanta, GA), Jan 1, 1950.

“Noted Dance Company To Appear At API.” Alabama Journal (Montgomery, AL), Mar 27, 1953. www.newspapers.com


The Atlanta Constitution (Atlanta, GA), Jan 11, 1950.

The Atlanta Constitution (Atlanta, GA), Jan 12, 1950.

The Atlanta Constitution (Atlanta, GA), Jan 13, 1950

The National Archives at Philadelphia; Philadelphia, Pennsylvania; NAI Title: Declarations of Intention for Citizenship, 1/19/1842 - 10/29/1959; NAI Number: 4713410; Record Group Title: Records of District Courts of the United States, 1685-2009; Record Group Number: 21


Year: 1940; Census Place: New York, New York, New York; Roll: m-t0627-02645; Page: 65B; Enumeration District: 31-892