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Special issue: Legacies of medieval dance

# The transhistorical, transcultural life of sausages: From medieval morescas to New Mexican Matachines with Aby Warburg

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**Abstract** New Mexican *Matachines* dances have long been discussed as descendent dances of medieval *morescas*. This article explores this ‘ancestral relation’, beginning on New Year’s Day in 1896 at the colonial outpost of Cubero, New Mexico. There, the German art historian Aby Warburg met a local shepherd who endeavoured to explain the pantomimic killing of a bull in the dance drama by saying the blood was ‘good for making sausages.’ Accordingly, this article investigates Warburg’s lifelong exploration of *Matachines* antecedents in the margins of his research on early Italian Renaissance images of medieval festive drama, and ‘headhuntress’ figures, such as Judith and Salome. Warburg’s thoughts on New Mexican *Matachines* meandered over the course of his life from Aztec sacrifice to medieval *morescas*, to the Mithras cult. Through these explorations, Warburg pursued a cultural evolutionary theory that would situate New Mexican *Matachines* as a descendent of antique pagan blood ceremony.

**Zusammenfassung** Die mögliche Abstammung der neumexikanischen *Matachines*-Tänze von den mittelalterlichen *Morescas* (*Moriskentänze*) wird seit langem in der Forschung diskutiert. Vorliegender Artikel analysiert diese “angestammte Beziehung” ausgehend von den Beobachtungen des deutschen Kunsthistorikers Aby Warburg bei einem Fest am Neujahrstag 1896 im

*kolonialen Außenposten von Cubero, Neumexiko. Dort traf er einen örtlichen Hirten, der die pantomimische Tötung eines Stiers im Tanzdrama damit zu erklären versuchte, dass dessen Blut "gut zum Würsternmachen" sei. Daran anschließend untersucht dieser Artikel Warburgs lebenslange Erkundung der Vorgeschichte der Matachines am Rande seiner Forschungen zu den Bildern der frühen italienischen Renaissance, des mittelalterlichen Festdramas sowie der "Kopfjägerinnen" wie Judith und Salome. Warburgs Gedanken zu den neumexikanischen Matachines wanderten im Laufe seines Lebens von aztekischen Opfern über mittelalterliche Morescas bis hin zum Mithraskult, wobei er eine kulturelle Evolutionstheorie verfolgte, welche die neumexikanischen Matachines als Abkömmlinge antiker heidnischer Blutzeremonien ansieht.*

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### ***Preludio: The indiscernible difference between afterlives and coincidences (Cubero 1896)***

*When I asked him what that meant, José said that they say that [it is] because the blood would be good for making sausages. This is, of course, an unhumorous explanation of trivial popular fantasy. Anyone who is somewhat familiar with the critical observation of folk customs should be aware from this brief description of an originally spiritually religious process under this [...] desert burlesque comedy.*

‘Der Matachines Tanz in Cubero’

Nineteen-page manuscript by Aby Warburg (1896b, 13–14)

On New Year’s Day in 1896, Aby Warburg saw a New Mexican *Matachines* dance. The young German historian of late medieval and early Renaissance art was at the time visiting Cubero, a small colonial outpost nestled in the shadow of Mount Taylor. He would become one of the earliest scholars to identify New Mexican *Matachines* dances as historically related to medieval *morescas*—festive dances prominent in Spain and Italy that involved pantomimic violence and mockery of cultural others and enemies (Nevile 2004, 47). Based upon his witnessing of the *Matachines*, Warburg would produce a novel, if problematic, body of work on the implications of a connection between the European medieval



**Figure 1:** Daniel Hopfer (1470-1536), ‘Moresca Dancers Surrounding a Sausage Seller’ (1490-1536). Courtesy of the Minneapolis Institute of Art, gift of funds from the Ronald F. Kinney Foundation (public domain).

and the living practice of dance in the colonial context. While visiting Cubero, Warburg learned that the dance was shared among settler and Pueblo Indigenous groups, and so he gathered informant accounts about Mexicano/Hispano and Pueblo Indigenous versions of the dance.

In his reception of local knowledge, Warburg was often sceptical. As the quote initiating this *preludio* shows, Warburg dismissed the interpretation of Cubero local José Chaves about the mock ‘killing of the bull’ near the end of the dance as ‘unhumorous’ and ‘trivial popular fantasy.’ Nonetheless, the local shepherd’s intervention points to one of the most significant likenesses between medieval morescas and New Mexican Matachines: the importance of humour. New Mexican Matachines, like medieval morescas, incorporate burlesque humour, often poking fun through exaggeration and distortion.

As Daniel Hopfer’s sixteenth-century ‘Moresca Dancers Surrounding a Sausage Seller’ (fig. 1) shows, imagery of medieval morescas expanded upon the dance’s penchant for mockery and ‘othering,’ augmenting and reinforcing these with the tools of grotesque visual language of the period. The sausage seller’s protruding goitres, and the exaggerated lumps and wrinkles distorting the bodies of the surrounding dancers, shift the comedic stance of the image to a realm of mockery not usually present

1 Among New Mexican Matachines, for example, nuts are sometimes served to giggling audiences after the bull figure undergoes mock castration (Romero 1993, 379).

2 For a particularly wild argument about the connections between English Morris dances and New Mexican Matachines, see Forrest (1984). For critical analysis of this contribution, see Heath-Coleman (1985).

among New Mexican Matachines. Nonetheless, the central sausage seller figure, dressed in drag, connects the image—even if by coincidence—to both the sausages mentioned by Cubero local José Chaves in Warburg’s notes, as well as the cross-dressed ‘Abuela’ figure present in a number of New Mexican Matachines dances. Both gender-bending and comedic uses of food to reference genitalia are as present among modern New Mexican Matachines as they are evidenced among medieval morescas.<sup>1</sup> Transhistorically, transculturally (and perhaps by happenstance), burlesque humour rides the sausage from a medieval moresca to the New Mexican Matachines.

Aby Warburg spent his life experimenting with ‘the afterlives of images’ in ways that continue to trouble art history with the indiscernible difference between relations and coincidences. Matachines provides a perfect storm for that indiscernibility. As dance historian Flavia Champe has written of the Matachines, ‘There is no clear-cut way to trace its history [...]. It is a matter of guesswork to separate the various parts and give each a suitable provenience’ (1983, 4).<sup>2</sup> With Champe’s description of Matachines’ ambiguity, I introduce the central question of this article: what, when facing indiscernible differences between traces and coincidences, does it mean to think about the postmedieval in living dance practice? This is a question that haunts dance historians like me, just as it haunted Warburg at the end of the nineteenth century. It is also precisely what makes Matachines’ historicity both ever incomplete, and truly alive—the indiscernible difference between heritage relations and happenstance similarities. Among the many Creole and Mestizo cultures that have emerged in the wake of European colonisation, historical ambiguity is often a significant component of play and exploration within performance practices. While a history of colonial eradication continues to haunt Indigenous communities with both traumatic memories and continued struggles, Matachines—by introducing breathing room and smiles into the practice of tradition—provides necessary comic, spiritual, and critical relief.

As Warburg once said, ‘this history is to be told like a fable: ghost stories for all adults’ (cited in Johnson 2012, 13; Agamben 1999, 95). Focussed on regalia, dance sequences, and adopting his period’s Eurocentric theories of cultural evolution and Indigenous historicity, Warburg nonetheless devalued the workings of storytelling and historical play in Matachines. For Warburg, thinking about the postmedieval in Indigenous dance practices began with the assumption that Indigenous rituality was fixed and ahistorical, either pre-contact or ‘overlaid’ by external colonial influence.



Figure 2: The view of Mount Taylor from Cubero, village in the foreground. From ‘Across the Continent on the Kansas Pacific Railroad’ (1867–1868), photograph by Alexander Gardner. Courtesy of the Boston Public Library.

### ***Intermezzo: Degenerate medieval Spanish Moresca (Cubero 2023)***

It is a crisp winter day in February 2023, and I just have arrived in the small town of Cubero (fig. 2, fig. 3). I park my rental car at Our Lady of Light Catholic Church, which was also here when Warburg was, but was rebuilt after a flash flood in the 1970s in place of the former 1886 adobe structure. This is a high-mesa community of big vehicles and small mobile homes. A stray dog follows me as I visit a series of abandoned structures with thick adobe walls that were built to protect against raiding (fig. 4). Cubero is filled with ruins, its mesa littered with rusted tin cans. The cab of an old car dangles from a tree outside an abandoned house (fig. 5). A few locals slow down and peer out of their cars at me as they drive past; I have been noticed. This doesn’t feel like a welcoming place; it feels like a place that wants to be left alone. I will try to keep my intrusion short, an *intermezzo*.

When Warburg visited this place over the New Year, 1895–1896, he saw the Matachines dance performed as a part of the annual New Year’s Fiesta. He then wrote nineteen pages of notes based on the experience.



- 3 Romero cites Hurtado and Indurain (2002, 164).
- 4 For example, Romero describes ‘the polemical debate, centred in New Mexico, surrounding matachines origins, a debate that has shaped most matachines research in the Southwest since the 1950s’ (2007, 61).
- 5 Further examples of Warburg’s penchant to view Indigenous peoples as violent can be found in Joseph Koerner’s analysis of Warburg’s youthful heavy consumption of ‘tales about American Indians, delectable for their “romantic cruelty”’ (Koerner 2012, 102–103).
- 6 As Rodríguez writes, ‘these ongoing interrelations are registered in traditional content and in year-to-year situational and idiosyncratic variation’ (1996, 36).
- 7 Recent developments in scholarly analysis of Warburg’s trip to the American Southwest include the MARKK Museum’s *Lightning Symbol and Snake Dance* (2022), edited by Christine Chávez and Uwe Fleckner.

While working on Warburg’s ideas about medieval dance at the Warburg Institute archives in London in 2019, I happened upon these notes, and noticed that the art historian initially connected Matachines with Italian Mattaccini unconsciously or implicitly, misspelling the New Mexican dance drama as ‘Mattachines’ to more resemble the Italian word. Warburg’s misspelling preceded later scholarship that has discussed New Mexican Matachines as a ‘New World’ descendent of late-medieval European performance parodies of cultural and religious others. As New Mexican ethnomusicologist Brenda Romero describes, the term ‘Matachines,’ ‘is most closely related to the Italian mattaccino, or buffoon, a role assumed by early matachines groups in Spain for theatrical interludes in burlesque comedies’ (2009, 188).<sup>3</sup> Disputes about the plausible ‘Old World’ and ‘New World’ origins of the dance drama continue to shape Matachines scholarship.<sup>4</sup>

Even though many medieval burlesque comedies involved mock violence, over the course of his notes, Warburg theorised the mock violence in Matachines as symbolic of the end of human sacrificial cults among the Aztecs under Spanish colonial rule. Such a theory, in the words of Romero, exemplifies ‘a common tendency to attribute all forms of inhumanity to the Indians and ignoring European forms of violence’ (2007, 67).<sup>5</sup> However, if Matachines dances are descended from European medieval performances of mock violence, they also negotiate the living legacy of hundreds of years of actual colonial violence. New Mexican anthropologist Sylvia Rodríguez has particularly documented how Upper Rio Grande Matachines directly engage with the heritage and present reality of colonial crisis in neighbourly and family relations, as well as land and water disputes (Rodríguez 1996, 36).<sup>6</sup>

Gazing at the ruins of Cubero, I notice how the town’s timeworn adobe structures have eroded through exposure to sun and wind. I think about how Warburg articulated colonial time in the American Southwest as if it were sedimentation, a building up of time and earth overtop a purer underlayer, which Warburg perceived as pre-colonial Indigenous psychology. Indeed, it was Warburg’s struggle with his own mental illness that resulted in his most well-known work on the subject. In a lecture given at Kreuzlingen sanatorium—which is also Warburg’s only extant published (post-mortem) essay on Pueblo ritual symbolism and dance<sup>7</sup>—he sought a clean bill of health and thus his release from custody by performing scholarly sentience (Koerner 2012, 94). In this 1923 lecture, Warburg described Pueblo Indigenous psychology as overlaid by colonial sedimentation:

The greatest caution is required to assess the religious psychology of the Pueblo Indians for one reason: the material is contaminated, i.e.,



Figure 3: The view of Mount Taylor from Cubero, adobe ruins in the foreground. Photo by the author.



Figure 4: A large nineteenth century ruin in Cubero, New Mexico. Photo by the author.



Figure 5: An abandoned house in Cubero, New Mexico. Photo by the author.

twice overlaid. Since the end of the sixteenth century, the original American foundation has been overlaid by the cultivation of Spanish-Catholic church education, which was violently interrupted at the end of the seventeenth century, later returned, but never officially penetrated into the Moki [Hopi Pueblo] villages again. On top of this is the third layer of North American education. (Warburg 2018, 66; 2010, 526; 1995, 2–3)

8 Works including Bandelier's *The Delight Makers* (1890) influenced Warburg in this pursuit. Not only did this work reframe the anthropology of Warburg's time into relation with fictional and idealized historical narrative; Bandelier's literary approach influenced Warburg's understanding of Pueblo peoples as a living 'pagan antiquity.'

9 Warburg's ideas were tied to the salvage anthropology of American anthropologists with whom he engaged—including Frank Hamilton Cushing, Jesse Walter Fewkes, and James Mooney (Vollgraff 2022, 51).

10 Vella troubles translation of Warburg's 'key theoretical term': 'I translate "Nachleben" as "survivals," both because of my own political orientation and as a means to reposition Warburg's theories' (2022, 87). I argue Warburg's term cannot be rehabilitated to reflect Indigenous survivance, see Vizenor (1999).

11 Harris investigates such dances in Europe and the Americas (2000).

Exploring these exposed historical surfaces, I wonder what it means to unearth history and its stories, cutting away the materials that entangle its surfaces with the living to get to the 'source,' the 'beginning,' if such a thing exists. Warburg saw his historical responsibility as that of the archaeologist; his duty was to chisel away at colonial modernity to unearth the premodern and thereby peer at the true, universal being of antiquity. So it was that in New Mexico, Warburg built a particularly foundational way of seeing for himself by thinking of Europe through the American Southwest, of antiquity through Indigeneity, and about the historical relations of European late medieval and early Renaissance to classical 'pagan' antiquity through Indigenous colonial contact with settler cultures.<sup>8</sup>

In his notes, Warburg wrote of the Cubero Matachines as a confluence of 'Spanish Catholic spirit with rooted pagan customs—which for the most part are now an unconscious afterlife [*unbewußt Nachleben*]' (1896b, 8; trans. my own from German). Performance historian Stephanie Vella describes how 'Warburg's *Nachleben* depends on the well-worn stereotype of Indigenous cultures [...] as "vanishing," "dying out," "the last of their kind," "on the verge of extinction"' (2022, 87).<sup>9</sup> Warburg further imagined Matachines performing communities as an afterlife still performing, inhabiting its unaware enactors.<sup>10</sup> It seems Warburg didn't seriously consider how the peoples of New Mexico might be consciously engaging with colonial history in living practice. While understanding Matachines as shared between Indigenous and Mexican-Hispano New Mexican peoples, Warburg further disregarded how the dance might engage with local struggles among these peoples as they negotiated living together across different understandings of history, as well as the political and religious severances of coloniality.

The violence of conquest characterises the pantomimic material most connecting masked medieval mattaccini buffoons and sword dancers in Italian records to New Mexican Matachines. 'Most scholars agree,' writes Rodríguez, that these pantomimic dances were related to 'folk dramas symbolizing conflict between Christians and Moors, brought to the New World by the Spaniards as a vehicle for Christianizing the Indians' (1996, 2).<sup>11</sup> Yet, it was not mattaccini dancers but moresca dances (or, in the



Figure 6: 'Mattasin' by Pietro Bertelli. Etching (17th century). 2023 © Photo Archive - Fondazione Musei Civici di Venezia.

Spanish, *morisca*) that emerged from centuries of Christian expansion into the Iberian Peninsula. After the expulsion of Muslim peoples from the Iberian Peninsula at the end of the fifteenth century, *moresca* emerged as Spanish performance forms caricaturing (and often racialising) Iberian, Sicilian, and Maltese Muslims, not only in dance, song, clowning, and pantomimic violence, but also in blackface.<sup>12</sup> *Mattaccini*, while likewise associated with clowning, sword dancing, and performing otherisation, did not in any way caricature Iberian Muslims or Islamic peoples of the Mediterranean.<sup>13</sup>

The source materials of *Matachines* can tell nothing of the dance's undermining of oppressive Spanish colonial prejudice. If historically traced, the intermixing of *moresca* and *mattacini* apparent in New Mexican *Matachines* brings together a Spanish dance rooted in racialisation and otherising with generic fool-figures. This might be preceded by the fact that medieval *mattachini* did indeed perform *morisca*.<sup>14</sup> Musician and historian McDowell E. Kenley notes an early performance of *mattacinni* in 1499 in which performers wearing bells called 'matti and

12 The term *Reconquista*, which is often used to describe Christian expansion in the Iberian Peninsula from the eighth to fifteenth centuries, is deeply rooted in nationalist discourses centered on a Christian Spain. Its use has been the subject of debate.

13 This difference is apparent in the words 'moresca' and 'mattaccini.' While the former word refers to the derogatory medieval term 'Moors' or 'Moorish'—often applied to Black Muslims—*mattaccini* is thought to derive from the Italian term 'matto,' meaning 'mad' or 'crazy.'

14 In some cases, dances associated with *Mattaccini* were called *mattaccino* dances—Thoinot Arbeau's *Orchésographie* presents one codification of a sword dance of *Bouffons ou Mattachins* (1598).

diminutive *mattaccini*’ danced ‘in an intermedio between the acts of a performance of Plautus’s *Eunuchus at Ferrara*,’ and, ‘guided by a buffoon, performed a *moresca*’ (2012, 662–63). In *Origini del Teatro Italiano* (1891), Alessandro D’Ancona discusses sixteenth-century intermezzi, writing ‘of the dances [...] such as the *moresca* which in the *santa Margherita* is done by one with rattles, and in the *santa Uliva*, where we find four *mattaccini* doing another similar dance, with bells on their feet and naked swords in their hands’ (1891, 516).<sup>15</sup> While the original meanings and source materials of *moresca* dances and *mattaccini* dancers (fig. 6) are different, in the end, *morescas* were dances appropriate to *mattaccini* performers, and records show they performed them, especially in intermezzi.<sup>16</sup>

15 D’Ancona cites Tomaso Garzoni’s *La Piazza Universale di Tutte Le Professioni del Mondo* (1585), writing that Garzoni records the ‘*moresca*, the *mattaccino*’ is ‘in use in his age’ (1891, 516).

16 Battaglia’s *Grande dizionario della lingua italiana vol. IX* (1997 [1975], 946) cites a number of early modern authors whose writings variously associate *moresca* and *mattacin*: Annibal Caro (1507–1566), Michelangelo Buonarroti *il Giovane* (1568–1646), and Domenico Lalli (1679–1741).

In Cubero at the end of the nineteenth century, Warburg would have seen the *Matachines* dance in the churchyard, where two lines of men would have been moving in unison to the music of a violin, holding gourd rattles and wooden tridents, their faces masked behind scarves, eyes hidden under beaded fringe, their heads crowned with decorated mitre-like headdresses with colourful streamers hanging down their backs. As shown in an image from the *Matachines* performed during a pageant in Santa Fe in the 1880s, two lines of *Matachines Danzantes* in their mitre-like headdresses, with *Palmas* and *Guaje* rattles in their hands, were joined by two musicians, sitting in kitchen chairs, playing music for the dance at one end (fig. 7). With these solemn yet vibrant figures, the characters of a crowned king or emperor (*El Monarcha* or *Montezuma*), a girl-child in a pristine white first communion dress (*La Malinche*), a bull wearing an animal pelt with walking sticks in his hands (*El Toro*), and one or more masked, clown-like *Abuelos* (or grandfathers) with whips would have performed a series of dramatic dances of meeting and exchange, at times solemnly, and at times humorously or playfully performed, culminating in the slaughter of the bull.

If taught to Pueblo Indigenous peoples by the Spanish, New Mexican *Matachines* undermines the dance’s historical connotations of racialisation and otherisation by playing with its source materials. The meaning of *Matachines* characters are doubled and thus blurred: *El Monarcha* is, among *Matachines* performing communities, described as an Aztec emperor, a God of the Pueblo peoples, and a local community leader; *La Malinche* is the historical translator, slave, and consort of Cortes, a villainess and heroine of Mexico’s colonial annals, the Virgin Mary, as well as an honoured girl-child of the village; the *Toro* is variously described as a devil, as symbolic of Spain, even while the boy playing him is gently care-taken; and the *Abuelos* (and cross-dressed *Abuela*) are clowns, ancestors, outsiders, as well as community elders and friends



**Figure 7:** Bennett and Brown, ‘Matachina Dancers,’ DeVarga Pageant, Santa Fe, New Mexico, 1880–1882. Courtesy of the Palace of the Governors Photo Archives (NMHM/DCA), negative number 010995.

whose sacred duty it is to watch over and assist the children in the dance. No one in the dance can be reduced to a single characterisation.

Warburg’s notes on the dance, produced on the road between Albuquerque and Santa F , focussed on the slaughter of the bull at the end of the dance to pursue a way of bringing Matachines into relation with Warburg’s other budding ideas about ancestry, blood ceremony, and antique sacrifice. This topic was incidentally also central to his research of Italian festive drama in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries. In his notes, Warburg quickly latched on to the mock violence of the slaughter of the bull, which perhaps reminded him of his recently completed doctoral dissertation, in which he briefly wrote about a staged *moresca* danced by nymphs as they pantomimed a slaughter of Orpheus in a festive drama presented at the wedding of Lucretia d’Este and Francesco Maria d’Urbino in 1571.<sup>17</sup>

In the years after his trip to the American Southwest, Warburg’s address of Matachines shifted into the margins of his other work on early Renaissance images of *moresca* traditions of jesting, dancing, and mock fights, more identifiable with the late Middle Ages.<sup>18</sup> Various depictions of figures in mitre-like headdress, dancers wearing masks, and dances with performers with bells about the knees and ankles (fig. 6)—all regalia shared between medieval *morescas* and New Mexican Matachines—are by consequence recurring elements in Warburg’s image archives and the archival records of his explorations of medieval dance, festive drama, and associated elements of clowning. Matachines dance drama first resurfaced

17 In the Addenda to page 125 of his dissertation, Warburg includes a full description of Orpheus ‘among the wild beasts’ and ‘slain by the nymphs.’ See Warburg (1999 [1893], 417).

18 As is well historicised, Spanish and Italian *Moresca* and *Mattaccino* dances of the late-medieval and early Renaissance were variably associated with clowning, buffoonery, and sword dancing; see Kenley (2012).

in Warburg's records in 1902, when he planned a section of research on 'das Tanzbild' (the dance-image) within his Habilitation project titled *Die Stilwandlung in der weltlichen Malerei der Florentinischen Frührenaissance* (The Transformation of Style in Secular Painting of the Florentine Early Renaissance). By this time, Warburg's *Habilitation* notes called Matachines an 'Indian Moresca'—a move which failed to acknowledge New Mexican Matachines for its performance among Spanish-descendent communities even while it situated Matachines firmly into relation with Spanish historical dance drama.

By 1905, Warburg had developed a way of thinking through late medieval imagery about dance, clowning, and pantomimic violence. His associations drew together images of antique sacrificial cults, prints of medieval folk dance, German depictions of the 'Nasentantz' or 'nose dance' and associated maypole dances, engravings of religious and mythological women storied to have committed acts of beheading, and depicted acts of pantomimic violence (including beheading) in morisca dances, festive drama, and burlesque.<sup>19</sup> In this, Warburg paid particular attention not only to nymphs and the beheading of Orpheus, but also to beautiful Judith holding the decapitated head of Holofernes, as well as the dance of Salome and the fate of John the Baptist—all 'pagan' and non-Christian figures Warburg called *Kopffägerinnen* (headhuntresses) (Johnson 2012, 105–106, 150). For example, Warburg's 1905 essay 'On *Imprese Amoroze* in the Earliest Florentine Engravings,' in its discussion of the 'antique style of life in motion' expressed in late medieval love tokens, includes an image with Judith holding the severed head of Holofernes (1999 [1905], 175) and references a live performance of moresca in a *brigata amorosa* in 1465 (1999 [1905], 433). His work on moresca in the essay turned him back to his 1896 Matachines notes. Amending them in red pen, Warburg redefined the New Mexican Matachines he saw in Cubero as a 'degenerate medieval Spanish moresca' in an alteration also dated 1905 (1896b, 6). It is unclear what this notion of the degenerate (*degenerierte*) means, but my guess is that Warburg here signals, as he was wont to do when addressing Indigenous practices after colonisation, a devolution of medieval moresca from its original, 'pure' state into the muddled over-layering of coloniality.

For his 1923 Kreuzlingen lecture, Warburg misremembered the Matachines dance of Cubero to fit the New Mexican dance more elegantly into his associations between moresca and acts of beheading (Vella 2022, 96). Uwe Fleckner's 2018 edition of *Bilder aus dem Gebiet der Pueblo-Indianer in Nord-Amerika* mentions a typewritten note by Warburg: 'The dance drama in Cubero, also clearly a medieval Moresca dance. The son of Montezuma dances only when a girl [*Malinche*] hands him the bull's head, and remarks: "The blood of the bull smells good"' (2018, 100). Here,

19 A happenstance connection between the 'Nasentantz' and Italian Mattasin can be enjoyed via the caption of fig. 6, which reads: 'There was a time when I was your buffoon, your fun / Now that you wear pearls, and satin / You don't even let your nose be touched.'



Warburg points to a falsely-remembered beheading of the bull figure in the Matachines as the factor in the dance most associating it with moresca. Though his recollection of a beheading was incorrect, his association between medieval moresca and beheading was not. Romero has further suggested that acts of beheading in morescas provided means to otherise the violence of the dance from Europe, connoting such violence instead as Muslim: ‘It could have been fear of being captured by the Moors and having to undergo this kind of punishment which led to a ritualized dance ending in the leader’s decapitation’ (Romero 1993, 44). Further, the English translator of *Orchesography*, Julia Sutton, has discussed how medieval mattachines, ‘may have also included a “rose” figure (crossed swords) and a symbolic beheading’ (2011 [1967], 231).

Vella’s work on Warburg and Matachines points to Christopher Johnson’s *Memory and Metaphor* (2012), in which Johnson argued for the importance of the Mithras cult to Warburg’s analysis of sixteenth-century philosopher Giordano Bruno in a book of notes from 1928–1929. Therein, Warburg wrote of antique blood ceremony and ‘how deeply the redemptive religiosity of the Roman religion took root in the thoroughly-soaked-in-sacrificial-blood earth’ (Johnson 2012, 209). As Johnson and Vella have pointed out, Warburg then networked Matachines into his analysis of Mithras within these notes by including a mention of Malinche (misremembered as ‘Malicieva’)—who he also extracts from Mexicano Cubero and removes to the Indigenous Pueblo of San Ildefonso—where he again misquotes her as saying that ‘the blood of the bull smells good’ (Johnson 2012, 212; Vella 2022, 97).

While noting that Warburg ‘struggled to describe [...] the history of colonialism in the Puebloan cultures he interacted with as anything other than a corruption of purity,’ Vella cites Romero to endorse Warburg’s exploration of Matachines and Mithras, arguing that, ‘Warburg’s comparison of the Upper Rio Grande Valley Matachines dance and the Mithras cult was not entirely syncretic’ (2022, 97). Vella argues that:

Warburg came close to glimpsing a possible shared survival between Renaissance painters and Matachines dancers in Cubero that disrupts the divisions of time invented by colonialism that too neatly demarcates the classical, the modern, and the primitive. Pagan Greek [sic] antiquity comes unmoored from its supposed ancestral tethering to European culture, and becomes instead refracted on waves of exchange, displacement, dispossession, migration—a survival shared, charged with pathos by the differences between its sites of transfer on both sides of the Atlantic. (Vella 2022, 98)<sup>20</sup>

Yet, I ask, what might this speculative trace in turn erase? Speculation that Matachines belongs to the lineage of Roman Mithras cults, I argue, is less

20 Mithras was a popular cult in ancient Rome (not Greece) between the first and fourth centuries AD. It was earlier known by Greek authors who identified Mithras as a Persian deity.

likely to unmoor antique historicities of Mithras from Europe than to decontextualise historical analysis of Matachines and de-emphasise its historical practices of colonial survivance. Mithras, as speculative origin, too easily fulfils the models of Eurocentric historical narrativization and colonial fantasies of Indigenous peoples as a living, blood thirsty antiquity. Performance historian Paul Scoleri, for example, has written of how conquistadores counterfeited histories of Indigenous ritual dance and performance, vastly overemphasising sacrifice ‘to justify their roles in the conquest, colonization, and evangelization of the New World’ (2013, 70).

Cubero is quiet. The women working at the trading post told me they aren’t sure if the Matachines is still performed here, though I have heard that it has been staged at the local school. I pass Bibo Ranch Road and stop to take a picture; somewhere here Warburg stayed with the Bibo family while he was in town. I pull up to the old cemetery looking for the names of locals with whom Warburg engaged and find a pile of overturned graves marked ‘Chaves.’ Perhaps José Chaves is buried here. Cubero is beautiful, but a hard history and the lived consequences of that history is heavy in the air: wars among colonial powers, the taking of ancestral lands, massacres, suppression of Indigenous peoples and a slave trade of their women and children, raids, famines, droughts, the desecration of traditional holy sites and the destruction of ways of life. As I leave, I can’t help but wonder how the violent history of colonisation might impose upon the pantomimic violence tying New Mexican Matachines to Spanish medieval morescas. *If it is ‘ritual’ blood that has soaked the earth of New Mexico over the last four hundred years, I think as I leave, then the violence of colonisation would have to be considered ceremonial.*

### ***Personaggi: Hungry grandfathers (Abuelos, ancestors, cannibal ogres)***

*Now perhaps you do not know who the Grandfathers are; but every Pueblo youngster does. It has nothing to do with the ‘truly’ grandpa, who is as lovely an institution among the Tée-wahn as anywhere else. No, the Abuelos were of an altogether different sort. That name is Spanish, and has three applications in Isleta: real grandparents; the remarkable masked officials of a certain dance; and the bad Old Ones. These last are called in the Tée-wahn tongue T’ai-kár-nin (those-Who-Eat-People).*

From ‘The Hungry Grandfathers,’ in  
*The Man Who Married The Moon* by C.F. Lummis (1894, 215)



Figure 8: ‘Matachine - Taos Pueblo Xmas, 1986’. Nancy C. Wood Photograph Collection (#000-464-0402), Center for Southwest Research, University of New Mexico Libraries.

The story of ‘The Hungry Grandfathers,’ quoted by Warburg in his *Matachines* notes, used an Isleta Pueblo story to tie the *Abuelo* figure within the dance drama with the multiple narratives of New Mexican history and memory (fig. 8). The *Matachines Abuelo*, in the above portrait, who posed for the camera with his quintessential whip before an adobe structure in Taos, is tied to the conflicted and disputed history of New Mexico, as well as to the unwieldiness of ancestry and identity. The Cubero feminist Laguna Pueblo scholar Paula Gunn Allen, who discussed the Cubero *Matachines* of the mid-twentieth century, showcases the complexity of ancestry and coloniality in New Mexico when she describes her own identity in her essay ‘The Autobiography of a Confluence.’<sup>21</sup> Therein, Allen wrote: ‘My life was more chaos than order in any ordinary American, Native American, Mexican-American, Lebanese-American, German-American, any heathen, Catholic, Protestant, Jewish, aesthetic sense’ (1987, 144). Allen has contributed to pan-Indigenous feminism and the Chicano movement, which have influenced New Mexican identity formulation since the latter half of the twentieth century. Both movements have contributed to the rise of pan-Indigenous, reclamation-oriented re-evaluation of Eurocentric history, adopting *mestizo* methods of historical practice in New Mexico. Particularly, the writings of Adrian Treviño and Barbara Gilles, Max Harris, Danna A. Levin Rojo, and Kurly Tlapoyawa have contributed to challenging received histories of *Matachines* as derived from European-medieval drama and dance (Treviño and Gilles 1994; Harris 2000; Rojo 2011; Tlapoyawa 2018). Scholars supporting Indigenous-historical origins of

21 For Allen’s description of the Cubero *Matachines*, see: *Grandmothers of the Light: A Medicine Woman’s Sourcebook* (1991). I have addressed Warburg’s work in context with hers in ‘The Blurred Bodies of *Matachines*’ (2022).

Matachines have variously disputed common etymological understandings of the name of the dance (arguing, for example, that the term could be instead Aztec or Arabic-derived) and maintain that performances of Mexica Indigenous peoples in Europe pre-date the emergence of Italian mattaccini. Consequently, these scholars propose that—in the words of Danna A. Levin Rojo—‘in Renaissance Europe, mattaccini could have become a generic term for a wide variety of foreign dances, including those early performed in Spain by Mexica Indians’ (2011, 550).

Warburg’s early theories of Matachines variously resonate with this later Indigenous-historical discourse, though in ways more aligned with (and likely inspired by) touristic imagination in New Mexico at the end of the nineteenth century. The tourist boom of the period was in part built on visions of Aztec-Pueblo kinship and fantasies about sacrificial rites and cannibalism of ‘savages.’ Along these lines, Warburg speculated in his notes while on the road in New Mexico whether the dance drama might exemplify an historical tie between living Pueblo practices of the nineteenth century and Aztec ritual sacrifice.<sup>22</sup> This particular interpretation of New Mexican Matachines does not fit the historical narratives used to describe the dance and its origins among Pueblo and Mexicano/Hispano communities who practice it, nor is it supported by further research on the dance (Romero 2007, 67). Instead, it resonates with colonial articulations of ‘paganism’ in the ‘New World,’ especially those used to oppress Indigenous groups (Drury 2021, 348).<sup>23</sup> Nonetheless, Warburg’s early notes began to pursue the idea by drawing a loose connection between the dance drama’s *Abuelo* clown figures (fig. 8), more traditional Pueblo ritual sacred clowning practices, and the Aztec priesthood encountered by early modern conquistadores.

The shepherd José R. Chaves, whose quip about blood and sausages annoyed Warburg, was the initial voice in Warburg’s notes to identify Matachines with Aztec history, and he explained the Mexicano Matachines as a re-staged court dance from the time of Montezuma:<sup>24</sup>

The dance came from a Montezuma dance and is a dance that used to be performed in honour of the Emperor in Mexico: The lead dancer (or Monarca) is the son of Montezuma, the ‘Malinche’ the daughter; they are the only ones who both dance in honour of the emperor at court. (Warburg 1896b, 5)

This description is comparable to other Hispano voices who lived around the turn of the century. The folklorist Cleofas Jaramillo wrote in 1941 of how her mother had told her years earlier ‘that it was the dance danced by the Aztecs when they went to meet Montezuma on his visits to the different pueblos’ (1941, 50). Hispano Rafael Chacón (1833–1925) recorded New Mexican Matachines as ‘an Aztec dance offered by

22 A thread of cannibalism notable in Warburg’s continued address of Matachines over the years reappears as an element of his mental illness in his institutionalisation in Kreuzlingen, see Koerner (2012).

23 The Spanish *Requerimiento* of 1513, for example, justified colonisation on the basis of alleged Indigenous cannibalism, and the result was that Conquistadores habitually used reports of cannibalism to justify the conquering and subjugation of Indigenous settlements to Spanish colonial rule (Vento 1998, 69; Restall 2021, 105; Seed 2001, 122).

24 José R. Chaves is notable within Cubero records as a plausible veteran of the civil war (Thompson, 2015, 461).



Montezuma to the Spanish at Cortez's conquest in 1519' (Meketa 1986, 76). An 1885 work by a Dutch travel writer similarly foregrounded Aztec historical elements of the dance while describing the Pueblo Indigenous Matachina of Ohkay Owingeh (San Juan) as 'a pantomimic-historical dance, representing Montezuma's struggle of love' (Kate 1885, 217). The account goes on to point out the La Malinche—a popular Mexican name for the Nahuatl translator of Cortez—'is here Montezuma's lover, instead of fulfilling that role—as would be historical—with Cortez' (Kate 1885, 217).<sup>25</sup>

While accounts of Chaves, Jaramillo, and Chacón show some of the ways narrative understanding of the Aztec emperor Montezuma was expressed among Hispano/Mexicanos at the turn of the nineteenth century, Pueblo Indigenous understanding of the Montezuma figure was vastly different. In 1936, scholar and folklorist Aurelio Macedonio Espinosa (1880–1958) published a folktale from Ohkay Owingeh (San Juan Pueblo) evidencing the characterisation of Montezuma as a god among Tewa Pueblo Indigenous peoples. Therein, Montezuma is described as Christlike and born among the Pueblo people of San Gabriel. In a short bibliography listed on the front of his Matachines notes, Warburg also included a work by the ethnologist Hubert Howe Bancroft that framed Montezuma as the creator god of Pueblo peoples.<sup>26</sup> According to Espinosa, among the Pueblo, the name Montezuma brought to mind a god who lived among the people, and taught them to hunt, make clothing, and dance on a seasonal calendar. He is variously related to the myth of Aztlán (Montgomery 2002, 96; Drury 2022, 244–45). Espinosa remarks that Montezuma also 'taught them to dance the Matachines' (1936, 100).

While in New Mexico, Warburg reasoned that Matachines was of Indigenous-historical provenance, 'Aztec or at least pueblo Indian in nature' (1896b, 5). However, Warburg did not see Matachines as a court dance as Chaves had explained, but as a pantomime related to Aztec sacrificial ritual. Warburg quoted the Isleta folktale 'Hungry Grandfathers,' published by Charles F. Lummis, to support his 'assumption that the wild men [Abuelos] originally represented the human-sacrificing priests' (Warburg 1896b, 15a).<sup>27</sup> Warburg then expanded from this initial idea to account for the other figures in the dance: 'The Monarca is the emperor who demands human sacrifice, the Malinche is the good spirit who makes him desist, and the oldest "Abuelo" is the chief priest who brings the bull as a substitute sacrifice' (ibid., 15a). The three applications of the term 'Abuelo' in Isleta are mingled in Warburg's notes enough to propose an all-encompassing figure: a 'masked official of a certain dance,' elder, sacrificial priest, and cannibal ancestor in one (Warburg 1896b, 15a).

25 For a lengthier analysis of La Malinche, see Harris (1996).

26 Bancroft wrote of Indigenous peoples and North American histories in works published between the 1870s–1880s, including *The Native Races. Myths and Languages* (1875).

27 Vella has proposed Warburg's use of the term *wilden Männer* here as evidence of his recognition of 'impossibility of quarantining cultures' (2022, 95). The term instead signals Warburg's initial way of seeing the dance within the frame of the *Wild Horde*, see Kurath (1949).



28 'I saw the dance. Main figure female, painted all over, naked men'; cited from Cestelli Guidi and Mann (1998, 153).

29 Aby Warburg: Cochiti notes (1896a); see Drury (2022, 250).

30 To read about Parsons' contributions to a history of colonial indiscretions with informants in the New Mexican context, see: Colwell-Chanthaphonh (2011).

31 Following Leilani Sabzalian (Alutiiq), I wish to signal that I have no ritual understanding of Katsinam, and to further clarify that the word 'kachina' is a commodified, outsider term (Sabzalian 2019).

32 Though Warburg didn't make the association between Nata'aska and Abuelos, he drew a Nata'aska Katsinam depicted on a vessel held at the time in the collection of Henry Voth (Chávez and Fleckner 2022, 68).

33 Rebecca Lemov critically examines a history of extractivist anthropological study of Talayesva's life as an informant on Hopi customs (2017).

When Warburg travelled to Cochiti Pueblo and observed a dance there on the sixteenth of January, he noted 'Bandelier's "Delight Makers"' in his travel journal, a reference to the Swiss ethnographer's novel on the Koshare clowning cult (Cestelli Guidi and Mann 1998, 153).<sup>28</sup> He wrote that he witnessed a 'Montezuma dance' while at Cochiti, the performance of which reflects, as Santa Clara Pueblo anthropologist Edward Dozier put it, 'the Pueblo's passionate desire to deflect attention away from their own rich mythology and ceremonialism. Dances connected with Montezuma are, unlike Katsina ceremonies [...] open to public observation' (Dozier 1970, 69). Warburg brought Matachines into relation with this experience, writing of 'the Malinche in the Cult dance' and 'Malinche in the Rain Dance' (Warburg, 1896a).<sup>29</sup> The figure of La Malinche thus began to participate in Warburg's ideas of connection between Pueblo sacred clowns and Matachines Abuelos. Meanwhile, Warburg's theorisation of Matachines' Indigenous-historical Aztec roots, and the reinforcement of such ideas by the presence of Montezuma figures in Cubero and Cochiti, began for him to reshape Pueblo rituality into an Aztec *Nachleben*.

While later works of Matachines scholarship generally contest any relation between the dance dramas and Aztec sacrificial ritual, various works of research do support Warburg's fledging theory connecting Lummis' recorded Isleta folktale of cannibal ogres to the Matachines Abuelo figures via clowning traditions. By 1934, the anthropologists Elsie Clews Parsons and Ralph L. Beals described Abuelos as figures present in Cochiti, San Juan (Ohkay Owingeh), Alcalde, and Santo Domingo Matachines,<sup>30</sup> further writing that

The Tewa and the Tanoans of Isleta and Taos apply the same term to a mountain dwelling cannibal giant who preyed on people, particularly on children. The Cha'vaiyo and Nata'shaka kachina of the Hopi,<sup>31</sup> impersonations of the early monsters, and the Zuñi Atoshle (grandfather) and Nata'shku masks are related [...] All are child bogeys or disciplinarians rather than clowns, but in some cases their behaviour corresponds to that of the clowns. (1934, 498–499)

Among the Hopi, who do not perform Matachines, Abuelo-like figures take the shape of the Chaveyo, and a whole family of mountain ogres called Nata'aska take part in annual dance dramas leading up to the more famous Snake dance—which is a culminating performance of a weeks-long dramatic practice among the Hopi.<sup>32</sup> Don C. Talayesva's 1963 *Sun Chief: The Autobiography of a Hopi Indian*, written with anthropologist Leo Simmons, extensively documents Talayesva's experience of Chaveyo as a child witness and adult performer of the figure.<sup>33</sup> Espinosa wrote in 1945 of a parallelism between Hispano 'Aguelos' and Pueblo 'Tsave-Yohs.' Describing the Aguelo who would appear among Hispano people around



Christmas eve, Espinosa wrote that, ‘the children were led to believe that the Aguelos were supernatural beings who lived in the mountains, whence they came each year’ (1992 [1945], 2). Articulating the relationship of Aguelos to Tsave-Yohs, folklorist Thomas J. Steele built upon Espinosa’s work:

These preternatural Pueblo fantasy figures live most of the year in mountain caves, coming into the pueblos for certain ritual dances where pairs of tsave yohs among the Tewa, chapids among the Keres, chapaiyunas and chapiudes among the Northern and Southern Tiwa, chaveyos among the Hopi, and chapayekas among the Yaqui show their devilish masked faces and their animal tails. They run from place to place, direct the dance (or more often, pretend to do so), howl like wolves, and make threatening gestures with their whips. But in addition to assisting the dances mentioned, these ogres appear in the pueblos at Christmas to punish the ‘bad and disobedient’ children, make them dance, and prepare to take them off and eat them. To keep the ogres from taking any children away in their sacks or baskets, the parents must give them bread and other dainties. (Steele 2001, 32)

I will here stop short of endorsing direct conflation of Matachines Abuelos with wider Hispano Agüelos, Pueblo Tsave-Yohs, or the Hopi Chaveyo figure or Nataska. I will only go so far as to say that these figures have similar roles in a universe of Pueblo and Hispano relations—they engage directly with children in ritual performance, by both threatening them and shepherding them into dance. Their association with Christmas and mid-winter, as well their styles of masking and their carrying of whips, further associate the wider universe of Agüelos, Tsaveyos, and Chaveyos with Matachines Abuelos (who perform among Pueblo communities most often around Christmas). These figures are also otherised from the communities who perform them; they are ritualized outsiders, at times providing comic relief, as Parsons wrote, ‘through clown comedy or satire’ by impersonating, among others, ‘Navaho, Mexicans, Americans’ (1934, 500). Cannibal Agüelos, Tsaveyos, and Chaveyos are variously described as degenerate outsiders whose laziness and inappropriate practices place them permanently on the exterior of the life of the community. They are not cannibals because they signify antique pagan blood ceremony ritually remembered by New Mexican peoples—instead, their narrativization is central to their identities as foreigners and monsters. The Agüelos, Tsaveyos, and Chaveyos are so foreign that they do not recognize a shared personhood between themselves and their potential child victims. They see kids not as people but as potential meals. While their absurdist antics

entertain audiences, they also serve to reinforce the relations of care within the community.

Elsie Clews Parsons, Charles F. Lummis, and the various other anthropologists and folklorists who have proposed a possible relation between Matachines Abuelos with Aguelo, Tsaveyo, and Chaveyo figures reliably propose that such figures were mythologized by the Pueblos to explain raiders and kidnappers to their children. After the rise of colonisation, many Pueblo children—especially Zuni and Hopi—were kidnapped and sold into an Indigenous slave trade (Brooks 2002). Indeed, Cubero had been a central outpost of a slave trade of Pueblo women and children in the nineteenth century. Perhaps the ritual regularity and magical qualities of Tsaveyo and Chaveyo figures made them less terrifying to children than the Pueblo's real enemies. As Lummis describes in the 'Hungry Grandfathers,' parents would make a game out of telling their children that the Abuelos were coming, hiding their little ones in secret panels in the walls of their houses from military attacks, forced subscription into boarding schools, raiding bands, or human traffickers (who were also often US soldiers).

### ***Finale: Descendants (from Las Cruces, 2023 back to Cubero, 1896)***

*The Old Man [Abuelo]: Oh dear, now the bull is dead and he's departing, never to be back again.*

*Malinche: Who does it belong to, then?*

*The Old Man [Abuelo]: Mr. Miller; Oh woe is Mr. Miller there! He can't find out!*

*Malinche: That won't work anymore, too many people saw it happen.*

Transcribed conversation between  
La Malinche and El Abuelo,  
part of the record of the Cubero Matachines dance  
(Warburg 1896b, 13)

Historical thinking seems too often to imagine the reversal of colonial time as the untangling of threads, as a lessening of cultural complexity that would 'return' to 'pure,' 'pre-contact' societies. This is true, for example, of Warburg's image of pre-contact Indigenous culture as a thing to be 'excavated' and exposed, like the ruins of Cubero to the elements and to the eyes of outsiders. In Las Cruces, archive director Dennis Daily shows me images of a Matachines from the nineteenth century. Daily's favourite image shows a Matachines performance of colonial time as the weaving of



**Figure 9:** Danza del Liston or Danza de la Trenza, Las Cruces Matachines, late nineteenth century. Calla Eyler and Ulysses G. Wolfe Papers. Ms 215. Archives and Special Collections. New Mexico State University Library.

ribbons. Known as the *Danza del Liston*, dance of ribbons, and *Danza de la Trenza*, dance of braids, the names of the dance refer to the braiding of multicoloured ribbons hung from the top of the pole: the symbolic unification of multiplicity (fig. 9). In the image Daily shows me, two little girls play *La Malinche*, as it is customary in Las Cruces to have more than one. *Danzantes* circle around an erected pole while a bearded *Abuelo* stands in the centre and a Matachines violinist in the foreground. Warburg's notes list that this part of the dance is present in the Taos Pueblo version, and he mentions it in English, as it is often described, as a dance performed around a 'type of maypole' (Warburg 1896b, 19). Warburg's image archive further includes a variety of depictions of medieval maypole dances, including Hans Sebald Beham's 'Der Nasentantz zu Hümpelsbrunn' (The nose dance in Gumpelsbrunn) (1520–1550) (fig. 10).<sup>34</sup>

I visit with the historian and librarian Lucia Ortiz, a member of Tortugas Pueblo whose family has performed a version of Matachines on the *Día de la Virgen de Guadalupe* for generations. After she discusses the dance, its performance within the *fiesta* annually, and her experiences teaching the dance to younger generations, she takes a moment to point out to me that not everything in the dance is traditional or historical. Some

34 It is plausible that Warburg found depictions of medieval peasant dances like 'Der Nasentantz' interesting due to their resemblances to New Mexican Matachines. It is also notable that 'the nose' emerges as a theme connecting Mattasin to maypole (see fig. 6).

aspects of regalia, she clarifies, are instead reflective of the personal taste of various performers. There is an openness and flexibility to Tortugas Matachines that she wishes to elucidate. I propose that folklorists and anthropologists who have addressed Matachines have perhaps overemphasized the traditionalism of symbol and ornamentation over the tastes, experiences, knowledges, and contributions of living performers. She nods.

In Cubero—as Warburg’s quoted notes from the beginning of this section show—the bull was not identified with a tradition of ritual bull-slaying extending back to the Mithras cult, but with a local named Mr. Miller. Thus, before the turn of the century, already direct acknowledgement of (and joking with) the arrival of white Anglo-Saxon settlers in the Mexicano town had been incorporated into the dance’s public performance. That Matachines spoke to the colonial context in Cubero is indicative of what has been most noted by scholars of colonial dance dramas in the Americas since the Chicano movement inspired a revival of research on the dance in the 1990s: dance as comedic, inclusive, inter-community means for direct address of political and social conditions, whose meanings are often lost on outsiders—tourists and colonial officials alike.<sup>35</sup>

There is a difference in the kind of historical practice that emerges from living with and responding to the consequences of time, and that which emerges to theorise the workings of time upon the living. The former is active: it negotiates with the materials of time, and as a practice it is a response to time and history that attempts *living with*. The latter assigns a position of passivity; it is a practice that focusses on time as a force that works upon, that charges, that determines. Matachines exemplifies the first approach; Warburg’s research on it was exemplary of the second. By consequence, Warburg’s theorisation of Matachines subjected the active practice of historical address within Matachines performance to wide-reaching speculation on source materials, influences, origins, and causes. Most importantly, through all his hunting of traces, Warburg approached Matachines as an example relevant to his particular theory of cultural evolution.

Both Warburg’s early, speculative notes on Matachines and his later writing on Pueblo Indigenous art and performance imagined human progress as the grappling of descendant cultures with the violent wellspring of ancestors. Warburg believed antique cultures—whether Aztec, Greek, or Roman—were characterised by ritual violence deemed spiritually necessary by ancient peoples. He theorised that later stages in cultural development carry this inheritance through processes of learning over generations, ultimately softening the radical violence of sacrificial enactment with play, symbol, acting, theatre, and image. If Warburg spent

35 In a comparative analysis of Matachines and Danza de la Pluma, for example, Harris (1997) discusses the concept of the ‘hidden transcript’ in James Scott’s *Domination and the Arts of Resistance* (1990).

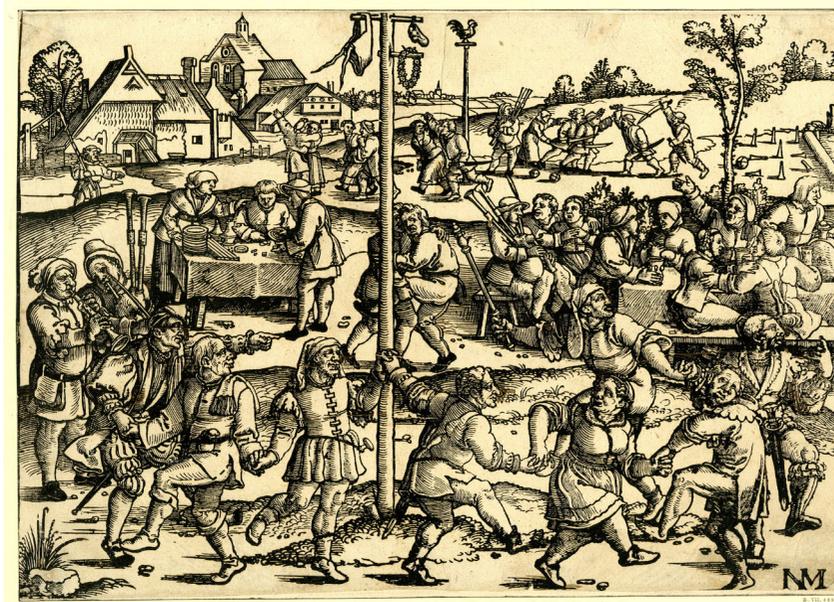


Figure 10: ‘Der Nasentantz zu Hümpelsbrunn’ (1520–1550), shown performed around a Maypole. Woodcut by Sebald Beham. © The Trustees of the British Museum 1917, 0714.10.

his life working on how this was expressed in late medieval and Renaissance art, he sought to universalise his claims with analogous evidence from Pueblo Indigenous art and performance.

Following popular theories of cultural evolutionism of the time, Warburg approached living Pueblo Indigenous peoples of the American Southwest as if they were existing outside of his own time, in an earlier, pre-modern state, working in their own way to reroute the blood ceremonies of Aztec ancestors into their own symbolic rites as Pueblo Indigenous descendants. Warburg researched ritual practice believing that antique forms have their roots ultimately in what he called ‘blood ceremonies.’ The symbolic source material of ancestral blood cults was a central concern of Warburg’s *Kreuzlingen* lecture as well, the arguments of which focussed on ritual and symbol in the Hopi Snake Dance as a late exemplar of antique serpent cults that, while incorporating dangerous live snakes, did not engage in the violence of blood ceremony.<sup>36</sup> Regardless of whether he was proposing *Matachines* as a relative of medieval *morisca* dances or a descendent of Aztec ritual sacrifice, Warburg pursued a theory of antique blood ceremony and its symbolic descendants through *Matachines*. In the end, Warburg worked on *Matachines* to build a larger art historical approach to ritual that would place blood ceremony at the centre of a method for measuring cultural-evolutionary time.

36 As analysed by dance scholar Lucia Ruprecht: ‘Warburg emphasizes the less violent nature of Pueblo practices when juxtaposed with the “orgiastic cult of Dionysos” conducted in ancient Greece, the very place from which Europeans derive their cultural identity’ (2019, 136).



While mapping nineteenth-century Pueblo Indigenous Matachines, medieval morescas, and antique ritual sacrifice into close relations, warping temporal and cultural distance, Warburg adhered to a hierarchy of cultural and societal progress that also shaped late nineteenth-century thought on the modern and the so-called primitive. In the wider field of art history, Warburg's approach to the social and iconological histories of medieval and Renaissance art holds the legacy of having shattered the periodisation of art even while realigning art history with early anthropology and its concepts of cultural evolution. In his more intimate life, this way of thinking allowed Warburg to place himself as researcher within a temporal map of his creation, understanding himself as distanced by modernity from the subject of his attention, and yet enabled precisely by that distance to think about living peoples he considered nonetheless ancestral.<sup>37</sup> As Warburg's formulation of temporal distance universalised the notion of ancestry, his work reconfigured Pueblo peoples living contemporaneously to him into comparative relation with European notions of cultural and artistic ancestry extending through the medieval and into antiquity.

37 Late in Warburg's life, he drew a schema of his own 'personal geography'—he mapped his hometown of Hamburg, Strasbourg (where he studied), Florence (the centrepiece of his research) and Arizona, where he visited the westernmost Hopi Pueblos of Oraibi and Walpi (Didi-Huberman 2017, 81).

During his Southwestern trip, Warburg was influenced by American salvage anthropology and adopted the popular scholarly idea—espoused by academics such as Adolf Bastian—that to observe Indigenous culture was to witness the expressivity of peoples in the last years of their existence as living cultures (Steinberg 1995, 60; Vollgraff 2022, 52). By consequence, Warburg attended to the ways that images survive the death of their originating cultural contexts. As articulated by art historian Georges Didi-Huberman, 'the surviving form, in Warburg's understanding of the term, does not triumphantly survive the death of its competitors. Quite to the contrary, it survives, as symptom and as phantom, *its own death*' (2017, 36).<sup>38</sup>

38 Emphasis my own.

Warburg's interest in the survival of images and in tracing the transfiguration of ritual forms blinded him to *practices of survival* as an energetic motive informing the living practice of dance drama sourced from medieval forms. In his lifetime, Warburg would develop a concept of 'thought space,' or *Denkraum*, as dependent on the mediated, imagistic space the modern subject can create between the self and the violence and absorption of ritual history. Yet Warburg did not consider if such a thought space could also arise in laughter, emergent from the mouths of Indigenous peoples dancing in the face of colonial disaster. Somewhere along the way, in his exploration of late nineteenth-century transhistorical principles of cultural evolution, Warburg missed the opportunity to think about what, following the dance-historical iconography and descriptions present in this article, I call the *transhistorical, transcultural life of sausages*: the appearance and reappearance of play, irreverence, and



coincidental aliveness that—even if it is used to theorise imagistic survival or performance tradition by the historian—is experienced in practice as the imminently defiant act of presence.

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