

GUEST ESSAY

Dominique Polanco, Ph.D.

Part of a series of writings by Virginia Tech faculty, staff, and community members that contextualize Moss Arts Center visiting artist performances

The play *Andares* is such a unique and important opportunity for the Virginia Tech community, especially those of us who are Latinx. It is a rare treat to have Latin American stories on the stage at the Moss Arts Center, particularly featuring Indigenous and Indigenous-descended actors. Issues of Native and Queer visibility and invisibility in Mexico are prominently depicted in this show. The artists who created the play present the intersectional aspects of their lives in Mexico. Many of the issues portrayed stem from Indigenous and colonial histories. The prejudices and violence date back to the time when Europeans first invaded Abya Yala and Turtle Island (current-day American continents and the Caribbean Islands) in 1492. That was when the notion of European superiority and Indigenous inferiority developed into a colonial mentality that is regrettably still present throughout the Americas.

My paternal grandmother's family is from Uruapan, Michoacán, a city in the western state of present-day Mexico. Uruapan is in the ancestral homelands of the P'urhépecha people, from whom I descend. My great-grandparents migrated to northern Illinois in the early 20th century and were one of only a handful of Mexican families in Rockford when they had and raised my grandmother and her siblings. My father and I were born in Southern California, putting us closer to Mexico, but still removed from our family. Nevertheless, I have returned to my history and heritage through multiple means, one of which is my research. As a Mexican-American art historian who specializes in Indigenous manuscripts from colonial Mexico, I am aware of the violence and long-term consequences for Indigenous people that arose from European invasion.

Andares masterfully depicts the subjugation of Native cultures. Europeans targeted language, among other things, in the larger goal of erasing Indigenous civilizations from their own ancestral lands. In the case of colonial Mexico, priests codified and created dictionaries for languages such as Nahuatl, P'urhépecha, and Otomí for the purpose of converting and forcefully supplanting Indigenous culture with Christianity. Moreover, the church attacked notions of gender and sexuality. Many Indigenous groups of Mesoamerica (Indigenous cultural region covering present-day Mexico, Guatemala, Honduras, and western El Salvador) understood gender and sexuality outside of the European-Christian fixed binary. Mesoamerican concepts of pleasure, self-expression, and religious importance were different than those in Europe.¹ Mechanisms like the Spanish Inquisition were transplanted from Iberia to record and persecute behaviors that contradicted the rules of the church in colonial society. The church also authorized special task forces on "idolatry" to persecute Native peoples and communities. Sentences ranging from corporal punishment to the full expulsion from Catholic society instilled fear and a colonial mentality that have unfortunately persisted in Latin America. Indigenous people learned to surveil and self-regulate beliefs, practices, and customs that the church denounced in the 16th century.

The characters of *Andares* tell various experiences of ongoing violence in their lives resulting from the commodification of their ancestral homelands. The theft of land and natural resources, both essential and sacred, have led to the breakdown of

¹ For in-depth discussions of precolonial and early colonial Nahua sexuality and religious practices, see: Sigal, Peter Herman. *The Flower and the Scorpion: Sexuality and Ritual in Early Nahua Culture*. Latin America Otherwise. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2011.

cultural traditions and understanding. Furthermore, poverty, pollution, and the lack of access to basic necessities like clean water and healthcare continue to affect Indigenous people in Mexico and all of Turtle Island and Abya Yala. These are all violent and traumatic effects stemming from the Spanish invasion when Indigenous people and their land were exploited for European profit and privilege.

Community was and continues to be an important means of survival for Indigenous people and their cultures. Native people were spiritually connected to the lands they inhabited, which were part of their origin stories. These connections were inherent in the rituals they practiced and ways they interacted with nature and the environment. The stories in *Andares* demonstrate how important communities are to safety, survival, identity, and the continuation of Indigenous practices and histories. After the invasion, the Spanish crown and the church rewarded settlers for their service and loyalty by granting them land and Native people. As a result, systems of forced labor such as the *encomienda*, *congregaciones*, *ejido*, and *mit'a* were put in place to make Indigenous people relocate and provide tribute and labor to settlers throughout Spanish America. Through these systems the crown, church, and wealthy Europeans stole Indigenous land, labor, culture, and lives.

And yet, as we know, and are honored to see in this play, Indigenous people are still alive, speaking their languages, and practicing their customs in Mexico today. Also evident in *Andares* are the lasting effects of colonial oppression and white supremacy, including racism, misogyny, homophobia, anti-trans sentiments, and much more. The survival of Indigenous cultures and people include joy, love, and self-awareness.

The cast of *Andares* brings to light the complexities of Indigenous Mexican people through art inherent in Mesoamerican culture like song, dance, and storytelling. Some of you, like me, are Latinx of Indigenous descent. You may have grown up knowing about your Indigenous heritage, or completely unaware and removed from it. Perhaps you are interested in discovering more about the long and fascinating history of Indigenous people in the Americas before the European invasion, or its survival during colonialism into the present that shaped your own ancestry. I encourage you all to learn—ask your family members, take courses on this subject, conduct research, and visit your ancestral lands to meet Indigenous people in your communities today. Do not extract and appropriate but rather listen and learn about the lives of elders in these communities, hear their stories, and see how you can help. The undeniable reality of survival by assimilation that Latin American immigrants experience here in the United States is equally present in Mexico in the form of erasure of Indigenous, Black, LGBTQIA+, and many other intersectional underrepresented people.

We can begin to right these wrongs by finding and listening to their stories, and *Andares* is one of many sites where this can happen.

Dominique Polanco, Ph.D. is an assistant professor of Latin American Art History and Culture in the Department of Religion and Culture at Virginia Tech. Her research focuses on the history of production and collection of Indigenous manuscripts from colonial Mexico. Specifically, she specializes in painted documents by Nahua tlacuiloque (artist-scribes) in the 16th century. Larger themes in her work incorporate decolonial theory, the history of recordkeeping and collecting, and translation, particularly between Spanish colonial officials and elite Nahuatl speakers. Polanco is currently at work on her first book manuscript that analyzes the creation, collection, and reproduction of the Pintura del gobernador, alcaldes, regidores de México (popularly known as the Codex Osuna) in Mexico, Spain, and globally.