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“Think With Your Feet”: The Cultural Politics of Native Dance

A dissertation submitted in partial satisfaction of the requirements

for the degree

of

Doctor of Philosophy

in

Ethnic Studies

by

Angélica María Yañez

Committee in Charge:

Professor Curtis Marez, Chair  
Professor Luis Alvarez  
Professor Kirstie Dorr  
Professor Ross Frank  
Professor George Mariscal

2014

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Chair

University of California, San Diego

2014

## DEDICATION

Luna, Jayde, Candice, and Destiny

## EPIGRAPH

Today we grapple with the need to thoroughly understand who we are—gifted human beings—and to believe in our gifts, talents, our worthiness and beauty, while having to survive within the constructs of a world antithetical to our intuition and knowledge regarding life's meaning. Our vision must encompass sufficient confidence that dominant society will eventually give credence to our ways, if the world is to survive. Who, in this world of the glorification of material wealth, whiteness, phallic worship would consider *us* holders of knowledge that could transform this world into a place where the quality of life for all living things on this planet is utmost priority; where we are all engaged in a life process that is meaningful from birth to death, where we accept death as organic to life, where death does not come to us in the form of one more violent and unjust act committed against our right to live?

*Ana Castillo*

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ABSTRACT OF THE DISSERTATION

“Think With Your Feet”: The Cultural Politics of Native Dance

by

Angélica María Yañez

Doctor of Philosophy in Ethnic Studies

University of California, San Diego 2014

Professor Curtis Marez, Chair

Drawing upon seven years of extensive ethnographic research in multiple regions in the U.S. Southwest, this dissertation presents a qualitative, transregional study of the contemporary indigenous practice of Danza Azteca in the United States. This study is driven by several questions. How do Chicanos/Mexicans enact political agency in the face of white supremacy? Put another way, what are the ways that marginal communities organize themselves to resist the destructive legacies of colonialism? Critical analysis of Danza Azteca asks, what types of political narratives are embedded in Native dances,

thus forcing us to ask in more compelling ways, what stories do Native dances tell? How is Native dance an alternative sphere that combats power relations within dominant society? How do these ceremonial dances contest power and historical oppression? What do they signify and how do they complicate the boundaries of colonial history and dominant paradigms? I began with the assumptions that Native dance has the potential to be political and could be a form of oppositional consciousness but how? I set out to discover how people organized not just as victims but as agents, and I let my interactions within the cultural circuit of Danza guide parts of the research.

This research offers an analysis of the political, cultural, and spiritual significance of the dance form. In the chapters that follow, Danza Azteca is an all encompassing space of political possibility that connects seemingly disparate sites such as formal education, Mexican women's leadership and group interactions amongst Native Americans and Mexicans in the U.S. and México. Ultimately, Danza Azteca is a practice that bridges Native spirituality and politics.

## **Introduction: Topic on the Cultural Politics of Danza Azteca in the United States**

Drawing upon seven years of extensive ethnographic research in multiple regions in the U.S. Southwest, this dissertation presents a qualitative, transregional study of the contemporary indigenous practice of Danza Azteca in the United States (Figure I.1).<sup>1</sup> This project analyzes the significance of indigenous spiritual and cultural practices within the dance form, as well as, elucidating its political implications. I explore the layered meanings of the dance itself, as it extends beyond the physicality of dance and creates new narratives of identity and relationships with other Native groups in the U.S. and intercontinentally. I understand Danza Azteca to be a transnational social movement that seeks its own political aims through cultural resistance. As this research demonstrates, Danza has proven to be a grassroots social movement that goes beyond performance and dance, but creates social transformation. In this way, it serves as an example of the complicated sociopolitical understandings, rich with contemporary and historical meanings about Mexican indigeneity and reveals how Native dance is a site of cultural empowerment and social resistance addressing issues that include colonial violence, cultural genocide, and spiritual healing.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> The Danza Azteca tradition is a Pre-Cuauhtémoc practice and ritual that originated in Tenochtitlan (Mexico City). Today diverse Danza philosophical branches exist in the U.S. and México and this study does not single out any particular group or fraction of Danza. I interviewed participants from the U.S. and México and those that identified with the Conchero or the Azteca tradition (or a mix of the two fractions). It has been called by various names such as: Chichimeca (1531), Conchero tradicional (1800), Conchero Azteca (1920-1940), Mexica Azteca (1950) and Neva Mexicanidad (1970) (Olivas 2014; Aguilar 2009: 2). Nonetheless it is most commonly known as Danza Azteca and is referred to as Danza for short; I capitalize both terms and use them interchangeably (i.e. Danza or Danza Azteca).

<sup>2</sup> Indigeneity is derived from “indigenous” which means born or produced naturally in a land or region. In this study Mexican indigeneity is being used to express Mexicans’ recognition of their indigenous heritage and their lived cultural practices within Danza Azteca. I am aware that the term “Mexican” is a political production as is the case with all labels of national, ethnic, or racial terms. All terms will be specified when appropriate.

This study is driven by several questions. How do Chicanos/Mexicans enact political agency in the face of white supremacy? Put another way, what are the ways that marginal communities organize themselves to resist the destructive legacies of colonialism? Critical analysis of Danza Azteca asks, what types of political narratives are embedded in Native dances, thus forcing us to ask in more compelling ways, what stories do Native dances tell? How is Native dance an alternative sphere that combats power relations within dominant society? How do these ceremonial dances contest power and historical oppression? What do they signify and how do they complicate the boundaries of colonial history and dominant paradigms? I began with the assumptions that Native dance has the potential to be political and could be a form of oppositional consciousness but how? I set out to discover how people organized not just as victims but as agents, and I let my interactions within the cultural circuit of Danza guide parts of the research.

What Native dance helps make clear is that performances reclaim bodies, history, and identity that actively respond to displacement and colonization (Murphy 2007). Danza is a practice that negotiates traumatic memory in the Americas (Taylor 2003) and it represents a political commitment that contributes to indigenous knowledge production. It offers an alternative pedagogy for people of Mexican descent and serves as a space where alternative modes of learning are practiced. Native oppositional consciousness is embedded into the dance form because indigenous epistemologies and customs are revived, maintained, and embraced. It is a practice where the Mexican body and politics intermingle; the body itself becomes a site of contestation, a living narrative that transmits history in the present, and actively creates socially relevant meaning today.

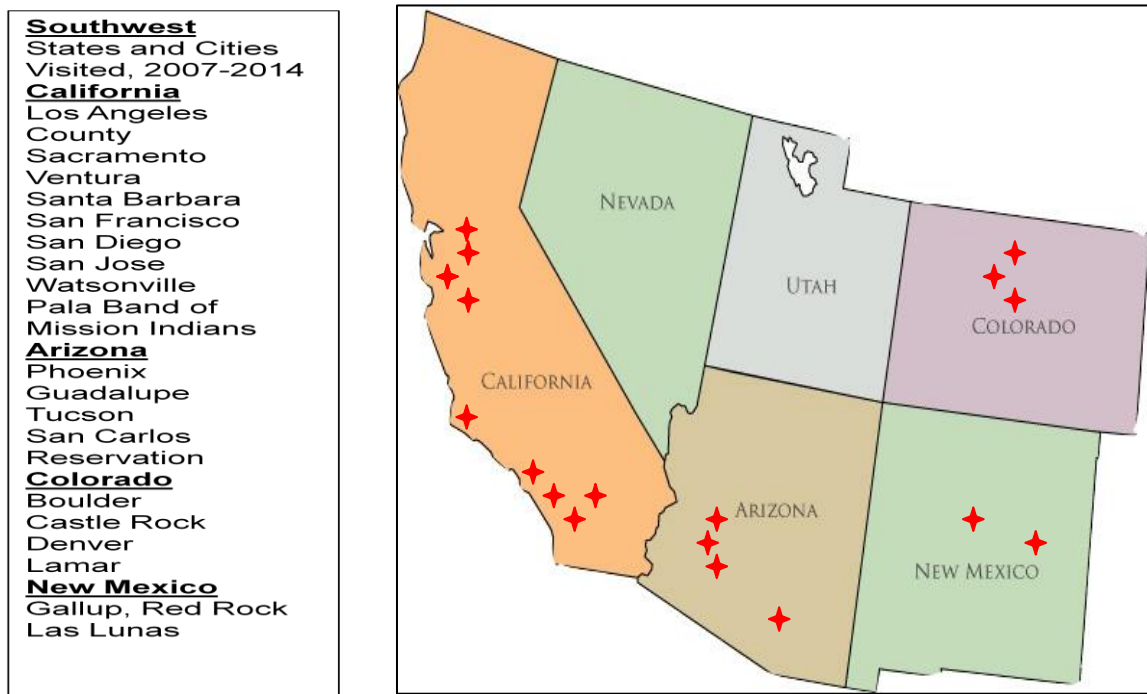


Figure I.1 Locations of ethnographic study on Danza Azteca in the Southwest 2007-2014<sup>3</sup>

Danza Azteca is a powerful form of resistance that is situated within larger frameworks of decolonization, self-determination, social justice, and community empowerment. In this way, Danza is a practice that contests ongoing forms of colonization and it has the aim of centering indigenous epistemologies and seeks to decolonize colonial ways of thinking and acting but more than that it is a way to develop a sense of authentic humanity (Smith 1999). Danza scholars understand the dance form to be a tool and a pathway toward decolonization (Valadez 2012; Luna 2011). For instance, Luna (2011: 90,175) describes that decolonization is not separate from spiritual healing, she writes:

<sup>3</sup> Previous research on Danza does not thoroughly address the states of Utah and Nevada. To date several groups exist in Salt Lake City, UT and Carson City, NV. I did conduct several interviews with Danzantes from Texas but did not travel to the state (state not shown on map). I had the most connections in California and Colorado.



Danza, in its fundamental beliefs and practice, has become a tool for decolonization and profound spiritual healing for the Xicana/o community. [...] The main point is that Danza maintains a resistance toward assimilation and indoctrination, which is a central component of the decolonization process. Whereas the majority sectors of society, including the educational system, may have discouraged or even forcefully deprived Xicanas/os of their birthright, culture, identity, and history, Danza provides a vital space for Xicanas/os to feel acceptance and even encouragement and admiration for holding onto Indigenous origins and belief systems.

In this way, by reclaiming culture, identity, and history Danzantes participate in the decolonization process as a way to heal the original wound (Anzaldúa, 1987) or the emotional, spiritual, and physical toll that colonization still exacts (Torres 2003).

Decolonization cannot be easily defined nonetheless it is a dynamic and a contradictory process (Sium, Desai, & Ritskes, 2012). In line with Haunani-Kay Trask's (1999:51) definition of decolonization as: "collective resistance to colonialism including cultural assertions, efforts towards self-determination and armed struggle." This research is primarily concerned with the cultural aspect of decolonization. As the data will show participants acknowledged their lived reality of colonization, rejected western ideologies as superior, and replaced western concepts with indigenous ways of knowing and viewing history. Danza Azteca is part of a larger decolonizing movement that mainly utilizes indigenous Mexican culture as a form of empowerment, resistance, and self-definition as a response to forced assimilation, conquest, and colonial race categories. Danza Azteca embodies a decolonization practice in the 21<sup>st</sup> century which is directly tied to the racial formation of Mexicans and Chicanas/os in the Americas.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> I use the terms Chicana/o and Mexican similar to the way that Native American scholar Jennie Luna (2001) uses it. They will be used interchangeably the latter referring to Mexican (from México) and Chicanas/os from the U.S., throughout the paper, blurring the division and demonstrating that the same

Mexicans who participate in Danza Azteca resist racial categories of “white” and “Indian” and assert their indigenous identities as a means of community empowerment and self-motivation. Battles over Mexican representation have been central to Danza Azteca as an important means of reclaiming a full humanity and historical narratives that have been suppressed, but equally important dancers assert ownership of their own bodies that are always subject to corporal punishment and surveillance. For instance, Danzantes resist the conventional understanding of racial categories of “white” imposed upon them in particular historical moments and “Indian” as a U.S. fabricated concept that disregards their indigenous ancestry in the Americas.<sup>5</sup> Danzantes challenge the ways that “Mexicans” have historically been designated as racially ambiguous. They do not submit to an imposed identity or dominant narratives of “Mexican as foreign”; rather, they acknowledge their indigenous heritage and maintain cultural practices to make visible their erasure as indigenous peoples.

Indigenous “Mexicans” and so-called mestizos and have been barred from accessing their legal and cultural Native status.<sup>6</sup> Such reasons include European racial categories (external definitions) that attempt to define Mexican-ness and mainstream interpretations of their presence in the Southwest as either foreign, invisible, and non-Native. A hegemonic understanding of the Mexican experience in the Southwest and the

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people are being discussed, despite the different names in which people self-identify (Luna 2001: 4). When necessary I will distinguish why a particular term is being utilized. For instance, regardless of country of birth Danzantes identified with a variety of ethnic/racial labels problematizing dominant definitions of racial/ethnic terms.

<sup>5</sup> A Danzante is a person who participates in Danza Azteca more commonly known as an Aztec dancer.

<sup>6</sup> Throughout the course of this study not one person used the term “mestizo” to describe themselves or their experiences. People in this study do not use this term nor do they identify with it. In line with Forbes (1973) I understand the origin of the concept to be a product of European imperialism and widely accepted in literature and the academy as an academic or technical term used to define a colonized people as “inferior.”

Americas is constructed through law and popular discourse (films, television, news, stereotypes, etc.). The construction of “the Mexican” has long been synonymous with cultural and racial impurity, mestizo vagabondage, and racial anxieties over where Mexicans fit into the racial hierarchy. Their alliances have always been questioned because their legal and social status is defined as ambiguous by dominant society; in some historical moments “white” and in other moments “foreign.”

I will briefly present this binary understanding of the racial status of Mexicans. One strand of thought is that Chicanos and Mexicans are *not* Natives. They are imagined as both foreign or considered European descendants, and thus settlers. Presumably, they cannot be Native because (U.S.) Native Americans are the only ones that can claim this status within territorial boundaries of the United States. They speak Spanish and have Spanish surnames, and thus they cannot be Native. This assumes that *real* Natives (or authentic “Indians”) only exist in the United States and do not speak Spanish. Within this logic the geopolitical space of the U.S. is rendered Native and language is considered a marker of Nateness. This would mean that not being biologically mixed with any other racial group and the ability to speak an indigenous (non-European) language would render one authentically Native. Unfortunately, American stereotypes of Native Americas have constructed them in rigid terms both physically and spatially. For instance, reservations are coded as the only authentic place an “Indian” can reside, which erases that fact that reservations were government sponsored measures to disenfranchise Natives through some of the most isolated versions of racial segregation by giving them the “worst” lands (Ramirez 2007).

Another reason Mexicans have not be able to access their Native status is because most people identify Mexicans as mestizos and “of all the imagined charter flaws of the Mexicanos, miscegenation was, and still is, the most primal and most indelible,” (Lamadrid 2000: 2) suggesting that it is a crime against racial purity is to be a mixed-blood. Racial and/or cultural mixing (mestizaje) within the American imagination was a sin against biological purity and racist ideas about European supremacy. Thus racial mixing was always characterized as negative and unfavorable qualities were attributed to Mexicans. They were described as posing the worst traits of the Indian, Spanish, and the Moor, for instance, “the cunning and deceit of the Indian, the politeness and the spirit of revenge of the Spaniard, and the imaginative temperament and fiery impulse of the Moor” (Lamadrid 2000: 2). Racial mixture was then seen as despicable; given that Mexicans descended from indigenous, African, and Spanish peoples they were then cast into a negative light. Historian David Weber (1973: 60) describes how Anglo Americans on the Mexican frontier “were nearly unanimous in their commenting on the dark skin of the Mexican mestizos who, it was generally agreed, had inherited the worst qualities of Spaniards and Indians to produce a ‘race’ still more despicable than that of either parent.”<sup>7</sup> Dominant perceptions of Mexicans have circulated widely and have served as stereotypes to reinforce their inferior status in the United States. On the other hand, politically conscious Chicanos and Mexicans (those that do not align themselves with whiteness) have refuted this negative image and stereotypes and nonetheless assert their

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<sup>7</sup> For more on this topic see Juan Perea, *A Brief History of Race and the U.S.-Mexico Border: Tracing the Trajectories of Conquest* (2003).

indigenous identities. For instance, Playwright Luis Valdez (1973: xiv) defines Chicano indigeneity in this way:

Our insistence on calling ourselves Chicanos stems from the realization that we are not just one more minority group in the United States. We reject the semantic games of sociologists [other academics] and whitewashed Mexicans who frantically identify us as Mexican Americans, Spanish Americans, Latin Americans, Spanish surname, Americans of Mexican descent, etc. We further reject efforts to make us disappear into the white melting pot.

Valdez insists that “Chicanos” refuse to “melt away” but rather want to remain a distinct cultural group. He asserts a politically conscious understanding of Chicano by distinguishing the Mexican origin people as not just “one more minority group in the United States.” This framework becomes critical especially during the late 1960s when Chicano identity became important because it was anti-assimilationist and a move away from “whiteness” or Mexican American ideals of assimilating into white culture in the U.S. and in many ways the philosophy behind Chicanismo recuperated an indigenous Mexican identity or a “bronze” race. Similarly, Christine Hebebrand (2004: 3) affirms how mestizo identity can be conceived of as indigenous. In regards to Chicanos: “First and foremost, despite their mestiza, or tricultural (Indian, Spanish, and American) mixed-blood heritage, Chicanos/as see themselves as Indio, as descendants of the indigenous population of the American Southwest and Mexico, a fact that shows in many works by contemporary Chicano/a writers [...]” In this way Chicanos have excavated a space for themselves as Native peoples because they have a distinctive historical presence in the Americas unsettling claims of Native authenticity.

On the other hand, some scholars have critiqued the ways that Chicanos and Mexicans lay claims to their indigenous origins (Guidotti-Hernandez 2011; Saldana-

Portillo 2001; Contreras 2008) as romantic or utopian and at times appropriating Native culture. For instance, Josefina Saldana-Portillo (2001) raises issues surrounding the reappropriation of mestizaje and indigenismo. Yet in this study, dancers often revealed how a stereotypical image of “Indianness” lead to narrow ideas of what it means to be an indigenous person in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. These stereotypes create static and prehistoric notions of indigenous peoples and their cultures. For example, Anne McClintock (1995) refers to as anachronistic space, in which the colonized are disavowed and are considered irrational and inherently out of place in the historical time of modernity. In this way a real Indian must be the pre-colonial Indian; one cannot be modern and Indian at the same time.

### **Danza Azteca and Oppositional Consciousness**

This project seeks then to understand how an oppositional consciousness functions within the practice of Danza Azteca as a social movement invested in the cultural revival of indigenous traditions and spirituality at the dawn of the 21<sup>st</sup> century as a form of resistance to a hegemonic social order. Chela Sandoval (2000) identifies five forms of “consciousnesses-in-opposition”: “equal rights, revolutionary, supremacist, separatist, and differential” forms of consciousness within social movements or modes of “consciousness-in-opposition.” Danza falls into a variety of these categories and is not exclusive to only one, and it often vacillates between equal rights and differential consciousness. Danzantes demand for equal rights can mean a number of things, for instance, the right for Mexicans to practice their Native American traditions, community self-determination, and the idea that the larger Chicano/Mexican community has the right to be treated fairly in the United States. Other symbolic actions and protests entail

dancers supporting immigrant rights marches. Though not only concerned with equal rights Danza falls within the spectrum of the modes of oppositional consciousness identified by Sandoval which contest power in a variety of ways. Differential consciousness or the way that Danza functions as an “oppositional expression of power as consensual illusions,” Sandoval asserts that, “differential consciousness re-cognizes and works upon other modes of consciousness in opposition to transfigure their meanings: they convert into repositories within which subjugated citizens either occupy or throw off subjectivity, a process that simultaneously enact yet decolonizes their various relations to their real conditions of existence” (Sandoval 2000 : 62). In this way, oppositional consciousness is both an ideology and a method of decolonization that seeks to establish an empowering state for oppressed people in order to combat the daily and residual effects of historical and current discrimination.

Drawing on the seminal work of Jane Mansbridge and Aldon Morris (2001: 4) to employ a comprehensive understanding, they define oppositional consciousness as, “an empowering mental state that prepares members of an oppressed group to undermine, reform, or overthrow a dominant system.” In the context of this study, an empowered mental state is a way of thinking about oppression as a person of color that has been traumatized, devalued, ignored and/or marginalized as inferior. In other words, an oppressed person of color who can identify their oppression as a social construction and find ways to make their lives livable, bearable, and dignified through social resistance and specifically through the maintenance of Native cultural practices for Mexican people possesses a form of oppositional consciousness and decolonization. This thought process cannot be taken for granted. Mansbridge and Morris (2004: 1) make the point that,

“members of a group that others have traditionally treated as subordinate or deviant have an oppositional consciousness when they claim their previously subordinated identity as a positive identification, identify injustices done to their group, demand changes in the polity, economy, or society to rectify those injustices.” This is why Danza is a radical space because it requires a “change in thought or consciousness” to understand subordination and then actively participate in counter-hegemonic ideas and practices. On the other hand, some people of color may find it difficult to embrace an oppositional consciousness because they cannot identify, acknowledge, or may be in denial of their oppression as subjugated people.<sup>8</sup> This internalized oppression (or racism) can often lead to self-hate, the complete acceptance of white culture and history, or denial of the ways that white supremacy structures their lives and therefore they cannot and do not challenge the status quo. Mansbridge and Morris (2001:4) suggest reasons for this conformity:

Those lower in the hierarchy also have incentives not to challenge the naturalness of inequality. Challenging the interpretation of the dominant group can result in punishment so severe or pervasive that subordinates will go a long way toward adopting the dominant interpretation. Inequalities in power have their most insidious effect when the dominant group has so much control over the ideas available to other members of the society that the conceptual categories required to challenge the status quo hardly exist. Ideological hegemony of this sort pervades every human society in ways that are, by definition, hard to bring conscious awareness.

At the very core, oppositional consciousness signifies a certain form of social protest that operates at a register that minimizes, destabilizes, and transforms white power structures. In this way, Danza Azteca is an oppositional space to the larger social process of forced assimilation and the glorification of whiteness. Danza is a particular type of social and

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<sup>8</sup> For more on the topic of internalized oppression see Padilla (2001).



cultural movement that engages in transnational migrations and imaginings, cultural revival and survival, resistance to a hegemonic social order, but ultimately the reclamation of Native culture, humanity, and history for Mexicans in both the United States and México as indigenous peoples. This project seeks to contribute to our understanding of Chicana/o cultural practices of Danza Azteca as it relates to gender, race/ethnicity, group dynamics, and cultural politics.

### **Methodology**

This qualitative study investigates in depth the social dynamics, political purpose, and cultural practice of Danza Azteca. My research methodology combines ethnography and interviews (Madison 2012). These two methods were helpful in order to gather and analyze data because this approach relies on primary interviews which allow experiential knowledge and research topics to be derived from the field and the interviews. For instance, themes throughout interviews included connecting to cultural “roots,” resistance to assimilation, oppositional consciousness, self-empowerment, and healing. Narratives and quotes selected throughout the dissertation represent general themes, but it is my intention to foreground indigenous and female agency by utilizing lengthy quotes from interviews. I also derived a framework that I call the cultural circuit to help me explain the interactions that Native dance and cultural productions create outside of dominant institutions.

Qualitative methods such as in-depth interviews and ethnographic observation were used to investigate the social context and group dynamics of Danza Azteca. Fieldwork was performed in California, Arizona, New Mexico, and Colorado, these locations are important because they not only were inspired by the 1970s politics in

California but remain interconnected today through the cultural beliefs and practices of Native dance. More specifically the sites include attending Danza Azteca events like public performances, inter-tribal events, ceremonies, educational workshops, and dance practices. Ethnographic observation allowed me to understand the social context in order to make connections between gender dynamics, group interactions, and public visibility. The crux of this research relies on ethnography and interviews and attending these events provided the opportunity to communicate with many people from a variety of places across the U.S.

I was able to generate extensive field notes, conduct informal and formal interviews, and produce video recordings and photographs of events, people, and places important to this project. Given the limited research on the topic of Danza, interviews and ethnographic observation have been integral to data collection. One-on-one interviews provide the opportunity to collect personal narratives that enhance the already existing literature of Chicano Movement politics.<sup>9</sup> These narratives detail the everyday practice of Danza Azteca and the intersections and workings of race, gender, and culture in the lives of Mexicans in the United States. Interviews conducted with leaders of the Danza Azteca Movement allowed for further documentation of the practice and to contextualize its significance in the United States within the last 40 years. Furthermore, interviews with newer members of the practice reveal the necessity of maintaining the political and cultural purpose of Danza. As a researcher, attentive to power issues, I am able to bridge community voices with academic sources to make connections to the larger

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<sup>9</sup> Munoz (1989), Rosales (1996), Mariscal (2005), Bebout (2011), I. Garcia (1997), Blackwell (2011), Broyles-Gonzalez (1994), A. Garcia ed. (1997), Haney Lopez (2003), and Chavez (2002)

social issues investigated in the research in order to categorize responses and identify common themes.

Ethnographic observations aided in understanding in more depth what these stylized dances mean what they mediate, where and how and for whom they are performed. Also, coming from a dance background and as a member of the community, I am afforded certain advantages. As both an insider and outsider, I have access to information and people that others may not. Though a critical distance is necessary, as an Ethnic Studies scholar I am aware that no systems or social relationships are value free. I approach my research from a subject position that is informed from my life experiences and academic training in Ethnic, Chicano, and Women Studies, as well Performance, and Cultural Studies.

Some of the challenges posed within qualitative methods include the reliability of memory because memory can be faulty and the narrative/interview is limited to one person's interpretation of events. Other problems posed for the researcher include giving up some "authoritative voice" or analysis if respondents provide differing opinions or new topics the researcher was not initially investigating. As a result, I remained opened to new possibilities and different interpretations of Danza Azteca. Through in-depth interviews and ethnography I have been able to observe the far reaching implications that Danza has on a number of sites critical in the process of decolonization.

### **Dance as a Living Document**

Dance is a "document," a living theory or a theory in the flesh (Moraga 1981) that embodies a political narrative that wrestles with memory, history and the future; in this vein, many Native dances in the current moment address grievances and redress for

oppressed indigenous communities. If the body can in fact be read as a text then the (Mexican) body as a traditional (Native) dancer not only transmits a specific historical narrative but reveals that brown bodies are sites of tension—one that is both subjugated by physical and epistemic violence and at the same time liberated because the Danzante enacts agency by utilizing dance as a protest to colonial domination by specifically staking claims to time, history, and Mexican indigeneity in the Americas.

“Dominant narratives” are what Chicana scholar Tara J. Yosso (2005) calls narratives that serve to reinforce the status quo; these include, a multitude of ideological discourses concerning Western philosophy, U.S. legal policies, and the Christian Bible. These dominant narratives, invested in the maintenance of white supremacy, have ideological aims that maintain a political understanding of the United States as a democratic nation, void of oppressive systems organized along racial, class, gender, and heteronormative hierarchies. Western ideology couched in ideals of “enlightenment” and the linearity of history stakes claims to modernity, progress and ultimately the ongoing search for truth. However, this linear narrative of “progress” fails to recognize that historical narration is ideological and particular histories and experiences are excluded, distorted, or erased—leaving racialized, feminized, and queer groups as the vanquished, silenced, and forgotten. As feminist anthropologist Ann Stoler (2002: 87) reminds us, “[C]olonial archives [are] both transparencies on which power relations were inscribed and intricate technologies of rule in themselves.” Unfortunately mainstream society often fails to question the very racialized, gendered, and sexualized discourse that structures everyday life through thought patterns (Anzaldúa 1999). Dominant narratives are taken

for granted as objective truth and official history. As a result, western regimes of “truth” become sites of contention.

Upon closer inspection, these myths hide the social, cultural, and institutional inequality inherent to the nation-state project. Therefore, the archive understood as “objective” and “official,” is a series of compilations of the dominant groups’ stories. The archive itself is a source of contestation over what is deemed worthy of documentation by preserving, cataloging, and categorizing; essentially the selection of what is included in the archive participates in creating the boundaries between what is worth knowing and remembering and what is considered expendable. In a similar vein, Joan M. Schwartz and Terry Cook (2002: 1) in their article, “Archives, Records, and Power: The Making of Modern Memory,” reveal how archives are intimately tied to power: “[The dominant archive has] enormous power over memory and identity, over the fundamental ways in which society seeks evidence of what its core values are and have been, where it has come from, and where it is going.” Therefore dominant narratives, in large part produced through the archive maintain an ideological dominance over the nation’s records and memory.

This is why an analytical lens like culture, dance, and performance studies (in relation to Chicano and Ethnic Studies) enhances what constitutes knowledge within the limitations of written text. By adding to the type of sources that can be consulted as legitimate forms of knowledge—be it visual, auditory, or performative—and putting them in conversation with official archives, theories and academic sources, this dissertation provides a more nuanced and comprehensive understanding of knowledge production outside of dominant institutions. Though academic sources are helpful, they

are not the only form of knowledge. While these forms of knowledge are often perceived as biased, ahistorical, and personal, unofficial archives are nonetheless a repository of information that is integral to understanding the ways that power is contested and mapped onto such practices. The interaction between the archive and dance performances can be explored, not in isolation from one another, but rather to recognize how they both shape cultural knowledge.

Following Taylor's reasoning, the Native dancer, or "the dancing body" thus can be read as text or a different type of record that transmits social knowledge. A close analysis of what Danza Azteca conveys, resists, and maintains outside of "official" sources can inform our understanding of power relations. If we can identify "dance as a document/theory in the flesh" or its own site of knowledge production, then Danza functions as an alternative pedagogy outside of dominant representations of what Chicanos and Mexicans are, look like, and what they decide to do with their bodies. These embodied cultural forms are not static or neutral in time but are always interacting with their current sociopolitical moment specific to Chicana/o experiences. Danza Azteca is not simply an expressive or creative behavior; rather with critical observation, we can understand what Yolanda Broyles-Gonzalez refers to as the "context of struggle" of such performances (Broyles-Gonzalez 1994: 81). In other words, the development and enactment of cultural performance, such as Danza, provides a critique of social relations including, the social reality of surveillance, incarceration, lack of access to education, cultural imperialism, and denigrating historical representations of Chicanos and Mexicans. Native dances and other oppositional performances like El Teatro Campesino,

Theatre of the Oppressed, and oral testimonios are thus situated within historical frames of power and dominance that seek to identify and dismantle power relations.

Chicana scholars and activists have historically contested dominant narratives and western knowledge production and what are deemed as valid sources, intellectual projects, and subjects of analysis. Their writing and creative work “exposes the wounds, confronts those who inflict pain, and tries to exorcise the shame that some individuals feel” (Torres 2003:10). Such a perspective is critical of colonial legacies and the residual effects they have on the present. Their scholarship is not only attentive to historical and present day material subjugation but recognizes the spiritual, psychological, and historical trauma brought upon by colonization. For example, Chicana scholar Teresa Cordova (Cordova 2001: 280) writes of cultural deprivation and spiritual abuse within Chicana feminist writings, saying, “[These] writings reveal their anti-colonial features. By reclaiming self and space, Chicanas counter colonialism, [identified] as the ‘taking over’ of someone else’s space by dominant power who then expropriates its resources. Those who must live in ‘occupied’ land are burdened with constant struggle for survival—culturally, spiritually, [and] economically.” Echoing this sentiment, cultural theorist Eden E. Torres (2003:40) understands oppression to manifest in various forms:

If we understand that oppression is not simply about political or institutional discrimination, but that is also a form of mental, physical, spiritual, emotional abuse, we have to cleanse ourselves and stop internalizing the hatred and humiliation we experience. We can celebrate, without apology or qualification, the strength it has taken to survive this history. [...] Mexican Americans who learn the “truth” of our history must either deny it or face the intense anger it engenders. This is not easy for damaged people who have learned to suppress feelings. But, we must do so in ways that do not add to our adversity and pain, but will renew us.

Within this framework, Danza functions as a site that signifies historical memory and trauma yet also, signals pride, resistance, and self-definition. Cordova affirms how spirituality is tied to decolonization because “through spiritual practices such as Danza Chicanas are retrieving their souls and healing the wounds of colonized memory” (Cordova 2001: 286). Dance and performance scholars alike ask us to see the value in Native dance as “off” the official record of documentation. They understand Native dance not only as the embodiment of specific rituals and cultural forms but also as political investment in retaining (and recapturing) historical memory. Like Taylor and Murphy, Olga Najera-Ramirez, Norma E. Cantu, and Brenda Romero (2009: xvi) describe the ways that Native dances transmit memory in the Americas, “Danza and its accompanying narratives [...] often served as important media for documenting and transmitting history, and they subsequently became a significant means of expressing complicated tensions of the colonial and postcolonial periods. As a result, the changing dance traditions testify to the political and historical trajectories of the people.” Historical narration, which is neither static nor neutral, then becomes a political project within the “*context of struggle*.” For Danzantes such struggles include: state violence, self-definition, agency, cultural revitalization, and historical erasure and trauma.

When specifically looking at Danza Azteca practices and expressive behavior one can identify how stylized dances collectively transmit an ethnic identity and cultural memory. The dancers (be it Sun Dancers, Maori, Hula, Matachines, or Danzantes) then engage with their own agency, contesting multifaceted layers of colonial society and power structures. For People of color maintaining traditional Native dances cannot be and is not merely leisure. Rather it is a political project of decolonization or a



battleground of “survivance.” Native American scholar Gerald Vizenor (2008) utilizes this hybrid term to signify survival and resistance. This hermeneutic “is enacted and continually reenacted, in the performance of meaning” (Madsen 2010: 12). Traditional Native dance then offers one example of how people contest hegemonic rule and dominant narratives by using public space and performance to stake claims to justice (Taylor 2005).

Since these objects of study, the performances and people themselves, are elusive, how do we truly capture the meaning of a live performance? And especially with regards to Native traditions, I ask are these dances meant to be interpreted and written down? If so, how can performance be reduced to text? However, once interpreted or translated to text, what is lost in the interpretation is the complete engagement with all sensory perception: sight, sounds, smell, place, and movement; once documented and translated to text, the events, dances, places, and people become immutable, frozen in time, a tangible artifact of the passing Moment and not like dance that changes overtime or bodies that continually morph throughout. So does this lead us back to the archive and “the written” as the ultimate documentation of meaning and history of human interaction?

Performance theorists Peggy Phelan (1998) and Richard Schechner (2013) ask us to be cognizant of these contradictions, but ultimately maintain the necessity of capturing these performances in our writing. This dissertation then attempts to capture not only the “performative” in writing, but asks politicized questions about Native dance and how these performances and their layered and nuanced meanings contest the colonial order, racial formations, and historical memory. Performance is a “vital act of transfer” that embodies its own epistemological apparatus, creating knowledge in the process. Since

performance is a vital act of transfer, the audience and the ethnographer are also necessary not only to view the act, but also to engage with its social meaning. The ethnographer, as both viewer and interpreter, must be cautious so as to not generalize the experience. The experiences once observed cannot be universalized or essentialized. In addition this methodology raises the question, how is objectivity measured when viewing cultural productions or people's interaction? According to Sociologist John D. Brewer (1994) these critiques have been levied against the use of ethnography as a legitimate method since it cannot be checked against statistical information or quantitative data or scientific knowledge. In line with Brewer, other cultural theorists claim the researcher is not objective and a critical distance is necessary, the researchers' subject position is vital to the investigation and overall analysis; the social context is both temporal and historical, and is tied to larger systems of knowledge production. In this case the researcher must be "reflexive, by establishing his or her integrity and critically confronting the data [...] can be systematic and satisfy the demands of many critics" (Brewer 232).

Using an interdisciplinary lens, I bring together the strengths of Ethnic, Chicano, Dance, Cultural, and Performance Studies that are not always in conversation with one another, yet share similar political and academic concerns. Following the thinking of leading performance studies theorist Richard Schechner (1998:360) I imagine this project to transgress many boundaries,

Performance studies is 'inter'—in between. It is intergeneric, interdisciplinary, intercultural—and therefore inherently unstable. Performance studies resists or rejects definition. As a discipline, cannot be mapped effectively because it transgresses boundaries, it goes where it is not expected to be. It is inherently 'in between' and therefore cannot be

pinned down or located exactly. This indecision (if that's what it is) or multidirectionality drives some people crazy. For others, it's the pungent and defining flavor of the meat.

For this reason my own work draws on these interdisciplinary methodological and theoretical resources. Though not without flaws, this methodology is nonetheless helpful to locate and situate my project in regards to larger social issues of power and hierarchies. Drawing on a variety of disciplines allows for a trans-disciplinary approach that results in a more inclusive and nuanced production of knowledge: more than just dance ethnography this dissertation reveals the Mexican/Chicano experience in the Americas and other ethnic relations this dance engenders.

### **Intervention**

This dissertation provides considerable insights for the fields of Chicana/o and Dance Studies, in relation to other fields such as performance and cultural studies, by thinking critically about Native dance as a form of political protest. Within this context, Native dance is a critique of colonial domination and the ways that oppressed groups engage in community building and knowledge production through indigenous epistemologies and cultural dance. Under theorized, Danza Azteca has not been identified as a critical mode of decolonization or social protest within the field of Chicana/o Studies, where it has been neglected particularly in Chicano Movement literature. Few studies have attempted to capture the history or the significance of Danza Azteca in California (then nationally) at a time critical to Chicana/o political consciousness during the height of the Chicano Movement. Today Danza Azteca remains one of the more visible legacies of the Chicano Movement and has thousands of participants across the United States and 50,000 "Conchero" dancers in México (Vento

1994).<sup>10</sup> I argue that the Danza Azteca Movement became more visible during the Chicano Movement era and should be understood as a critical impetus for social organizing. Moreover, Danza has largely lived up to many of the goals that activists sought .i.e. indigenismo, self-determination, women's leadership, alternative pedagogies, transnational relations with Mexican "nationals," and the creation of oppositional knowledge. This analysis expands our notions of Chicana/o social resistance through brown bodies (Cruz 2001) and in response to various forms of state violence (legal, physical, mental, and spiritual domination). Critical observation of Danza Azteca reveals the necessity of understanding the ephemeral in relation to particular historical moments and power relations.

Native dance has much to teach about Mexican indigeneity in the United States. Through thinking critically about the "Danza Azteca Movement," which began in the early 1970s, I examine how this dance form opened up a space for a public practice of Mexican indigeneity and cultural revitalization. The dance form itself is a call for cultural, spiritual, and political autonomy that in turn allows for Native dance to become a means of knowledge production and identity formation amongst Chicanos and Mexicans who embrace their indigenous ancestry. My analysis of Danza Azteca demonstrates that political projects based on gender, racial, and cultural equality are often intertwined with popular spirituality. For that reason, the research is aimed at producing a historical, yet contemporary understanding of the indigenous epistemologies reproduced by Danzantes in opposition to the Eurocentric paradigms.

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<sup>10</sup> To date there is not an official count in the United States.

This research will enhance the literature on Chicana/o history, particularly Chicano Movement literature and Native Dance Studies, in order to provide new visions of the complicated cultural and spiritual practices of Mexicans, identity formation, political consciousness, cultural productions, and the transnational flows of Native tradition and dance. Danza Azteca scholars come from various fields (education, native, ethnic, Chicano, anthropology, and psychology) many are practitioner themselves and have largely utilized ethnography, interviews, and oral histories to document the significance and history of the dance. The burgeoning literature on Danza Azteca (Aguilar 2009; Luna 2011; Valadez 2012; Huerta 2009; Hernandez Guerrero 2010; Rostas 2009; Ceseña 2009; Maestas 1997, Vento 1994; Ramirez-Wheeler 2011; Barron 2010) has contributed to building the field of “Danza Studies” within the last ten years and have primarily identify Danza Azteca as a form of cultural and social resistance and negotiation of Chicano/Mexican/Native identity. My data collection and interpretations of Danza Azteca builds upon existing Chicano Movement literature (Munoz 1989; Rosales 1996; Mariscal 2005; Bebout 2011; I. Garcia 1997, Blackwell 2011, Broyles-Gonzalez 1994, A. Garcia 1997, Haney Lopez 2004; Chavez 2002) in order to identify ways that Chicanas/os organize around the cultural politics of Native dance. I bring into conversation historically separate disciplines, Dance and Chicano Studies; in order to analyze issues of race, power, and resistance thereby addressing the cultural politics of Danza Azteca. Critical analysis of the dance form offers new ways to analyze the political possibilities that Danza Azteca engenders such as: community empowerment, oppositional consciousness, and women’s leadership. Native Dance Studies makes a critical intervention into Chicano Movement literature because it provides new ways to

understand grassroots activism that engages oppositional consciousness and alternative pedagogies. This dissertation demonstrates that not always mere “victims” of circumstance, it has been through Native Dance Chicanas/os resist and subvert hegemonic processes of whiteness and disrupt dominant paradigms that are designed to maintain racial hierarchies and divisions. This research provides a more comprehensive understanding of Mexican indigeneity and social resistance; particularly the social context of Danza, and finally the overall political significance of the dance form.

More specifically for this dissertation, ethnographic work, including participant observations, formal interviews, and oral histories, are necessary to fill the void in archival material, especially in regards to the history, regional manifestations, and the development of Danza in the United States. This requires that I consult people and participants not only from the Movement era but new generations participating today. This dissertation does not just fill a gap in the literature but also suggests re-periodizing the Movement, since in my account, at least with regard to dance, the Movement did not end.

### **Organization of Dissertation**

Chapter 1, “Dancing to Remembering: Chicano and Native Relations in the Cultural Circuit,” makes a significant contribution to our understanding of race relations and interactions between Native Americans and Chicanos through cultural performances or spaces such as Danza Azteca, powwows, and other indigenous ceremonies including the annual Gallup New Mexico Inter-Tribal Indian Ceremonial and Pala Cupa Days. Such events enhance our understanding of issues related to authenticity, racial formation, identity, and cultural citizenship. I argue that Danza Azteca and other “Native hubs”

(Ramirez 2007) have been critical spaces that allow Chicano and Natives to forge meaningful relationships that decenter American racial categories and ideas of “indian-ness.”

Chapter 2, “Danza Azteca as an Alternative Community Pedagogy: Cultural Movements and Oppositional Consciousness,” analyzes the ways that Danzantes create spaces of cultural empowerment and social resistance, and argues that Danza Azteca offers an alternative community pedagogy for people of Mexican descent. I will look at the ceremony of Xilonen, a female ceremonial rite of passage for young Danzantes, workshops on the subject of the Sun Stone or the “Aztec calendar,” and Dia de los Muertos, an indigenous celebration that honors the dead (ancestors or loved one’s that have passed). As indicated by interviewees, Danza provides a supplementary form of learning that mainstream society and dominant education cannot and does not provide.<sup>11</sup> In this way, Danza Azteca is an alternative to discriminatory practices and other negative aspects of contemporary state sponsored anti-Mexican racism and their cultural erasure within dominant society.

Chapter 3, “Women Leaders of the Danza Azteca Movement,” draws upon extensive ethnographic research in multiple regions in the U.S. Southwest. Through

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<sup>11</sup> The purpose of the interviews is to provide critical narratives as to why young people participate in Danza. Interviews were conducted with dancers from California (Sacramento, San Francisco, Los Angeles, San Diego, Colorado (Denver area), and Arizona (Phoenix area). 22 interviews were conducted from 2010-2012, 12 women and 9 men between the ages of 18-35. I used snowball sampling. I do not claim that all dancers have these same sentiments. At least 3 participants mentioned migrating to the U.S. as young children. I did not specifically ask this question for confidentiality purposes. The majority of the participants were U.S. born. Interviews lasted from 1-2 hours and overtime I did follow interviews with some participants to make sure I understood their quotes, interviews, etc. I did not follow up with every one mainly with people who were quoted in the text. Initially I set out to conduct 25 interviews however, one male from Colorado, and one female and one male from Arizona had scheduling conflicts and the interviews never took place. In addition, I did engage in long and extensive conversations with other dancers regarding these topics during the last five years of this research. I made a conscious attempt to have a gender and geographic balance when discussing issues of Danza for this research.

interviews I highlight how women have maintained cultural, spiritual, and political activities at the forefront of their communities. The purpose of this chapter is to center the women leaders of Danza Azteca. Though not intended as comprehensive life stories, the women's narratives nonetheless provide micro-histories of their involvement during the "early years" (late 1970s-early 1980s) of Danza in the United States, based on their lived experience, knowledge, and activism surrounding Native dance, social consciousness, and spirituality.

Lastly, the epilogue, "Sacrifice My Heart: Danza Azteca Style in the Streets," consists of a photo archive of Danzantes throughout the country. Pictures that I have taken throughout the years while conducting research on Danza Azteca help me tell the embodied histories and body politics of Native dance in different ways. I am especially interested in images that juxtapose an ancient past with the modern moment, in a sense creating subject positions that lead to contradictory identities. For instance, Danzantes wearing name brand tennis shoes or talking on cell phones in full regalia can be seen as a contradiction. Rather than reproducing debates of authenticity and exclusion I understand this to be a form of modern indigeneity or what I call "modern day Mexicas" because these practices attest to the constant evolution and survival of Native cultures.

This research offers an analysis of the political, cultural, and spiritual significance of the dance form. In the chapters that follow, Danza Azteca is an all encompassing space of political possibility that connects seemingly disparate sites such as formal education to women's leadership to group interactions amongst Native Americans and Mexicans in the U.S. and México, as well as a practice that bridges Native spirituality and politics.



## **Chapter 1: Dancing to Remember: Chicano and Native Relations in the Cultural Circuit**

This chapter makes a significant contribution to our understanding of race relations and interactions between Native Americans and Chicanos in the contemporary moment in what I describe as the cultural circuit.<sup>12</sup> The concept of the “cultural circuit” opens up both literal and symbolic spaces for Native oppositional consciousness that rejects the idea of being swallowed up in the Eurocentric notion of the melting pot or rather, the assimilationist, U.S. racial project discussed by Omi & Winant (1994). It addresses the gap in academic research conducted on the interactions between Native Americans and Chicanos within cultural, political, and artistic spaces.<sup>13</sup> Historically, Mexicans and Natives have a shared history in the American Southwest and both groups have struggled to maintain their cultural and spiritual distinctiveness in response to European repression. Destruction befell many Native lifestyles due to European attempts to repress indigenous knowledge systems. According to Christina M. Hebebrand (2004:3), Chicanos and Native Americans have “struggle[d] to establish a sense of identity based on their ancient heritage.” During the Red Power era political activism fueled the resurgence of Native American ethnic pride and cultural awareness.<sup>14</sup> Sociologist Joane Nagel points out that during this period religious and spiritual dimensions of tribal life became a main concern for Native Americans, for example; “many reported becoming Sun Dancers for the first time as adults, many spent time with

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<sup>12</sup> The phrase “people of color” can be problematic for Native Americans but for the scope of this dissertation I do use the term minimally.

<sup>13</sup> All racial/ethnic terms defined in dissertation introduction.

<sup>14</sup> Red Power is a term coined by Vine Deloria Jr. (1969) and it is known as the Red Power Movement or the American Indian Movement that took place between 1969-1978.

tribal elders seeking instruction in tribal history and traditions, many learned more of their tribal language, many abandoned Christian religions and turned to Native spiritual traditions, and some have returned to their home reservations” (Nagel 1995: 961).

Similarly, Chicanos and Natives have remained committed to the preservation of their distinct indigenous cultures; both reclaim a homeland side by side; though the claiming of homeland can be very different in each context nonetheless it is a response to colonial displacement of Native peoples in the Americas.

The Chicano Movement of the late 1960s intersected with the American Indian Movement through social and political interaction during the Alcatraz Occupation, the Third World Liberation Front, and the formation of DQ University (Forbes 1972). Radical Chicanos and Natives actively embraced Native identity, culture, and race consciousnesses to reclaim their dignity as indigenous peoples in the Americas. Both the Chicano and Native American social movements sought to voice, claim, negotiate, and maintain cultural spaces marked as non-white through cultural revitalization efforts which were attempts by both groups to maintain their spiritual and ancestral ties in the Americas. Cultural revitalization has thus remained an ambition not only during the Movement era but also in the present moment. For instance, both groups continue to have goals of reviving cultural elements such as language, religion, medicine, and dance attempting to reverse the loss of indigenous knowledge systems (Martinez Cruz 2011). These historicized interactions and solidarity campaigns provided opportunities for interaction and cultural sharing. It is evident that the legacies of these movements led to cultural awareness and the widespread creation of alter-Native spaces (Gaspar de Alba 2003; Luna 2011; Lai and Smith 2011) and radical ideas that are enacted through Native

cultural dance practices that contend with forced assimilation and American racial hierarchies. Today Native dance events are more frequently performed in public spaces and can be enjoyed by spectators. It is also common that Chicanos and Natives continue to interact around cultural revitalization movements.

Over the last seven years of conducting research on Danza Azteca I witnessed Danzantes perform at diverse community events and host sacred ceremonies across the country. I was not however familiar with their interactions and engagements with other Native American groups. I learned that many Danza Azteca circles were invited to dance at Powwows and other Native American gatherings. Through these interactions Chicanos and Natives build relations on common ground and value the importance of preserving indigenous customs; which I describe as the cultural circuit. Through in-depth interviews, and countless hours in the “field” with Danzantes, I learned the reasons they committed enormous amounts of time and resources to attend ceremonial and cultural events. What was at stake for many participants in this study included things like: Mexican representation, building relations with Native Americans, and the necessity to create their own space(s) through the cultural circuit. The cultural circuit is an important a site of interaction between Chicanos and Natives and fosters the building of relations, community, and cultural sharing. It is critical to both groups in this study to maintain indigenous traditions of the Americas and this vested interest is predicated on the idea that preserving these traditions legitimates their ancestral heritage, knowledge systems, and directly ties them to the land in the western hemisphere. Participants in the cultural circuit blur international and cultural boundaries by deploying a hemispheric approach to indigeneity. Ultimately, this chapter discusses the impact of these relationships and the

cultural exchanges historically and in the present analyzing the reasons that Native culture remains an important source of empowerment and a site where Chicanos and Natives interface.

This contact and social interaction between Native peoples across national borders, tribal affiliations, language, age, and regional experience facilitates a “coming together” of various Native communities (Ramirez 2007). This interaction plays an instrumental role in maintaining Native rituals and at the same time deploys a hemispheric consciousness of indigeneity (Castellanos; Najera; and Aldama 2012). In this way, indigeneity is approached from a hemispheric perspective that decenters the nation-state; indigeneity is not fixed or static but a dynamic process and is not exclusive to North America, tribal affiliation, or nationality. Though transnational ideas of indigeneity are deployed other moments of cooperation unfold in the cultural circuit and people congregate locally and trans-regionally in the U.S. to engage in various indigenous celebrations and ceremonies. This Native oppositional consciousness challenges dominant ideologies and structures by critiquing them and asserting its own worldviews.

I choose to use the word circuit because it connotes to movement or “moving around,” much in the same way that Danza Azteca acts as a circulatory journey beginning and evolving at various places in the Americas (Aguilar 2009; Valadez 2011; and Luna 2011).<sup>15</sup> There exists a constant movement and exchange of culture and ideas that spans

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<sup>15</sup> The English Oxford Dictionary technically defines circuit as “The line, real or imaginary, described in going round any area; the distance round; the compass, circumference, containing line or limits and as “the action of going or moving round or about; a circular journey, a round.” Here I primarily use the word

across various indigenous nations or inter-tribal interactions. Equally significant, the practice of Danza Azteca connects diverse people through movement, for instance, during the organization of social movements, travel, and through the kinetic energy of bodies in motion. Within a colonial context, the idea of movement itself exposes the ways that brown bodies have been forced to migrate, relocate, and literally move across the continent in order to survive (Chang 2000).<sup>16</sup> The Danzantes allow for not only the physical movement of change but also the evolution and sociohistorical specificity of Natives throughout the Americas. As both metaphor and practice, the cultural circuit as movement speaks to the ways that Native culture(s) are neither static nor monolithic, but change and adapts across space and time. In contrast with dominant assumptions that Native culture is anachronistic (McClintock 1995) or “frozen in time” (Weber 1973; Loewen 2007) the dancers’ constant movement speaks to the fact that Native culture is not fixed or immutable but dynamic and kinetic. The cultural circuit thus challenges authenticity tropes that stereotype Natives as inauthentic if they engage “modern” society.

Native American dance practices and concepts like Turtle Island (Snyder 1974) and the Peace and Dignity Journeys deploy a Native oppositional consciousness that re-imagines political borders and understands indigeneity from a hemispheric perspective. Native peoples have articulated the concept of Turtle Island before colonial borders were in place; this concept exemplifies the ways that indigenous people re-conceptualize

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circuit as a metaphor to refer the evolution and movement across time and space of Native dance forms in the Americas.

<sup>16</sup> Here I am referring to the continued legacies of colonialism and therefore colonial rule. Put another way, the colonial context concerns itself with the continued legacies of oppression that stem from colonization.

space, land, and specifically colonial borders. Gary Snyder (1974) explains, “Turtle Island the old/new name for the continent, based on many creation myths of the people that have been living here for a millennia,” here Snyder refers to pre-colonial times and how indigenous people migrated throughout the continent without borders or passports and he goes on to describe the United States, “as an arbitrary and inaccurate impositions on what is really here.” Turtle Island or the Anishinaabe Prophecy is the name given to the North American continent by several Northeast Woodland Native American Tribes and other Native American rights activists. The concept predates the arrival of Europeans and helps shifts conceptions of the continent not as “discovered” or empty lands by European invaders but as a land inhabited and stewarded by a collection of rich, diverse, and organized people on the entire land mass of the Americas. Another contemporary example of indigenous minorities working across national borders is the Peace and Dignity Runners that support the notion of hemispheric indigeneity and encourage communication amongst diverse indigenous communities in the Americas.<sup>17</sup>

This chapter provides an ethnographic account of present day interactions among Danzantes and Native American dancers in the cultural circuit in various places throughout the Southwest (California, Colorado, Arizona, and New Mexico). Utilizing an ethnographic approach and drawing on photographs I took in the cultural circuit. I analyze the annual Pala Cupa Days Celebration (Cupa Days) on the Pala Indian Reservation in San Diego, California, and the 90<sup>th</sup> annual Inter-Tribal Indian Ceremonial

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<sup>17</sup> Much of this information is cited in the Peace and Dignities Journey’s literature (i.e. brochures, DVDs and websites). See <http://sandiego.indymedia.org/pdij/>.

(The Ceremonial) in Gallup, New Mexico.<sup>18</sup> I provide details about the Ceremonial as it offers a way to learn about Native American cultures, exciting dance competitions, and local art. I also discuss the way that the Pala Cupa Day Celebration acts as a form of counter-memory. Chicanos and Natives come together and bring to light their often forgotten historical struggles and through dance publicly display Native heritage serving to broadly educate Native and non-Native communities. Also significant, I address tensions that arise at Powwows and other contradictions within the cultural circuit.

### **The Cultural Circuit: The Politics of Native Cultural Practices**

The cultural circuit can be witnessed at Powwows, Danza and Native American ceremonies, and political actions. The cultural circuit can be identified by a number of things and primarily represents the goals of: 1) building community which allows for interactive and personal relations through sharing Native customs and dances 2) encouraging meaningful trans-regional travel 3) aiding in “remembering” Native histories and traditions from a politicized standpoint and therefore functions as a form of decolonization 4) creating spaces for Chicanos and Natives outside of dominant institutions to practice their cultural traditions and finally, 5) the cultural circuit is a site that allows for healing and political agency. The cultural circuit serves as a reimagining of political formations and collaborations between Chicanos and Natives. At the same time, however, I remain attentive to tensions and other potential internal conflicts.

Ultimately, I assert that the maintenance of Native cultural practices such as Native dance is a critique of Eurocentric historical formations that confronts historical

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<sup>18</sup> These events revealed themselves organically because my research informants discussed their participation in such events and thus invited me to attend. I attended the events from 2010-2014.

trauma (real life pain) and through the survival of such rituals posits a politics for the future of these communities. Dance forms are not usually thought of as political activity but through the cultural circuit a Native oppositional consciousness takes form. These cultural politics force us to contend with colonialist history of static notions of indigeneity and the erasure of indigenous experiences. In the cultural circuit indigenous peoples reclaim their humanity by centering their experiences and cultural forms. The cultural circuit represents a framework for and commitment to social justice and within this space Natives and Chicanos are active participants in their own subject formation and the creation of collective memory.

Renato Rosaldo (1998) describes a politicized view of culture for people of color, or cultural citizenship, as “the efforts of disenfranchised groups to assert their social and political agency as they interact with dominant notions of citizenship and belonging.” Drawing upon Rosaldo, I expand on the notion of belonging to include the private and public spheres created by Chicanos and Natives as they interact on their own terms and redefine Native culture not as static and merely intergenerational, but as a means of individual and community strength that acts as a catalyst for social change, inner strength, and resistance to white assimilation, mainstream culture, and dominant definitions of Nativeness. I consider cultural politics to be an important factor for Chicanos and Natives because historically, people of color have often been expected to adapt to the dominant culture’s institutions in order to access services, citizenship, dignity and/or literal recognition. In this context, Native oppositional consciousness combats ethnocentrism, cultural genocide and, appropriation, offering resistance to forced assimilation. Native dance enables Chicanos and Natives to lay claim to indigenous



cultural practices and epistemologies in response to dominant discourses of othering, stereotyping, and silencing. This oppositional consciousness does not assume an uncritical approach to “culture” as totalizing or essentialist, but rather helps people make sense of their lives, and offers a politicized understanding of their historically constructed position within American society.

Disenfranchised people, such as Chicanos and Natives, who are excluded from economic and political power, are able to access the cultural circuit on their own terms. As primary leaders and organizers within the cultural circuit, Chicanos and Natives speak for themselves and define their existence in opposition to white supremacy.<sup>19</sup> As Lisa Lowe and David Lloyd (Lowe and Lloyd 1997: 1) suggest, “[oppositional] ‘culture’ obtains a ‘political’ force when a cultural formation comes into contradiction with economic and political logics that try to refunction it for exploitation or domination.” In this context, Native dance constitutes an oppositional culture that confronts the racist logics of white supremacy and calls into questions its legitimacy and its legacies of disenfranchisement and poverty. Moreover, Gerald Vizenor’s (2008) work on survival and resistance moves beyond physical existence, since the preservation of indigenous communities is predicated on collective memories. Survivance (a hybrid word of survival and resistance) implies endurance beyond physical existence, an attitude of hope toward the future, defiance, and resistance.

At its most fundamental level enacting “your culture” and promoting community cohesion is a political act because it disrupts narratives that have been essential to the nation-state and Euro-American values such as the idealization of individuality verses

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<sup>19</sup> Personal observation and field notes on ceremonial and celebratory events are described below.

community well-being and the accumulation of capital and resources with little regard for communities of color, group cohesion, or spiritual wellness. On the other hand, the cultural circuit encourages community wellness disavowing individualism and maintaining that the future generations are central to the concept of community. Political and ideological participation in the cultural circuit levies a critique of dominant forces that have sought to erase and silence indigenous histories (Smith 1999) and diminish their strengths through divide and conquer tactics in order to marginalize Chicanos and Natives both psychologically and materially. The cultural circuit constitutes both a call for and the practice of self-determination and provides productive spaces where Chicanos and Natives can share their specific histories, learn across indigenous context, and transmit their ancestral knowledge.

### **Traveling in the Cultural Circuit: On Native/Chicano Time**

Travel is important because it is a way that people come together and make a conscious effort to engage Native cultural and spiritual practices together. This interaction allows diverse groups to get to know one another and support one another by attending ceremonial and cultural events, in effect these events create movement and aid in spiritual healing and cultural revitalization. They also promote positive interaction amongst Chicanos and Natives given historical tensions between both groups. We can consider this form of travel as “ritual migrations;” is what indigenous peoples have done for thousands of years (Mitchell 2005), and this movement and engagement are evident today.

The cultural circuit promotes travel that allows for people to become familiar with places they might not have journeyed to otherwise. Travel also diminishes regional,

tribal, and state lines. Laverne Roberts, a Paiute and founder of American Indian Alliance, in San Jose, CA, states that Indian people travel great distances to learn from one another: “Thus travel suggests that it can be a purposeful, exciting way to transmit culture, create community and maintain identity that ultimately can support positive changes for the Native American community across the country” (Ramirez 2007: 2). For instance, barrio or city residents from Logan Heights, Chula Vista, San Ysidro, the Mission district, or even the Westside of Denver travel to various reservations across the U.S. to partake in Powwow gatherings or other intertribal celebrations. Native Americans travel to places like Chicano Park or to assist and volunteer in Danza Azteca ceremonies. Chicano Park is located in Logan Heights in southeast San Diego and it has largely long symbolized the quest for cultural space and social justice. The park is well known for its’ murals and community events that include Chicano Park Day, Danza Azteca ceremonies, and weekly Danza practices held at the park by various groups. Chicano Park itself is a meeting ground for people coming together to celebrate Chicano and Mexican heritage while being a central location for Chicanas/os all over San Diego country and holding great symbolic and political importance. It is also a space that builds community in a local context. This interaction establishes relations amongst Chicanos from various regions in the United States, and encourages Mexican and Native interactions through cultural dance and Native ceremonies. Specifically these networks allow for the time and place for “coming together” despite regional or national origin, age differences, tribal affiliation, and blood quantum status.

The cultural circuit provides an alternative means for indigenous minorities to communicate and interact outside of dominant institutions, creating a space that allows

for a coming together that facilitates networks and relationships that break down barriers between Chicanos and Natives. These sites and particular events are significant because these cultural flows and interactions show us that they are embedded in cultural survival and cultural exchanges between Chicanos and Natives. These exchanges and collaborations across sites thereby connect subjugated bodies that cut across these “differences.” These common political struggles for an alter-Native space and the right to exist inherently garners mutual respect or a kind of acknowledgement of co-existence, which is gained through the sharing of culture and creating the space for this interaction; aiding in the process of healing and decolonization. The cultural circuit allows for this transitory community (though very important locally), the movement of bodies trans-regionally strengthens the power of all individuals and communities working together.

### **Powwows: “Coming Together”**

Powwows showcase the diversity of Native tribes and each style of dance has unique regalia (traditional attire) along with its own meaning and interpretation of dance movements. Powwows offer a variety of Native elements such as song, story, dance; which allows various communities to congregate in one place for celebration but especially for the preservation of cultural heritage. Powwows begin with the Grand Entry and at this time all participants enter the arena together. Historically a procession would take place in the town that was hosting the Powwow. During the entrance flags are brought into the arena and they include: the United States and POW flags, tribal flags, and eagle staffs, usually held by Native American veterans of the military. The United States flag holds a double meaning, “Native Americans hold the United States flag in an honored position despite the horrible treatment received from this country. The flag has a

dual meaning. First it is a way to remember all of the ancestors that fought against this country. It is also the symbol of the United States which Native Americans are now a part.”<sup>20</sup> By utilizing the United States’ flag and bringing it into the area this action simultaneously affirms U.S. patriotism and honoring the ancestors who fought against this country.

Generally, Powwows are thought of as a gathering for North American tribes; less well known however is the involvement of Danzantes from both the U.S. and México. Danzantes are often invited to participate in Native American Powwows, providing an opportunity to reaffirm interconnected bonds between Native Americans and cultures from different locales.<sup>21</sup> More specifically, over the last three decades Danza groups have been collaborating with Native Americans in a variety of social and ceremonial circles. Reyna Ramirez (2007: 9) explains how early Danza teachers from México like Andres Segura “encouraged Chicanos to feel a sense of connection to Native Americans from the United States.”<sup>22</sup> Similarly, long time practitioner of Danza and Native American scholar, Jennie Luna has documented that as early as 1973 Danzantes in Morongo Valley under the direction of Florencio Yescas performed at Powwows (Luna 2011: 172 ). Similarly, Native American elder Martha Thunder Hawk from northern California, comments on these relationships within the cultural circuit: “A lot of Mexicans here in the United States began looking toward their traditional ways [during the Chicano Movement era]. Because they were cut off from their medicine people in Mexico many of us elders took them in and we began to teach them too, like our

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<sup>20</sup> See Michael A. Elliott, “Indian Patriots on Last Stand Hill,” in *American Quarterly*, (2006) 58.4.

<sup>21</sup> Powwow can be spelled in a variety of ways (Powwow, Pow-Wow, and Pau Wau).

<sup>22</sup> Andres Segura was one of the first leaders of the Danza Azteca community in the U.S. since the 1970s.

children.”<sup>23</sup> According to Thunder Hawk survival also depends on the ability to adapt to new challenges and geographic locations in a changing world. The survival of these traditions and the continued existence of these relationships depend on connecting across indigenous communities and sharing with one another. To highlight this relationship Powwow MC’s often discuss Mexicans as related, introducing Danzantes as, “our indigenous brothers and sisters from the South [who] are here to share with us some of their traditional dances,”<sup>24</sup> again promoting more inclusive definitions of Nativeness across different indigenous contexts. Danzantes too echo a similar sentiment, “We get invited to share our culture with Native Americans, and it’s a way to show solidarity.”<sup>25</sup> This exemplifies how interaction through the cultural circuit provides an opportunity to build relations and create community.

Through cultural dance Chicanos and Natives from various regions learn from each other’s experiences supporting a hemispheric perspective regarding indigeneity that does not universalize a specific group. Nonetheless, throughout the last several decades these relations have persisted. For instance, the first annual Powwow in Chula Vista (2012) invited Danza Mexica from the greater San Diego area to showcase flute playing and dancing at the event (see Figure 2.1). Group leader Aida Flores, introduces the group and shares ancient meanings of dances with the audience, while the final dance is

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<sup>23</sup> Interview Sacramento, CA. October, 2010. Martha Thunder Hawk is a pseudonym to protect this person’s privacy.

<sup>24</sup> Mac Lopez, Master of Ceremonies, South Bayfront Powwow Chula Vista, CA 1<sup>st</sup> Annual Powwow. Field note, Chula Vista, CA August 11<sup>th</sup>, 2012. Also, information from interviews discussed their experiences about performing at Powwows. Powwows are organized by committees that prepare before the event; essentially responsible for the organization of the Powwow. At the Powwow, the Master of Ceremony with work closely with the Arena Director to keep the event organized and running smoothly; these two individuals along with the committee work hard to bring the people together to dance and create a fellowship in the circle.

<sup>25</sup> Interview, male 33, San Diego, CA. September 2011.

reserved for the friendship dance, at this time the Danza circle is open to the audience and at this event Powwow participants join the circle (see Figure 2.2).<sup>26</sup>

Powwows are similar in their purpose to the other events like the Inter-Tribal Indian Ceremonial and Danza events because each gathering is concerned with the preservation of histories, stories, and dances important to indigenous minorities. Each encounter/celebration encourages the collaborative effort that works toward the community's goals of maintaining and creating sustainable systems of Native spirituality, culture, language, and history.



Figure 1.1 Alejandro Marez (left) and Mac Lopez (right) Powwow Chula Vista, CA 2011 (Yañez)

<sup>26</sup> It should also be noted that the friendship dance is only performed for and with a non-Danzantes. This dance will be described below in more detail.



Figure 1.2 Powwow dancers join Danza circle for the Friendship Dance Chula Vista, CA 2011 (Yañez)

### **Inter-Tribal Indian Ceremonial: Pan-Indigenous Celebration**

Held over 5 days, during the month of August, at Red Rock State Park east of Gallup, New Mexico, the Inter-tribal Indian Ceremonial commits itself to the preservation of Native traditions and other events. The event attracts tourists from all over the world and dancers from across the country. During this time the whole town revolves around the Inter-Tribal Indian Ceremonial, shops are closed and streets are sectioned off for the parades. “‘Ceremonial,’ as it is known throughout the southwest, is a time when indigenous peoples from throughout the United States, Canada, and Mexico travel to Gallup to share the best of their creative and performing talents and diverse heritages with the rest of the world.”<sup>27</sup> Since 1922 the Ceremonial has featured a variety

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<sup>27</sup> <http://gallupceremonial.com/>



of dance styles such as the Pollen Trail Dance group (Navajo), Hopi Pueblo from Arizona, Zuni from New Mexico, Kiowa from Oklahoma, Danzantes from California, along with other events such a rodeo featuring bull riding, calf roping and barrel racing, a queen competition, art shows and exhibits. Evening and day parades are also held downtown that include Navajo Code Talkers of World War II, and an all-Indian contest Powwow.<sup>28</sup> As one of the largest Native gatherings in the nation, the event attracts over 30,000 people, and unlike Pala Cupa Days (described below), the Ceremonial is not centered on a specific historical event but nonetheless promotes the cultural survival of Native life by showcasing diverse indigenous dress, traditions, arts and crafts, indoor and outdoor marketplaces, and a showroom presenting the country's most complete and varied displays of genuine "Indian" fine arts, including Navajo rugs, katsinas, jewelry, pottery, and basketry.

Throughout the day other activities include storytelling. The storytellers (usually elders of a specific indigenous group) capture the crowd's attention as they listen intently and the storytellers use this opportunity to pass down history, myth and symbolism, and the life of the tribe. "Come evening, the arena will be lit with symbolic roundhouse fires and the dancing will begin: Miwok men from Northern California will do a welcome dance to bless the ground, while Miwok women will perform their Acorn Basket Dance to thank Mother Earth for the nuts that sustained their people when they were being starved out by white men during the 1849 Gold Rush. Many more tribes will perform many more dances."<sup>29</sup> Again, the cultural dances and rituals are not only predicated upon

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<sup>28</sup> For an excellent photo documentary on the event see "Visions of the Ceremonial" by Daryl Custer.

<sup>29</sup> Cowboys and Indians June issue 2012

maintaining Native customs but rather reveal the ways that indigenous people survived white terrorism. History, which is neither static nor neutral, becomes a political project within this “context of struggle” for Native dancers. Native dance is a living testimonial that transmits social knowledge about history and memory. These dances tell a story and this performative knowledge provides a comprehensive understanding of past moments that inform the present.

I was invited to attend the 90th annual ceremonial with Mexi’cayotl.<sup>30</sup> The group was commissioned to dance and were paid for their mileage and provided a place to sleep along with other performers. During the first day of traveling we caravanned to Arizona and stopped at the San Carlos Reservation to eat and sleep for the evening and in the mean time dancers share their experiences with me. A more veteran dancer of the group tells me that he has traveled to Gallup for over 20 years. “We’ve been coming here for a long time,” he says “back in the day they use to host a dance contest and every year we would win first place! We were the ones to beat! We don’t do that kind of thing in our tradition but it’s really cool to join them.”<sup>31</sup> I had the opportunity to hear other stories like this for the duration of my travels with the group. The next day we continued on our way to Gallup and there was a noticeable change in the elevation making it difficult to breathe and the dancers joked amongst themselves about not being able to dance at such high altitude. In total we caravanned 10 hours to reach Gallup from San Diego. Once in “Indian Country” we unloaded the cars and unpacked in the sleeping quarters and Danzantes readily greeted old friends. The next several days would prove to be

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<sup>30</sup> I went with the group in August from 90<sup>th</sup> anniversary the 9<sup>th</sup> 14 2011, 91<sup>st</sup> annual in August 8-12, 2012, and 93<sup>rd</sup> annual in August 7-11 2013. I was invited to attend multiple times but I could not attend all years.

<sup>31</sup> Male dancer interview Arizona August 8, 2011

physically daunting for the dancers; they had a full schedule that obligated them to dance in parades and quite a few arena performances at high altitude in hot and raining weather; along with practicing the dances they would showcase when they had free time. In addition, preparation before dance events proved to be eventful and time consuming because copillis (headdresses) needed to be prepared and depending on how elaborate a dancer wants to present themselves several hours could go into “getting ready for the presentation.” For instance, dancers carefully arrange their copillis with hundreds of feathers that need to be arranged in correct placement and others wore bold make-up or face paint reminiscence of “Indian war paint.” Yet others take enormous amounts of time to finish new regalia which include extensive sewing, cutting of fabrics and various materials, and even bead work. When dancers were not performing they attended other activities at the Ceremonial such as the rodeo or art exhibits. In their down time I was able to discuss with them their involvement and ideas about Mexican indigeneity and self-representation.

The dancers expressed the importance of being a cultural representative within events like the Ceremonial and this was a common theme amongst those interviewed.<sup>32</sup> People were eager to represent themselves and their cultural heritage because it is a way to share and teach, as they connect to a variety of people, and collectively learn about one another. A new member to the group reflects on her first experience at the Ceremonial. Citlalli Cisneros says:

I attend the ceremonial with my group. It is a big deal because it is considered one of the biggest gatherings for indigenous people and it's a big one because it's for the 90<sup>th</sup> anniversary. [What was it like being there

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<sup>32</sup> Interviews took place between 2009-2014 in New Mexico and California.

for you?]) I felt so elated to be there, overwhelmed with emotion. It was the first time I could go. In so many ways I understood that I was representing México and myself as an indigenous person, not to say that all Mexicans share the same experience but it really is like we are cultural ambassadors. We get to know each other a little bit more. There is a big respect for us there. We usually draw the larger crowds and it's very exciting to be there with the Apache, [other dancers], and the voladores from México.<sup>33</sup>

Though the Ceremonial remains an important event for the surrounding community it nonetheless is considered a “gathering for the peoples of the southwest,” in effect a gathering of diverse indigenous groups to showcase their traditional heritages and specifically for Danzantes self-representation is empowering and unifying strategy when working across regional and indigenous contexts. Many respondents for this project expressed being uprooted (and living away from their ancestral lands) now speaking from different places, and historical moments Danzantes acknowledged the overall importance of their presence at the Ceremonial.

For many dancers interviewed for this study participating at these events opened up space for Mexicans to be identified as indigenous and provides an informal setting to educate others about traditional Native dances from México, thus self-representation through the embodiment of Mexican indigeneity, for most dancers was an important part of cultural sharing and community building between Chicanos and Natives and other spectators. They also preserve their cultural heritage and become empowered because they reclaim an identity that has been repressed but also because they take physical control of their very bodies and how they choose to represent themselves and spend their

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<sup>33</sup> Interview adult female dancer in Gallup New Mexico, August 2011. This name is a pseudonym to protect this person's privacy. Voladores from México perform an ancient pre-Columbian ritual to honor Quetzalcoatl; this dance is also performed throughout Central America.

time. Through Native dance Mexican Danzantes have the ability to represent themselves rather than being represented. This type of self-representation challenges dominant ideologies that stereotype Mexicans as foreign or immigrant (as discussed in the previous section on racial triangulation) and through the medium of Native dance and Danza traditions decolonization takes place. Self-representation is used by Danzantes as a proposal for social change, as a decolonizing, empowering strategy that unravels the history of colonization. This decolonizing paradigm leads to a re-thinking of indigenous identities as specific and distinct from one another. Native dance is part of a decolonizing project because it ultimately seeks to prove that "self-representation" is a viable tool in the dismantling of hegemonic representational frameworks and divisions between indigenous minorities. Through the cultural circuit Native dance events promote cultural awareness and diversity amongst indigenous minorities in effect unifying these groups. Interethnic relations are encouraged through the sharing of culture, spending time with one another, and interacting attests to the ways that this space builds positive forms of cooperation.

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### **Contradictions and Challenges within the Cultural Circuit**

Though interactions at inter-tribal gatherings have been amicable and have served to build relations amongst Chicanos and Natives, not all interactions have been free of tension. For instance, Emilio Reyes describes his groups' experience at Powwows as fraught. The group had danced at Powwows for many years to show support and solidarity and he describes the relationship as being "good" and never having any problems. He did feel however that over the years Danzantes were not given "good times" to perform or were not taken as serious as "Northern" Native American dancers. One year conflict ensued due to nationalistic divisions. The dancer describes this tension and details the experience. He explains:

They [some Native Americans] don't want to acknowledge that México is part of this land. I have been in Powwows that we have to put down the Mexican flag. To them we are saying this is Mexican. They have the same colonized mentality like Europeans. I questioned them about it because it represents the oppression of Natives in México and claim we are not native. I say this is one continent like the Yaqui who exist on both sides of the border. But [we] couldn't have the Mexican flag [represented at the Powwow] yet they held the American flag up. I ask about the massacres of Thanksgiving and the land seizures. They can be uninformed about their own American history. Same thing with [some] Mexicans they are ignorant of their culture and history [...] we suffered double colonization.<sup>34</sup>

In this instance, the Mexican flag was not welcomed in the arena because it was seen as a colonizing symbol yet the American flag was acceptable. Yet for both Chicanos and Natives national flags have double meanings. For Chicanos the Mexican flag too holds a double meaning, not necessarily pledging allegiance to the Mexican government but to

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<sup>34</sup> Interviewee wished to remain anonymous. I did not create pseudonym or reveal location of interview. Interview took place in 2009.

the culture and land base considered Native before colonial forces conquered it.<sup>35</sup> Even when Chicanos and Natives come together nationalist tensions (U.S. verses México) do exist; the irony however is that many Chicanos were born in the United States yet do not feel the same affiliation as some Native Americans. In providing a reasonable argument for these tensions George Hartley in, *Comparative Indigeneities of the Americas: Toward a Hemispheric Approach* (2012: 58) challenges us to consider the reasons nationalistic tensions exist. He asserts:

This reality of the border itself as [who] has done the crossing ends up not simply dividing Mexicans into two different national groups on either side of the border but at the same time dividing Mexicans from Native people in the newly expanded United States. As a result, the Anglo invader-conqueror-occupier of Mexico benefits from this continental divide that now pits indigenous peoples—American Indian and Chicano—against one another to the degree that members of these two groups internalize and police each other in terms of the new international/economic/racial border.

According to Hartley, Chicano and Native divisions stem from colonial borders or the “continental divide” and the policing of what is considered authentically native is evident through nationalistic tensions.<sup>36</sup> Other reasons include the triangulated relationship between whites, Natives, and Mexicans.

Racial triangulation situates an uneven relationship between the groups under the power structure of white supremacy that continues to maintain racial hierarchies prevalent today. Political Science and Asian American Studies scholar, Claire Jean Kim (1999) introduced the idea of racial/ethnic triangulation and I too further the concept in

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<sup>35</sup> This was one theme generated from interviewees.

<sup>36</sup> Luna (2011: 320) discusses other types of conflicts with Danzantes in Native circles or Powwows: “There are some Xicanas/os and Danzantes that have presented themselves in a way which could be perceived as ego-centric or lacking respect. Stories of Danzantes at Powwows that went over their allotted time, or Danzantes that did not give the first prayer to the people from that land are not reflective of ALL Danzantes [...]”

this study. For instance, Kim examines how white racial power can thrive in a formally colorblind society, advancing the theory of racial/ethnic triangulation. Specifically, she looks at the role racial triangulation has played with respect to Asian Americans, in which whites provide relative valorization in conjunction with civic ostracism to give them power over both Blacks and Asians. The theory of racial/ethnic triangulation is a form of racial or ethnic stratification that occurs when *a least favored group* is juxtaposed to a most favored group, with a third group being “triangulated” between the two; creating inferior/superior racial status among the hierarchy. Stratification occurs when the most “favored” group seeks to maintain an economic advantage over the others (and I would further add a cultural, symbolic, or psychological advantage); the triangulated relationship is established and as a result enforced when public policies pit the third group (least favored group) against the other groups while retaining economic dominance (or another type of privilege) for the “favored” group. Kim contends that racial triangulation positions Asians as “superior” to Blacks; this arrangement benefits whites through the reinforcement of constructed conflict between both groups. Consequently, Asians are situated in an intermediate position within the racial hierarchy where whites are on top and therefore superior and Blacks on the bottom to designate their inferior racial status. Asians occupy this middle status that polices other People of Color. They are perceived to be “*better than Blacks*” yet they remain inassimilable when compared to whites (Kim 1999).<sup>37</sup> This racial hierarchy creates interminority conflict which serves to protect white interests (Kim 1999). This triangulation can work in

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<sup>37</sup> Kim also discusses how Asians are perceived to be “better” than both Latinos and Blacks.



various ways, placing different racial groups within the hierarchy yet despite the arrangement of the triangulated hierarchy it ultimately serves to enforce white dominance.

In addition to Kim's theory of racial/ethnic triangulation between white/Asian/Black, I address in a similar vein, how Mexicans and Natives have had to contend with white dominance utilizing the theory of racial triangulation. I provide a graph to demonstrate the triangulation of white/Native/Mexican to describe the ways that Natives and Mexicans are juxtaposed when colonial racial categories create an inferior racial status such as foreign or immigrant that is synonymous with Mexican. I am primarily concerned with the racial construction of Mexicans for the scope of this dissertation as it relates to Mexican indigeneity.

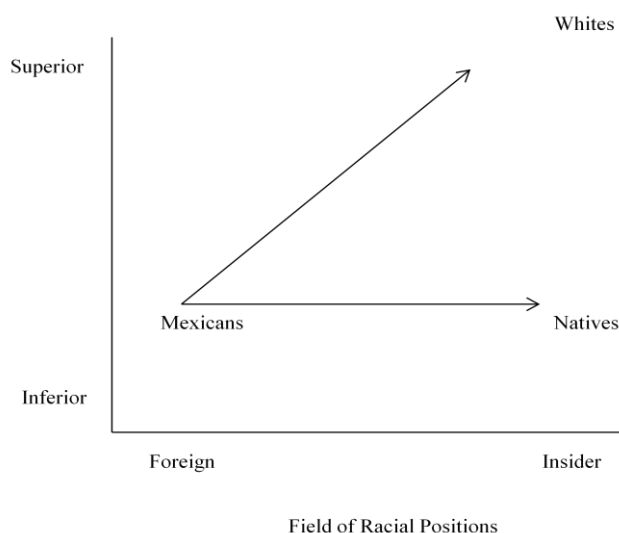


Figure 1.3 Racial Triangulation amongst white/Native Americans/Mexicans in the Present Moment

The field of racial politics for Natives and Mexicans as the graph demonstrates positions whites as superior and insiders yet neutral (not as outsiders or foreign) while Natives are racialized as insiders yet inferior. Along this axis Mexicans are considered

inferior and ultimately racialized as outsiders (foreign), directly constructing Natives and Mexicans as at odds with one another, native verses foreign. The triangulated relations between white/Native/ Mexican reveals the ways that Mexican and Natives have been racialized against the measures of whiteness and perceived inclusion into the nation-state.

This comparison reveals that through a white legal system both groups must abide by federally designated racial categories in order to be legible to the nation-state. This racial hierarchy acts “[a]s a normative blueprint for who should get what, this field of racial positions profoundly shapes opportunities, constraints, and possibilities with which subordinate groups must contend, ultimately serving to reinforce White dominance and privilege” (Kim: 107). Within the context of cultural politics, Native status that is federally acknowledged renders both symbolic and real benefits for federally recognized “tribes.”<sup>38</sup> As a consequence, colonial definitions of racial categories inform contemporary attitudes and political possibilities for Chicano and Native confining them within U.S. racial terms thereby creating antagonistic relations (Ramirez 2007; Weber 1973; Forbes 1973; DeLay 2008). In response, Chicano and Natives have struggled to imagine alternative relations and self-definitions of personhood. George Lipsitz (1998: 2) discusses the social construction of race and white dominance, he asserts:

Race is a cultural [and social] construct, but one with sinister structural causes and consequences. Conscious and deliberate actions have institutionalized group identity in the United States, not just through dissemination of cultural stories, but also through systematic efforts from colonial times to the present to create economic advantages through a possessive investment in whiteness for European Americans [...] racial categories that emerged in each of these eras all revolved around applying

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<sup>38</sup> For the scope of this dissertation I do not engage lengthy debates about federal recognition. Some scholars however do find federal recognition problematic because it imposes colonialist models of authenticity and often supports patriarchal tribal governments the mirror the U.S. nation-state.

racial labels to “nonwhite” groups in order to stigmatize and exploit them while at the same time preserving the value of whiteness [for Europeans that were afforded the social privileges of whiteness].

Ultimately, these antagonistic relations are informed by structural causes of racial divisions and competition (Lipsitz 1998; Ngai 2004; Kim 1999; Almaguer 1994; Haney-Lopez 1996). Racial triangulation reveals how social interaction is constructed and race relations and conflict amongst People of Color is often instigated through the “invisible” veil of a racial order predicated upon white dominance that has the power to define and implement social definitions through racialized categories that then police People of Color and instigate interracial conflict. Similarly, Professor of Law Ian Haney-Lopez (1996: 10) describes the material reality of race categories, “the operation of law does more than merely legalize race; it defines as well the spectrum of domination and subordination that constitutes race relations.” Legal identities designate which groups can access “authentic Nativeness” through blood quantum, citizenship, European borders, and imposed racialized American identities. Under these conditions, particularly through the construction of “Nativeness” some indigenous people in North America (primarily Plains Indian) were considered as “authentically Native.” While the construction of Nativeness became ingrained in dominant paradigms and the legal system so to was the construction of “foreignness.” Mexicans, for instance, were designated as a mongrel race (Rodriguez 2007; Gandert 2000) and therefore could never be seen as authentically Native and the dominant idea of whom or what signified Mexican became synonymous with categories such as immigrant or foreign within the territorial boundaries of the United States; this anti-Mexican attitude has been prominent since the 1800s, amplified

again in 1920s, and in the present.<sup>39</sup> The racial identity of Mexicans has always debated and national anxieties over race and Mexican bodies have perpetuated this ambivalent or schizophrenic attitude toward Mexican Americans, Mexican immigrants, and indigenous Mexicans living in the United States (Rodriguez 2007). This narrative constructs a binary understanding of nativeness as “real” or “authentic Indian” verses the “mongrel Mexican.”

Less considered tensions however are those that deal with self-hate and community policing. Through the course of this research and ethnographic observation I have identified several ways that Chicano and Native communities internalize notions of Native authenticity. Unfortunately in an effort to prove “Nativeness” some construct a “reverse” colorism that favors dark or darker skin rather than lighter skin tones.<sup>40</sup> Skin color becomes a measure of who is considered to have more “Native blood” and the darker one’s skin tone is the more Native they are perceived to be. But more than just skin tone other physical markers are considered Native and therefore authentic. For example, one woman explained the dilemma over her hair texture while participating in Danza. “I loved being a part of my culture, questioning and looking for my identity but then I was conflicted about certain things. I use to pull my hair back in a tight bun but that wasn’t me either.”<sup>41</sup> The woman had medium length wavy hair and felt pressure to abide by stereotypical images of Native Americans having straight hair and according to

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<sup>39</sup> For more on laws that target Mexicans see: Johnson Reed Act 1924, Mexican Repatriation 1930s, Operation Wetback 1954, Operation Gatekeeper 1994, CA Proposition 187 1994, AZ SB 1070 2010 and AZ HB 2281 2010

<sup>40</sup> For the scope of this dissertation I do not go into extensive debates about colorism. Though generally thought of as an issue in the black community it can be applied in other communities. For an excellent analysis of the politics of skin tone in Black and Mexican American communities see *Race, Gender, and the Politics of Skin Tone*, Margaret L. Hunter (2005)

<sup>41</sup> Interview, female 37, San Diego, CA. July 2010

her this ideal was a “false standard.” In addition, straight hair has long been considered a European beauty standard but it is also being played out in Native circles and having straight hair (preferably long and black) has a lot of symbolic value and in effect wavy or curly hair or non-black hair is less desirable.<sup>42</sup> In other instances some women dyed their hair black and/or blow dry their curly hair for a straight haired look. The same point about ascribing to a stereotypical Native phenotype is made by an older female dancer she says:

I think most of us are looking for our identity that is non-European. The truth is that most of us have not and will never identify with Europe or have the privilege their descents have. I know I am a brown woman, an indigenous woman, and I used to love to wear turquoise but for some it is a way to say, “Hey I am Native I am wearing turquoise or feathers” but I have come to the point in my life where I do not have to prove that I am a Native person. I am not trying to be Native American—I am. I am okay in my own skin regardless if I turn different shades of brown throughout the year or whether I straighten my hair or not. I get tired of all that bullshit, having to prove to others that I am Native.<sup>43</sup>

The quote exemplifies contradictions about Native authenticity policed inside or outside the community. For some they leave Danza altogether and for others they find comfort in their “own skin” and varied hair texture. Female dancers are not the only ones subjected to these standards men too attempt to fit into this mode of Nativeness. Men with long (curly, wavy, or straight) hair often keep their hair long and tied back into a braid. Facial or chest hair is considered problematic when attempts are made to define authentic Nativeness through physical markers. For example, a male Danzante shares his experience about exposing his chest when wearing regalia to dance garnered some

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<sup>42</sup> Though I cannot say that every dancer in both Native and Danza circles agree with this or ascribes to this standard, these are some observations that I have chosen to point out.

<sup>43</sup> Interview, female 40, Los Angeles, CA. February 2011

attention he was not expecting, “An elder from México commented on my chest hair. Saying he didn’t realize that Natives had chest hair.”<sup>44</sup> The dancer himself was not offended, in fact he laughed off the comment without giving it serious thought. The elder from México could have been joking yet in this instance the visible presence of hair was rendered non-Native. In some ways these comments serve to police boundaries and create an ideal Native dance subject through what is perceived to be an authentic “Native” phenotype.

### **The Politics of Remembering and Celebrating Survival: The Pala Cupa Days Celebration**

The Pala Band of Mission Indians is a federally recognized tribe with nearly 1,000 enrolled members. The Pala reservation is located in the middle of San Luis Rey River Valley in northern San Diego County. Each year they host the Pala Cupa Days Celebration and attending is much like going to a small fair. It is especially busy during the festivities yet there is a calm energy as attendees and families take pleasure in being there. Kids play in the grass, several dozen vendors sell t-shirts, art, and jewelry, and food stands are crowded with waiting people. Indian (frybread) tacos are especially popular along with burritos, hot dogs, coffee, and soda. This is a no alcohol event and centers around family and community. Surrounded by the warmth of a fire, traditional peon games played at dusk last through the night. Both men and women play this competitive gambling game of complex skill and strategy.<sup>45</sup>

Throughout the day however, the arbor is the main attraction where people dance, sing or speak about their unique traditional practices, family legacies, or Native life in

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<sup>44</sup> Interview, male 38, San Diego, CA. June 2012

<sup>45</sup> I attended the event from 2010-2013.

general. During the weekend long celebration diverse indigenous dances are scheduled “around-the-clock” and such performances include: Bear dancers, Fancy and Grass dancers, and Feather, Hoop and Eagle dancers, as well as Yaqui and Danzantes. “It’s a celebration of survival,” said Shasta Gaughen, acting director of the Pala Cultural Center. “We invite all kinds of tribes to celebrate their culture.”<sup>46</sup> In the spirit of cultural sharing, diverse Native groups are invited to come together to sing, dance, eat, and share with one another their Native dances and customs. The politics of remembering in the cultural circuit advocates for a public sharing of Native histories and therefore acts as a way of producing and passing down indigenous knowledge. In addition, these events reconnect the individual to the community and across indigenous contexts of varied experiences. The participants (Native dancers, speakers, and organizers) involved share a common connection and yet feel a sense of pride and honor to share their particular experiences and history as the diverse participants learn about other experiences through indigenous dance and storytelling.<sup>47</sup> On one hand, the celebration is just that—a celebration where people come together to enjoy themselves, and on the other hand, it is a commemoration of the survival of the Cupeño People in the wake of their 1903 removal. In a newspaper article in the San Diego Union Tribune, Vincent Rossi (2010) describes the forced removal of the tribe:

The Cupeños had formed a self-supporting community based on farming and the operation of a hot-springs resort when California Gov. John G. Downey purchased Warner Springs Ranch and, in 1892, filed a complaint to have the Indians evicted. The legal battle went to the U.S. Supreme Court, which ruled in Downey’s favor in 1901. Two years later, armed government agents evicted the Cupeños, forcing them to move to the Pala

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<sup>46</sup> For more on Pala see Gaughen (2011)

<sup>47</sup> Personal observation; information gathered from event speakers and interviews

Indian Reservation, 40 miles away. At Pala, the Cupeños became part of the Luiseño community.

In response to colonial displacement and disruption, the Pala Cupa Day Celebration, held since 1974, is intended as a commemoration of the tragic removal of the Cupeño people from their ancestral village of Cupa in May 1903. As you walk into the cultural center a banner has the statement (in English and their Native language), “We are the People from Kupa,” suggesting the declaration “we still exist” or “we remember who we are.” As a way to protect and preserve the communities’ history, the Cupeño created of a cultural center on the reservation. The act of remembering itself recalls past events, but the cultural circuit uses the power of memory to engage historical formations of indigenous trauma, exemplifying an important feature of the cultural circuit: remembering or collective memory about the Native experience(s).

Indigenous scholar Guillermo Delgado-P (2002) has recuperated the term “remembering” by placing its significance in a decolonial context. He suggests that the recuperation of repressed histories is a decolonial process, “indigenous peoples sharing their past and contemporary experiences is a process of bringing back together or remembering the social body that has been torn apart by colonization” (2002: 36). The act of remembering within the cultural circuit is not static or linear but rather a means to contest hegemonic narratives of colonization in relation to ethnocide, indigenous displacement, and silenced histories of survival. In this way, remembering a traumatic past against the totalizing discourse of national memory and western hegemony takes on political significance as a mode of Native oppositional consciousness.



The politics of remembering offer a counter discourse or a refusal to forget the historical struggles that have been masked, silenced, and ignored in hegemonic narratives (Smith 1999; Taylor 2003). Indigenous scholar Linda Tuhiwai Smith (1999: 30) in her book, *Decolonizing Methodologies* details the importance of indigenous resistance, writing that, “[...] indigenous groups have argued that history is important for understanding the present and that reclaiming is a critical and essential aspect of decolonization.” Native cultural productions (like dance and the celebration) then challenge historical consciousness of dominant society by publicly narrating silenced histories and reclaiming them through culture and the body. Once colonized people “remember” their historical subjectivity, the process of decolonization is initiated, cultivating a critical consciousness as a way to heal or negotiate the trauma. Ultimately, the Cupa Days Celebration acts as a form of counter-memory to the removal of the Cupeño people against its’ official silencing. Chicana Studies scholar, Yolanda Broyles-Gonzalez (1994: 15) asserts that cultural identity and cultural survival depend on memory. She makes the point that “memory should not be understood here as a cerebral, individualistic, psychological process, but in its collective and physical manifestation: as remembrance and transmission of the community’s knowledge through that community’s performance forms [such as Native dance].” Native oppositional consciousness through dance embodies collective identity and history which is constituted by collective forms of physical memory. In this way, Native voices and bodies emerge to remember the colonial past that is not so distant, and which is still present. Indigenous elder Andy Little Rock discusses the purpose of the Cupa Days Celebration, the importance of preserving culture, and remembering history from his perspective:

I have heard before that the past does not matter and people have told me to let it go. We have to understand our past to understand the current situation that we live in. There is no future without looking at the past. We don't have to linger in the past but it is useful to think about where we are going as a people. Our future generations depend on it—in order to guide them and teach them right. How can we truly know ourselves as indigenous peoples if we don't understand our struggles and the beauty that we have inherited from our ancestors? I am for that beauty, for sharing it, for passing it on, and for protecting it. But I cannot forget the past or why indigenous people across Turtle Island live in shambles. I make a small alliance to myself, to make peace, to be here, and do this—preserve our culture. We are not dead, we are not lost, and we are not gone. We are here living, dancing our dances, and singing our songs. For some of us this is all we have. This is what rightfully belongs to us. The white man has tried to take this away but he can't. As a young [person] I had a lot of anger but after coming back to my ways, I chose life. I feel like I deserve to be happy.<sup>48</sup>

The past matters because it explains the current conditions in which indigenous peoples find themselves, “across Turtle Island in shambles.” Though Cupa Days focuses on a particular historical moment, its larger significance makes connections to all aspects of Native existence in the present. Narrations of the past in the cultural circuit are also a “forward” looking politics about the future. The past, present, and future all merge within the public display of political memory and Native oppositional consciousness. The event specifically draws on past injustice and celebrates survival in the present in order to access dignity, happiness, and forgiveness as expressed by Andy Littlerock. People find healing or make “small alliances with themselves” to move forward and decisively choose the beauty of their indigenous cultures for future generations to enjoy.<sup>49</sup> The Pala Cupa Days Celebration through public declaration recognizes the specificity of Cupeño history yet the event is largely based upon the acceptance (through

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<sup>48</sup> Interview Pala Reservation May 2012. Andy Littlerock is pseudonym to protect this person's privacy.

<sup>49</sup> Personal observation; this is a common theme amongst interviewees.

formal invitation) of other indigenous peoples to share their distinctive cultural histories and dances of the Americas. For instance, Danzantes travel to the Pala reservation each year to gather and share with other traditional Native American dancers. Dancers from throughout the country are invited to perform at the celebration are honored because their presence is being requested and thus signifies a sign of respect. In most Native circles an invitation is needed to participate because it involves some level of trust. The relationship however is mutual, so while Danzantes are initially invited to share Mexican customs with the audience in turn the Danzantes themselves are provided an opportunity to learn about other Native American cultures and histories, such as the removal of the Cupeño people.

For the past 30 years Danza Azteca group Mexi'cayotl from Chula Vista, California has participated in the Cupa Days Celebration. The dancers always make a grand entrance: in full regalia they seemingly dash out of nowhere and in feathered-filled copillis (head piece), bright colored trajes (regalia) and Mesoamerican symbols, and with loud hand and ankle rattles. Dancers get into formation as the sargento (person who takes care of placement of the circle and is in charge of keeping order within it) places people accordingly. For the entrance they do the Camino de Paz the entrance dance performed before each ceremonial performance. The dancers are placed in a single file line making it an easy transition to form a circle once they reach the arbor. An older woman at the head of the line carries the sahumador (a small clay pot in which incense is burned)—white smoke quickly raises into the air and this means the sacred fire has been lit and that the prayer has started. The dancers are ready to “march” in unison into the arbor.



Figure 1.4 Four direction ritual, Pala Reservation 2012 (Yañez)

Once the group enters the arbor the opening blessing of the four directions is followed by a greeting from Dr. Mario Aguilar (captain of the dance circle) which he usually delivers in multiple languages such as Nahuatl, Spanish, or English (see Figure 2.3). It is not uncommon for group leaders to discuss Mexican indigeneity in the Americas or the southwest specifically. In between dances leaders often speak to crowds about the purpose of the dances, explaining how each step has ancient meaning that resurrects their ancestors' indigenous epistemologies.<sup>50</sup> For instance, a certain step in the dance called *venado* (the deer dance) symbolizes lightning. As the dancer turns quickly it is imperative to arch and point one of the feet upon the landing because this symbolizes lightning. In the dance called *Quetzalcoatl* it is important to preserve every step because it has ancient meaning, "this step here is a very old step, a pre-Columbian step, it's very hard [you place your foot to the side and cross over with you other foot] some dancers are

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<sup>50</sup> Field note 2012 Pala

too lazy to do this step” says one dance teacher.<sup>51</sup> Other dances are about harvest, mother earth, fire, rain, (Aguilar 2009) or specific stories significant to indigenous peoples in the Americas. Embodied knowledge is embedded in the movement itself, its’ preserved meaning is a way that dancers connect to their ancestors that had once danced these steps. Each time I viewed a performance it was as if I was learning something new. When Danza leaders addressed the community in attendance, I not only learned something about the visible performance of Native dance but it was also a way to produce and pass down indigenous knowledge in public spaces. Every movement of the dance has significance that will most likely be unknown to those less familiar with the deeper meaning of Native dance; even the number of dances performed has a meaning. The circle in which the dancers create is also considered sacred space for its members yet it is flexible and “open” to new comers or spectators when appropriate.

The last dance is open to the audience and is considered a friendship dance and at this time spectators can join the dance circle. Though I will describe the friendship dance that took place at the Pala Indian Reservation I have seen this done many times before at Danza performances and at Powwows.<sup>52</sup> Dr. Aguilar and other dance members invite the crowd to join them in the center of the arbor (Figure 2.5). Some people are shy and others are enthusiastic about learning the fundamental steps of Danza Azteca. Inviting people into the circle acts as a special way of expressing reverence and mutual respect for others because the Danza circle is considered sacred space (it can take years to

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<sup>51</sup> Field note 2009 southern, California. Quetzalcoatl is a feathered serpent deity of Mexica, Toltec, and others of the Mesoamerican society.

<sup>52</sup> Personal Observation of various cities the friendship has taken place amongst different Danza Azteca groups: Santa Barbara, Los Angeles, Sacramento, San Diego, Denver, Phoenix, Gallup.

understand the protocol of the group's organization) and immediately I can see the exchange of energy as new people enter the circle. Chicanos and Natives literally connect by joining hands; the circle expands to include the new and eager participants among the preexisting group of dancers. They tap their feet softly on the mound of earth and all march to the beat of the drum and move in unison. The more seasoned dancers lead the entire circle in a basic two-step foot movement. The entire circle begins to move to the left and Dr. Aguilar shouts above the crowd and asks, "Are you ready to learn how to count in Nahuatl? We are going to count to five, repeat after me."<sup>53</sup> The audience engages in call and response. People listen to the Nahuatl word and then shout back as everyone follows the rhythm of the drum and each other's footsteps. The entire circle looks to be having an enjoyable time, they laugh and shout together, counting in Nahuatl from one to five (cē, öme, eyi, nähui, mäcüilli). Eventually, the dance comes to an end and people go back to their seats, smiles are exchanged, and the energy feels good. People are taking photos, clapping or showing their enthusiasm by cheering and because there is a light hearted atmosphere, not the serious tone of a ceremony, some Native youth can be found texting or talking as they take pleasure in viewing the dancing as well. The dance performance provides an opportunity to teach people the indigenous origins of the dance and shed light on Mexican indigeneity in relation to other Natives. The people become connected by sharing Mesoamerican dance rituals and this is a symbolic invitation to "join us" to dance, share, and learn Native traditions; in essence the circle promotes harmony and balance. The friendship dance helps deepen the understanding of the purpose of Danza Azteca and demonstrates a respect for indigenous

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<sup>53</sup> Field note Pala Reservation May 2012

cultures in the Americas. In this moment there is a “coming together” or collaboration through cultural and historical sharing. The cultural circuit is a type of cultural sharing that facilitates the coming together of Natives and Mexicans to partake in Mesoamerican dance rituals and language.



Figure 1.5 Friendship Dance, Pala Reservation 2012 (Yañez)



Figure 1.6 Pala Reservation 2012; note dance leader with microphone (Yañez)

Through my observation it was apparent that group leaders often had both public space, time and/or a microphone to elaborate on the significance of dances and teach about Mexican indigeneity (see Figure 1.6). Less obvious however were the voices or reasons why younger or inexperienced dancers participated in events not necessarily particular to Danza Azteca but in different venues such as these celebrations and Powwows. While conducting interviews, I asked about experiences at the Pala reservation, and in particular their participation as Danzantes. A young adult discusses her involvement in the celebration and addressed things important to the cultural circuit such as travel, Mexican self-representation, and Chicano and Native relations. Novice dancer Metztli Martinez says:

I am somewhat new to Danza. My [dance] group has been coming to Pala for over 30 years and I am really happy that I get to come and experience this. Many different Native people travel to be here, I think from places like Arizona and Oklahoma too. I have a funny story to tell you [...] I was getting ready to dance and was waiting for my group to come out of the Cupa Center [where the dancers change]. I was in full regalia and I heard these guys say, “Looks like we found our way...we are in California... I see the Aztecs.” I kinda laughed to myself they [two Native men] waved and kept on walking. I realized that they weren’t from the area and looking at the program I hadn’t noticed people traveled from so far. I really like dancing here. People are so friendly and they are always waiting for us to dance and want to take pictures with us. I feel this unity here, amongst all of us. Even if we are from different Native origins, the truth is we have a lot of the same struggles. So we are connected like that. We teach others about our ways. My dance teacher introduces [the group] and talks about our history as indigenous people. I am from a pretty small town and I never really traveled as a kid. So it is always a great time traveling with the group. Another thing I thought was funny was at one of the food stands I saw this big sign that said *Indian Tacos for Sale*. I thought tacos were from México [chuckles].<sup>54</sup>

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<sup>54</sup> Interview Pala Reservation May 2013. Metztli Martinez is pseudonym to protect this person’s privacy.





Figure 1.7 “Indian Taco” sign at Powwow (Yañez)

The dancer discusses several important elements of the cultural circuit for instance how Native dance becomes a teaching tool and unites people. Events like Pala provide an opportunity for people to cooperate with each other and learn from one another across different indigenous contexts. It is not uncommon for people to travel from the neighboring area but longer distances as well that involve crossing state lines. However, the dancer points out some contradictions. For instance she was struck by the irony of the “Indian Taco,” saying, “I thought tacos were from México” and implying that if tacos are from México they cannot be from North America because particular foods such as tacos are perceived as “Mexican.” But this is a prime example of cultural mixing where the cultural influence of both groups is highlighted not just through Native dance but

through food (Aguilar 2009).<sup>55</sup> The dancer acknowledges some commonalities saying “we have similar struggles” as indigenous minorities but acknowledges differences “even if we are from different Native origins.” These events educate in the assertion and dissemination of local indigenous worldviews. The Pala Cupa Day Celebration permits a public and visible representation of Native culture especially through dance; indigenous people re-discover and simultaneously experience their histories, heritages, and sense of belonging both individually and collectively. Their narratives and cultural dances contribute to the formulation and enhancement of Native culture across different indigenous contexts.

### **Conclusion**

In response to the long history of Chicanos and Natives constructed as inferior, morally decrepit, and culturally backward (Ramirez 2007), I make a conscious effort to showcase the ways that these communities enact political agency and use their cultural capital (i.e. Native culture) as a means of empowerment. Since little academic work focuses on positive interethnic cooperation between and amongst communities of color, I choose to emphasize the ways that Chicanos and Natives come together to assert social and political agency, thereby demonstrating an alter-Native vision of race relations through cultural politics. According to cultural theorists Glenn Jordan and Chris Weedon (1995: 3), “History and culture are fundamental aspects of the fabric of everyday life. They help to give us our sense of identity, telling us who we are, where we are from and where we are going. In any society the denial or marginalization of histories and cultures

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<sup>55</sup> Frybread or Indian Taco is flat dough fried in oil and usually topped with various items found in tacos such as beans, lettuce, salsa, chili, tomatoes, meat, and cheese.

other than those of the dominant group has profound implication for subjectivity and identity.” Both groups have asserted claims of indigeneity in the western hemisphere through culture and Native dance, revitalization of indigenous customs and through visual representation of indigeneity.

The celebrations are often open to the public and “the gaze” (discussed in epilogue) is on the performers but another way to look at the significance of these cultural dances performed in public or to a wider audience of non-Native people is the display of political memory. The Pala Cupa Days Celebration and Inter-Tribal Indian Ceremonial are both examples of physical and collective memory that have messages to share. Chicanos and Natives come together and bring to light a counter-memory that recognizes their often forgotten historical struggles and through Native dance publicly display Native heritage serving to broadly educate Native and non-Native communities. The cultural circuit elucidates the way that indigenous minorities co-exist with one another. This coming together dispels myths and allow for Chicanos and Natives to find common ground. The cultural circuit is an opportunity through expressive culture to articulate indigenous identity and history and provides a relational approach to indigeneity in the Americas. The indigenous dancers’ bodies represent ancestral histories and practices as a way of knowing history that counters colonialist histories. The cultural celebrations do more than critique past injustice; they deploy agency and resistance in finding a means to heal fractured communities and to reclaim humanity and dignity. These events bring together and aid in the process of healing colonization’s wounds of self-hate, constructed divisions, and repressed histories. Declaring of “we still exist,”

“remember who we are,” and “these are our roots” are major reasons dancers participate in the cultural circuit.

This ethnographic study demonstrates that through Native ceremonies and cultural dance Chicanos and Natives have found common ground. It is through this common denominator of cultural survival that both have struggled to remain culturally distinct since European contact that sought to erase indigenous customs, values, languages, and religions (Hebebrand 2004). The everyday struggle for autonomy intertwines with the political struggle of cultural survival. Politicized culture that deploys a Native oppositional consciousness is a necessary tool in combating racial subordination and self-hate. Specifically, Native cultural dance practices embody indigenous knowledge and history. Danzantes utilize Native dance as a way to connect to ancestors and their practices and through the dancers’ bodies as sites of memory, protest, and recuperation of indigenous knowledge.<sup>56</sup>

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<sup>56</sup> Other interviewees discussed blood or genetic memory.

## **Chapter 2: Danza Azteca as an Alternative Community Pedagogy: Cultural Movements and Oppositional Consciousness**

This chapter details the ways that Danza Azteca is a cultural movement and elucidates how political agency is enacted through the performance of Mexican customs, worldviews, and indigenous ancestry. Danza Azteca is invested in the maintenance of Mexican indigenous culture as both a political critique of coerced assimilation and a way to assert cultural views or a lifestyle that decenters whiteness. Mexicans have been denied access to information and scholarship about their experiences thus aiding in the systematic attempt to erase Native people's history in the Americas. In this way, Danza Azteca is a decolonial practice or what Chicana scholar, Chela Sandoval calls "a mode of consciousness" that has the ability to disrupt the hegemonic order. Sandoval identifies oppositional consciousness as a "science of oppositional ideology" that operates within the dominant sphere, yet challenges power relations imposed on oppressed groups. Some of these challenges include the proliferation of oppositional consciousness and ideological critiques of "white history," as well as the creation of symbols and knowledge production through art, body politics, traditional regalia, and alternative learning spaces. Though Danzantes may constitute a "subgroup" within the larger Mexican community (in the U.S. and México), they have nonetheless been instrumental in producing cultural symbols, preserving native dance, and other traditions as an important part of Mexican identity. I therefore focus on the ways that Danzantes aide in the formation and dissemination of cultural and historical awareness of Mexican nativeness. Their participation in native dance in the present represents a form of resistance and visual protest through cultural aesthetics of indigeneity.

I analyze how Danzantes create spaces of cultural empowerment and social resistance, and argue that Danza Azteca offers an alternative community pedagogy for people of Mexican descent. Dancers embody history and dance events serve as site of knowledge production in terms of cultural expression, native epistemologies, and critiques of hegemony. As indicated by interviewees, Danza provides a supplementary form of learning that mainstream society and dominant education cannot and does not provide.<sup>57</sup> In this way, Danza Azteca is an alternative to discriminatory practices and other negative aspects of contemporary state sponsored anti-Mexican racism and their cultural erasure within dominant society. Specifically, this chapter will utilize interviews to better understand the reasons that Chicana/o youth participate in Danza.

Danza Azteca provides an alternative “school” of learning by creating oppositional educational spaces outside of dominant institutions such as workshops, educational instruction, and weekly dance practice. Danza Azteca usually takes place in barrios, schools, and at community centers making it accessible and free of cost to all community members thereby creating positive community spaces that do not require costly membership fees or contracts. Danza Azteca groups are essentially a community based effort and for the most part create “safe spaces.” According to social movement

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<sup>57</sup> The purpose of the interviews is to provide critical narratives as to why young people participate in Danza. Interviews were conducted with dancers from California (Sacramento, San Francisco, Los Angeles, San Diego, Colorado (Denver area), and Arizona (Phoenix area). 22 interviews were conducted from 2010-2012, 12 women and 9 men between the ages of 18-35. I used snowball sampling. I do not claim that all dancers have these same sentiments. At least 3 participants mentioned migrating to the U.S. as young children. I did not specifically ask this question for confidentiality purposes. The majority of the participants were U.S. born. Interviews lasted from 1-2 hours and overtime I did follow interviews with some participants to make sure I understood their quotes, interviews, etc. I did not follow up with every one mainly with people who were quoted in the text. Initially I set out to conduct 25 interviews however, one male from Colorado, and one female and one male from Arizona had scheduling conflicts and the interviews never took place. In addition, I did engage in long and extensive conversations with other dancers regarding these topics during the last five years of this research. I made a conscious attempt to have a gender and geographic balance when discussing issues of Danza for this research.

theorists Jane Mansbridge and Aldon Morris (2001) these spaces help to develop oppositional cultures and oppositional consciousness outside of dominant institutions, repressive ideas, and racist people. These spaces of consciousness help develop the larger community and individuals by reclaiming space and self. This creates a situation or experience of lived community—the essence of community pedagogy. Within dance circles people can socialize, build solidarities, and analyze their own oppression but most importantly people can freely articulate their grievances or address any issue in their life. Danza is a space that contains many layers of community activism and personal journeys of retrospection. On the mundane level, for example, at the end of each dance practice the groups organize themselves in a circle, the *sahumador* (clay pot with resin burning) is passed around and people are able to express themselves. Women, children, youth, and men are all equals at this time; every voice is important and there are no hierarchies. Someone may announce an upcoming birthday, another dancer may address the drug problems that are going on in their family or ask for prayers about a murder in the neighborhood, another person might announce an event to dance at or the group might discuss fundraising opportunities in order to travel or host a ceremony. This is a time that all dancers can express themselves, extend an invitation of celebration, address a community concern, ask for prayers or advice from the other group members. In this context, where community politics and personal life matters are equally important, the dancer is therefore seen an entire person.

In what follows I illustrate how Danza Azteca does a number of oppositional things. 1) It contests European history, combats anti-Mexican stereotypes and foregrounds an indigenous “Mexican” perspective in the Americas. By disseminating

cultural knowledge about Danza Azteca dancers undermine European paradigms and recenter indigenous cosmologies. 2) Danza reclaims the Mexican body by utilizing indigenous aesthetics and practices in public spaces to create awareness about Mexican nativeness and 3) the Danza community creates oppositional learning spaces outside of dominant institutions. Specifically, I will look at the ceremony of Xilonen, a female ceremonial rite of passage for young Danzantes, workshops on the subject of the Sun Stone or the “Aztec calendar,” and Dia de los Muertos, an indigenous celebration that honors the dead (ancestors or loved one’s that have passed).

### **Chicana/o Experiences within Dominant Education**

This section concerns itself with the ways that Mexican people actively and publicly resist their marginalization-through the performance of Danza Azteca. The public display of indigenous culture encompasses not only dance, but also indigenous epistemologies and nonwestern rituals.<sup>58</sup> The following interviews pay particular attention to Mexican youth and young adults and the reasons for their participation within Danza groups and highlight complex issues of Mexican indigeneity. I asked fundamental questions about why Chicana/o youth participated in Danza and their answers were complicated, layered, and addressed difficult social situations about Mexican racialization, Eurocentric education, western history, forced assimilation, cultural roots and indigenous ancestry, even expressing ideas of genetic or ancestral

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<sup>58</sup> At least in this sample of dancers; oppositional consciousness developed through cultural outlets that portrayed Mexicans in a positive light or that actively sought decolonization (Chicano Movement, M.E.Ch.A, and other positive or conscious spaces).



memory.<sup>59</sup> All participants described an intense calling, a sense of place and belonging within Danza. Other times Danzantes described more practical needs to acquire a support system or positive community structures that would sustain their sobriety.<sup>60</sup> The reasons that people join Danza are multifaceted and often these desires overlap. It can be for spiritual strength and healing, community building or group membership, to actively learn about and preserve indigenous Mexican traditions, personal and individual reasons, to become politically involved with overlapping social movements, to search for an ethnic identity and a more personal quest for an indigenous identity.<sup>61</sup> Though there are many reasons that people become involved within Danza groups, either for personal or political reasons, or both, it nonetheless is a process and practice of decolonization.

Mexican youth are marginalized through their encounter with dominant education and negatively affected by mainstream messages of Mexican inferiority. Interviewees detail how they suffered from the mental trauma of internalizing messages of inferiority.<sup>62</sup> However, those that were exposed to Mexican culture and its indigenous forms in positive terms, either by family members or teachers, or those that had a

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<sup>59</sup> Ancestral, Genetic, or Collective Memory refers to a form of knowledge embedded throughout the body. Danzantes believe that it is a bodily and spiritual awakening or consciousness that happens within the particular space of Danza. For instance, the drum beat and the smell of copal are often cited as experiences that awaken their senses and activate the memories of their ancestors. Other describe this feeling an immediate sense of peace and belonging within the Danza circle.

<sup>60</sup> This is not uncommon within indigenous communities and ceremonial spaces. For example, in Native American communities the “red road” is not just ceremonial or cultural but also acts as a supportive environment that promotes sobriety for those battling all sorts of addictions.

<sup>61</sup> According to Danza scholars other reasons include: sacred space (Aguilar 2009), ethnic identity (Valadez 2012) and quest for an indigenous identity (Rostas 2009).

<sup>62</sup> For more on this topic see: Laura M. Padilla, “But You’re Not a Dirty Mexican: Internalized Oppression, Latinos and Law” 7 *Texas Hispanic Journal of Law and Policy* 61-113, fall 2001. Stephen Quintana, “Mexican American Children’s Ethnic Pride and Internalized Racism”, JSRI Occasional Paper # 41, The Julian Samora Research Institute, Michigan State University, East Lansing, Michigan, 1999. Michelle Marie Espino, “Master Narratives and Counter Narratives: An analysis of Mexican American Life Stories of Oppression and Resistance Along the Journeys to the Doctorate, 16, 21, 29. For more on historic trauma and internalized oppression see Torres (2003).

connection to México through frequent travel, felt less vulnerable to Mexican stereotypes but nonetheless sought out relevant cultural spaces that expressed Mexican indigeneity as a form of a protest and pride.<sup>63</sup> Interviews detailed how the educational system did not encourage or validate their experiences and thus became one reason why Mexican youth sought to learn about their culture, history, and experiences elsewhere, particularly within Danza groups. It was noticeable throughout interviews that school curriculum was not grounded in the daily experiences of Mexican students but rather in the dominant culture's knowledge and values. Many discussed how their school experience lacked a connection to their daily lives or described racist treatment or low expectations from teachers or counselors. For these reasons Mexican youth sought outlets to engage their history, Mexican culture, and daily life experiences in Danza groups.

Though some participants did report being “good students” and found school enjoyable they nonetheless remained invisible within the wider educational system. Eurocentric perspectives dominated the curriculum and Mexican and Chicano history was excluded. They discussed how culturally biased school curricula favored European values, language, and history. Very few students encountered teachers of color and they were seldom encouraged to develop scholastically. For instance, one male Danzante from northern California describes how he was stereotyped as a gangster or “cholo”: “In my high school I was treated very poorly, in fact teachers expected me to flunk because all they saw was a big brown guy that dressed as a cholo. I guess, I was menacing to

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<sup>63</sup> Interviewees reported “less” trauma because positive messages about their culture, ethnic group, and Mexican indigeneity were accepted within their families. 5 out of 25 reported this in interviews. Typically conscious teachers of color helped Mexican youth find positive alternatives.

them. They did not expect much from me but I was determined to prove them wrong.”<sup>64</sup> Though one strategy is to succeed in school and prove teachers wrong, others internalized negative messages and had a more difficult time and described feelings of shame and in turn “hated all things” associated with being Mexican. For instance, one female Danzante explains how at a young age she internalized negative attitudes about Mexican culture and by extension herself, “We were taught that whites had everything and they were better than us. I was ashamed to be Mexican.”<sup>65</sup> Another woman expresses a similar sentiment, saying “As a kid I hated eating beans, I hated being poor [...]”<sup>66</sup> The women experienced internalized racism and viewed their cultural heritage as deficient.

This attack on impressionable psyches would be the impetus for some to desire acceptance within mainstream culture. Another male Danzante from Arizona recounts how he renounced his cultural heritage, speaking Spanish, and the way his Mexican parents understood the world in hopes that one-day the “white world” would accept him. He provides a sobering assessment of the devaluation of Mexicans in American society: “My predominant impression was that Mexicans had no legitimate place in the world, if we wanted to survive at all, we had to act white, and I wanted to fit in. I didn’t know how that would work because I knew deep down I was not one of them.”<sup>67</sup> Dominant society and the educational experiences described above not only served to render Mexican youths’ experiences invisible but also had damaging psychological effects that allowed for some to internalize negative messages about themselves and Mexican people

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<sup>64</sup> Interview, male 35, San Francisco, CA. September 2011 (undocumented at the time)

<sup>65</sup> Interview, female 25, Denver, CO. June 2012

<sup>66</sup> Interview female 27, San Jose, CA. January 2012

<sup>67</sup> Interview, male 25, Phoenix, AZ. May 2011

in general. In this study schooling and dominant messages about “Mexican-ness” had primarily taught Mexican youth that white values were superior, and unfortunately for many people of color that experience the American educational system encourages the internalization of negative messages about themselves and the glorification of whiteness (Yosso 2006; Moreno 1999; Valencia 1991; Gonzalez 1990; hooks 1994; Grande 2004).<sup>68</sup> Despite this experience overtime interviewees abandoned the idea of “acting white” or trying desperately to fit in with mainstream culture. Once Mexican youth gained a critical awareness of racial hierarchies they accepted themselves and were able to embrace their cultural heritage. This process however usually took place outside of dominant institutions (i.e. schools) and in oppositional spaces that embraced positive influences and associations with Mexican culture.

One person’s interview summed up numerous issues that were also described by others through the course of this research. This Danzante elaborated upon the transition from internalized oppression to the embrace of her culture.

[It was through] M.E.Ch.A. that I became socially aware.<sup>69</sup> I learned I had a history, a face that tied me to this place. It was like archeology, I was digging to find myself. I was in high school at the time and my school did not offer any type of Chicano Studies courses. It was through the philosophies that I learned to take pride in myself as a Mexican person because up until that point I had internalized very negative feelings about Mexicans. [Can you expand on this topic?]

What I really mean is being brown in white America, insidiously teaches you how to hate yourself, who you are, where you come from. I no longer

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<sup>68</sup> Other historical examples include: Americanization programs for Mexican students and Indian Boarding Schools

<sup>69</sup> Other ways people learned about their culture was through their parents and family, books and/or magazines geared toward Mexican culture, and images or pictures. Also, community events that focused on Mexican history or events like Cinco de Mayo or Mexican Independence Day and organizations like M.E.Ch.A. impacted the way Mexican youth learned about their historical experience and many Chicano Studies classes played a positive role in affirming the Mexican experience in both the U.S. and México.

blame myself or my culture for its perceived “marginal status.” I moved away from my individual life and that of my family and made those connections to social institutions and how these institutions covertly promoted and maintained racism. I began to understand the colonial legacies of oppression to really get at why the current situation of the community was the way it was. You know dealing with all these things like teen pregnancy, drugs, poverty, incarceration, under-educated [under-education of Mexican students]; cycle of oppression continues throughout the years, the generations. I connect my experience to others and see how we all suffer under a system of white supremacy.

I loved school because I loved learning about all kinds of things. I even graduated at the top of my class but I was not reflected there. We were there but at the same time we were invisible. At times I bought into believing that whites were better. I guess you could say I was ashamed that our community had very little compared to them. It’s different now, I learned to love many things and where I come from, to have that pride. This eventually led to my interest in Danza. I was at a M.E.C.H.A. conference and it was the first time I had seen la Danza. I was really watching and observing and I knew one day that I would do that. I was really taken back by the drum, the smoke, the movement. I remember really focusing and taking it all in, it was like I was meditating and watching.

What would you say to those that criticize this kind of “race pride” that you talk about?]

Empowering myself doesn’t mean that I disempower others because that way of thinking is implicated in the values of white supremacy and how white power operates. I think it is more based on fear to criticize me or my community because there is potential for people to step up and change their current circumstances. Brown pride is not the same as white power because white power has always served in the interest of white elites and to keep brown people in inferior places in American society. Brown pride is about an individual not buying into these white ideals and white lies, really we hope to empower ourselves, those around us and that the community will empower itself. Why are people intimidated by this? [Me: I am not sure.] I think because it means brown people are not acting like slaves but taking control of their lives, having a vision for themselves, and believing they are worthy of good things, as all people are. I found Danza when I needed that healing; it was a place of awareness and healing. Because we are proud and conscious does not mean we are some type of radical fringe group.<sup>70</sup>

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<sup>70</sup> Interview, female 33 , Los Angeles, CA. February 2012

This interview is compelling because she had become involved in student organizing in high school and it sparked a social awareness that she had not been able to articulate up until that point of her life. It was through M.E.Ch.A. that she was able to form complex critiques of social hierarchies that led to her eventual participation within Danza, where she was able to embrace her culture and history. Eventually she became overtly involved in community politics and worked in the Mexican community to advocate for social justice and immigrant rights.<sup>71</sup>

Similarly, a female dancer from Southern California discusses the importance of oppositional spaces of learning such as Chicano Studies classes at the university and the impact they had on her.

If it was not for Chicano Studies classes I might not have felt supported as a college student. A lot of us helped each other out even if it meant sharing your home with other students that struggled [financially] with education. It seems to me that these classes provide something different...it was this type of knowledge that attracted me to Danza. Many of us are teachers or educators. There is definitely a connection between these types of classes and my own self-esteem and why I was determined to be involved with Danza. These courses provided that political drive that kept me motivated to stay in school, many of us that were engaged in these politics tended to do better in school and graduate, well that is what I observed.<sup>72</sup>

As the quote above describes it is apparent that Chicana/o student organizations and Chicana/o Studies classes aided in attracting Mexican youth to Danza. Other ways included the influence of family members or teachers. Mexican youth also became aware of Danza groups by their visibility at community events or through performances at their

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<sup>71</sup> Eventually this participant attended law school and studied immigrants' rights law.

<sup>72</sup> Interview, female 35, Los Angeles, CA. February 2012 (eventually became a Chicana/o Studies professor)

schools. For example, one Danzante recalls the reason she became interested in Danza Azteca and hoped that this cultural practice could provide her answers about her cultural heritage. She felt that her education was lacking: “I began to look for things outside the classroom that could speak to my history [and] my heritage. I was given an opportunity to organize an event at my school and thought it would be a good idea to get some Danzantes to perform, in retrospect seeking them out was the beginning of my consciousness.”<sup>73</sup> Shortly thereafter she became involved with a local group and began attending ceremonies, dance practices, and workshops about the history of Danza Azteca. Again, she points out two of the major themes that others addressed such as lack of information regarding Mexican history or culture and looking outside of the school system for such information and in other moments carving out a space within schools for oppositional practices.

Many interviewees felt isolated in the dominant school setting, and as teenagers and young adults looked for cultural spaces like Danza Azteca groups that allowed them to participate in their cultural heritage in places other than the home, to learn about the “Mexican experience” in the Americas, and to assert their indigenous identities as Mexican people in the United States, but most importantly to participate in a culturally relevant space that supported decolonial politics.<sup>74</sup> In this way, Danza Azteca is part of a larger decolonizing movement that mainly utilizes indigenous Mexican culture as a form of empowerment, resistance, and self-definition as a response to forced assimilation,

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<sup>73</sup> Interview, female 21, Sacramento, CA. August 2012

<sup>74</sup> The majority interviewed attended high school in the 1990s. This isolation can be attributed to what Tara Yosso (2006) calls the Chicana/o educational pipeline which facilitates disproportionately high dropout (pushout) rates.

conquest, and colonial race categories. Through interviews and observation it was clear that education, along with other dominant institutions, were seen as spaces that marginalized Mexicans' experiences and histories.

Interviewees discussed the psychic damage they endured through their Eurocentric educational experience and society in general and despite this experience, I highlight the ways that Chicana/o youth empower themselves through their participation in Danza Azteca. Throughout the remainder of the chapter, I demonstrate the importance of oppositional consciousness both as an ideology and a practice within the context of Danza. Through interviews dancers conceptualized history as a narration of domination and invisibility for Mexicans and sought to contest mainstream ideas of history that centered Eurocentric ideals and points of view. Overwhelmingly, people said "I wanted to learn about my history because you would never find us in their textbooks." In a similar vein, Linda T. Smith (1999: 29) identifies the recovery of history as a political project of resistance, writing that, "Indigenous peoples have also mounted a critique of the way history is told from the perspective of the colonizers. At the same time, however, indigenous groups have argued that history is important for understanding the present and that reclaiming history is a critical and essential aspect of decolonization." For Danzantes questioning their experiences within dominant education and particularly "history" was one step that led them toward cultivating a critical consciousness and social awareness (conscious family members or teachers were also influential). This in turn led to their involvement with M.E.Ch.A. and other student organizations, Chicana/o Studies classes, and their participation within Danza Azteca. Deconstructing colonial discourses of Mexican inferiority and societal oppression were critical moments for the dancers, in



fact life changing, because interviewees had profoundly transitioned from self-deprecating ideas of themselves and by extension their larger communities, to one that embraced self and community. As Smith (1999: 23) argues, “The reach of imperialism into ‘our heads’ challenges those who belong to colonized communities to understand how this occurred, partly because we perceive a need to decolonize our minds, to recover ourselves, to claim space in which to develop a sense of authentic humanity.” For Danzantes the first step toward decolonization is to question the legitimacy of colonization and its’ colonial systems that have direct consequences in the daily struggles of poverty, legal and physical violence, incarceration, alcoholism, internalized racism, institutional discrimination, etc. Alternatively, Danza groups provided a space for youth and young adults that sought to decolonize the reach of imperialism in their heads and recover themselves, their bodies, and their histories.

### **Little White Colonial Lies and the Politics of His-story**

When asked about the reasons they participate in Danza Azteca *all* respondents spoke about the necessity of knowing “their history” and by recovering information that had been suppressed or marginalized they challenge a culture of whiteness and discuss Europe as less unique and less central to their lived experiences. Many understood dominant history as inaccurate and saw a need to contest and rearticulate history. One strategy for challenging Eurocentrism was by debunking Europe’s position of centrality within schools and the conventional narrative of its superiority in the Americas and the rest of the world. These narratives repeatedly debunk dominant paradigms, and by rethinking history they construct and define themselves by describing alternative experiences to colonization and to the Americas. As the data will reveal Danzantes

uncover diverging notions of time, space, and place and particularly discuss their thoughts on Mexican indigeneity.

In addition to decolonizing history and their minds, Danzantes embody memory. The notion of embodied memory presumes that the individual is the summation of history and that dancers simultaneously experience the past and the present. Danza scholar Veronica Valadez (2012: 160) argues that “Danzantes embody visual representation of Nahua metaphorical symbols as they transform themselves into contemporary ‘dancing codices’ or ‘dancing amoxtli,’ “infused with the spirit of their ancestors and a resistance against the marginalization of their indigenous culture.”<sup>75</sup> In this way, the body itself is a site of memory, agency, and change lending itself to a living history and evolving tradition of Danza Azteca. It is through the embodiment of native dance that history, memory, and politics unfold in public spaces. For instance, one male dancer describes Danza as a cultural expression laden with political elements that allow for a visual display of public protest:

For some it is a political device to gain recognition as indigenous peoples. It is a visual way to say, hey we are here and we deserve certain kinds of rights or recognition from our peers or the government. At the same time to a lot of people it is just a way of life. It's not a vehicle they use to gain something or it is something they keep to themselves. It depends on who you are talking to and if you are dealing with a younger group as well they might be more politically minded because that is the nature of people. Younger people are trying to push for more things.

When you are doing the Danza you are in a specific place and usually if you are politically minded you are going to go somewhere where there are a lot of people [who support that]. People will see you, you may be dancing and people will be attracted to the dance and they will come, not necessarily realizing that there is a political message behind it. So they

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<sup>75</sup> Valadez (2012) also makes that point that the Nahua referred to their books as amoxtli. The generic term “codex” is a roman word used to describe Mesoamerican manuscripts.

will come and see what is going on in my mind people hear the sounds and come, you now have the audience for what you want to accomplish or say what you want to say.<sup>76</sup>

This public display of Native culture through dance allows for a “teaching Momé nt” and a venue to share with those in the audience about Mexican indigeneity. It is both an attempt at visual representation and a declaration, “this is who we are, we still exist,” thereby creating awareness through their visibility at community events and other public spaces. This quote describes two major themes identified throughout interviews 1) the notion of teaching/sharing indigenous culture in public spaces with the goal of creating awareness and 2) self-representation of Mexican indigeneity. For instance, another Colorado dancer explains why it is important to “dance at schools” and create awareness around Mexican indigeneity.

Danza fights for social justice, though historically for the ancient Mexica it was something different because of the context, but it became a way for our people to fight for the acknowledgement that our people are still here because when you are in school you are taught the European colonizers came and they conquered our people. But they didn’t conquer, we are still here. When we dance at schools it helps us to be able to give knowledge that our people are still here, still alive, and what we had to go through to be able to teach our kids these ways and to pass them on.<sup>77</sup>

Yet for others, honoring ancestral roots is the foundation of the dance form. As one dancer explained:

[The] foundational meaning for everyone in that you are participating in some-thing sacred. You are participating in something that is honoring yourself, your ancestry, your familial roots, your ancestral roots. You are honoring all that. Whether you honor your great-great-grandfathers or the original peoples, whether they are the Mexica or the individuals that were here in Aztlan, you are honoring the most indigenous aspect of who you are and the most original form of who you are. Generation after

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<sup>76</sup> Interview, male 26, San Diego, CA. September 2010

<sup>77</sup> Interview, female 33, Denver, CO. June 2010

generation we keep adding on changes and new experiences that we tackle becomes a part of our DNA structure. By participating in Danza we are honoring the most basic, the first people that existed in our culture. I feel that we are honoring them because we carry that ancestral blood.<sup>78</sup>

The above quote discusses intergenerational connections regardless of evolution or changes that have occurred over time. Similarly, Shalan Joudry (Mi'Kmaq), an aboriginal dancer from Nova Scotia, also addresses intergenerational connections, explaining, "My understanding is that as we go from one generation to the next, a part of our spirit and body is passed on to our children, and they pass on a bit of their collected spirit, and so on. Therefore, within me is a piece of all my ancestors, and I have that memory within me somewhere. The challenge is to get in tune to that, to hear and feel it, respond to that kind of memory" (Murphy 2000: 143-144). In this way, honoring ancestors disrupts western notions of time and lineage for Danzantes and other aboriginal dancers because they recognize that their existence did not begin or end with the invasion of European contact but rather what existed before colonization remains critical to their worldviews and cultural practices.<sup>79</sup> According to Valadez (2012: 135) Danzantes refer to this phenomenon, "[A]s an awakening of our genetic memory. Danzantes believe that genetic memory (or ancestral memory) is another form of knowledge that is embedded throughout the body and not just the intellect."<sup>80</sup> Besides the enactment of physical movement Native dance has multiple dimensions, which are intricately linked to

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<sup>78</sup> Interview, female 27, Boulder, CO. June 2010

<sup>79</sup> Many interviews echo this sentiment for example; one female dancer describes the history colonization and her Mexican indigeneity. She says: "We hold our autonomy as indigenous peoples because we are here trying to survive what was done [violence process of colonization] to us as a whole. It's not like we went to another continent and put ourselves in that predicament. We are trying to survive with what was done and trying to make it work because of that we have the right to say we are native to this land." Interview, female 27, San Diego, CA. January 2011

<sup>80</sup> Also see, Luna (2011) on collective/genetic memory, Murphy (2007) on blood memory, and Moraga (1981), *Theory in the flesh*

embodied historical memory as a source of knowledge. Aboriginal dancers from Canada also reflect on the ancestral memories held in their bodies and through dance they call upon these memories to awaken their senses. Sid Bobb a Sto:lo man from Vancouver explains, “I envision myself as my ancestors [...] we’re not different. People ask today, well, you live in a city or you do this or you do that. I am not different than I was a thousand years ago, because I am the same person, reacting to things around me, making choices within things around me. So there’s no difference with the man [or woman] two thousand years ago.”<sup>81</sup> Similarly, Danzantes propose indigenous dance and brown bodies as sources of historical reenactment and a means of decolonization. It is a dance form that transcends physical movement and Eurocentric concepts of time, by suggesting that this point in time (their current lived reality) is the same as thousands of years ago. For indigenous dancers the past and its historical configurations are cyclical and continue to matter in the present.<sup>82</sup>

### **Oppositional History: Major Critiques of Dominant History/Paradigms as Described by Danzantes<sup>83</sup>**

Danzantes question the legitimacy of colonization and colonial narratives that distort or erase their long-standing experiences in the Americas. Danzantes develop sophisticated historical accounts that decentered dominant history and thus rearticulate their socio-historical status as a colonized, yet a thriving group, in the U.S. and the Americas. They understand the process of history not necessarily as linear and static but

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<sup>81</sup> Dancers from Chinook Winds Aboriginal Dance Project affirm that participating within aboriginal dance practices is a process of decolonization.

<sup>82</sup> Other ways that Danzantes understand cyclical time other than genetic memory is through *Día de los Muertos*; described later in the chapter.

<sup>83</sup> Due to the nature of qualitative work it is impossible to quote every person or highlight each aspect discussed regarding their ideas and experiences within *Danza*. I was however able to identify the major themes and condense them in this section using a sociological technique known as coding.

as a dynamic process that needs to be re-defined and re-articulated to incorporate the politics, experiences, and the vitality of the “Mexican experience.”<sup>84</sup> These narratives destabilize the histories of hegemony and oppression by articulating an oppositional history, culture, and body politics. They did this in a number of ways through body politics, learning their specific histories, and teaching others about oppositional historical narratives that debunk stereotypes about Mexicans. Danzantes not only focus on the physical aspects of decolonization but the psychological, mental, and spiritual aspects as well. This critical insight generates from a root understanding that history is as much a socio-political and cultural construct as it is about the cultural politics of lived experience. Danzantes do not just rearticulate history; they provide new ways to theorize, think of, and include multiple experiences in the U.S. and the Americas by describing a hemispheric approach to indigeneity. The three main patterns of thought expressed interconnected ideas of decolonial politics that include the reclaiming of self, body, land, indigenous culture and heritage and layered meanings of history and memory.

1. History is the narration of domination and implicated in power relations that destroys and distorts Mexican history, Mexican indigeneity, and Mexican experiences. Thus the re-articulation of history through dance becomes a decolonial project that helps that recovers alternative histories and reclaims knowledge systems particularly Mesoamerican knowledge. Danzantes actively contest these dominant narratives and bring awareness about their racialization and heritage. Danza can be considered a visual protest and a form of self-representation in public spaces and becomes a way to garner informal

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<sup>84</sup> Within the last ten Danza scholars in the U.S. have done this in a traditional academic setting and have started documenting the history of Danza Azteca.

“recognition.” Dancers implicitly declare, “We educate others with our presence,” and “We take pride in our heritage and enjoy sharing or teaching others.” Rather than assume that history is static, Danza is the embodiment of a living tradition, and therefore a living history.

2. Due to the systematic erasure of Mexican people’s experiences in the Americas and their relationship to the land, Danzantes insist on reclaiming their humanity and histories. Interviewees, describe their specific relationships to the land, family histories, ancestral memory, and long standing experiences in the Americas as indigenous and “mestizo” peoples despite dominant representations of Mexicans as “foreign” or “alien.” They identify the process of ideological warfare through the construction of colonial race categories and colonial history that have actively sought to erase their presence and indigenous ancestry. As a result, Danzantes contest and resist anti-Mexican and anti-immigrant sentiment in the United States by defining themselves on their own terms, declaring, “We exist, we are still here and always have been,” and “We are indigenous to the Americas.” In addition, their theories expand definitions of indigeneity in which they call for a hemispheric approach to understanding the experiences of native peoples. By reclaiming their presence as indigenous peoples they do not erase other native experiences in the U.S., Mexico, or the Americas; rather they see these experiences as different yet related. Some of these connections include cultural, linguistic, historical or ritual migrations, intermarriages, and a shared history of colonization in the Americas.<sup>85</sup>

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<sup>85</sup> Long time Danza leader and scholar Mario Aguilar defines ritual migrations as historical migration and movement of indigenous peoples throughout the Americas before European colonization (Interview, October 2011, Chula Vista CA).

3. History and historical events are not static, neutral, or linear but have bearing on the present. Danzantes consider the root causes of oppression and identify colonization as key to the historical and daily struggles of poverty, forced migration, incarceration, institutional discrimination, assimilation, cultural genocide and intergenerational trauma. In an attempt to imagine a decolonial world or a better alternative than what currently exists Danzantes restore, maintain, and commit to the preservation of Mexican indigenous knowledge systems and values. By preserving indigenous dance practices they are in fact remembering their ancestors and lifeways by salvaging them from oblivion; Native dance is about history, memory, and the future that decenters linear thought patterns of time, history, and space. In this way, Danza is a living history and traditions that will continue to evolve to meet the needs of the people in any historical moment yet maintain its “essence.” They will use it as a form of resistance, communal support, cultural empowerment, healing, and prayer. For Danzantes, “Danza is a way of life, a way of understanding the world,” that favors indigenous epistemologies.

The three major thought patterns described above decenter dominant paradigms and have the potential to imagine a decolonial existence. For Danzantes decolonizing oneself can mean many things—defending their cultural roots or promoting awareness of the injustice their ancestors faced—but colonization is not the central force of their culture nor is articulating a romanticized past; Danza is about their existence and the things they do today that matter, drawing strength from a rich past in order to celebrate their cultural survival. Within this context, history is politically charged for conscious people of color and they remind us that the past has bearing on the present and through



Danza Azteca we are reminded that “history is living.” As a female dancer from Los Angeles says, “I did not want to just read about the history of my culture or talk about. I wanted to be a part of it.” She did not want to passively understand history but wanted to be a part of its’ evolving narrative. She saw her participation in Danza Azteca as a way to bridge the past, present, and the future of the Mexican people. Danza isn’t necessarily about what you are against but what you stand for. Their experiences with racism and other forms of oppression continue to be institutionalized and systemic, yet Danzantes have seized spaces for change by constructing alternative spaces where Chicana/o youth and their communities can learn, practice, and cultivate indigenous knowledge. This collective effort celebrates heritage through movement in a variety of ways and is a tool of empowerment that is available to all people who wish to participate. One specific example includes the rite of passage for Chicana youth, called The Ceremony of Chicomecoatl.

### **Oppositional Spaces of Indigenous Knowledge: The Ceremony of Chicomecoatl and the Timekeeper, Cuauhxicalli**

The ceremony of Chicomecoatl or Xilonen has its roots in Mesoamerican culture. Xilonen is a Nahuatl word, and means young tender ears of maíz (corn). The purpose of this ceremony was to assure a return of the waters and corn harvest and those who were more fortunate had the duty to share with those that had less. The sharing of food and the giving of gifts for 8 days characterized the ceremony. Though its’ origins lay in Mesoamerican culture to honor the harvest of corn, today it takes on a variety of meanings that simultaneously maintains an indigenous perspective and its’ relevance in the lives of Chicana youth. Although more commonly known amongst Danzantes as

Xilonen or the “Fiesta de Maize,” it is a rite of passage to honor the young girls’ transition into womanhood.<sup>86</sup> The Xilonen ceremony is dedicated to young women to celebrate their growth in different aspects in their lives; it also reflects their importance within the community. Danzantes, parents, and other community members create spaces of leadership, self-worth, and community cohesion, in order to empower young women to become socially conscious and responsible for their own lives and at the same time to help them gain awareness of who they are. The young women make a commitment for an entire year to dance and be present at ceremonial and community events. The year long ritual signifies their future and the commitments and responsibilities they will have as they get older to themselves and their communities if they so choose.

Major ideas expressed by those who participated include understanding in more depth the importance of self-respect, respecting others, and “giving back” to their communities or other social spaces they inhabit. Another common sentiment is the ideal of social justice and the development of not only their respective Danza communities but larger communities as well (i.e. school, work, home, social activities). There are many political issues that young women can become involved in. For instance, volunteering at women’s shelters, contributing to community gardens in poor neighborhoods, and other forms of activism. If a Xilonen feels compelled and seeks to contribute to a specific social cause she has the power to organize her Danza group around these issues. The youth do not take on difficult tasks alone but with their group. Other reasons the young

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<sup>86</sup> I attended Xilonen events in Sacramento, San Diego, and Colorado from 2010-13 and interviewed a total of 10 participants. To protect the identity of the youth I do not state the name of their group.

women participate is to gain greater knowledge of their indigenous traditions. For instance, Los Angeles based group Cuauhtémoc describes the purpose of the ceremony in this way:

In our modern practice, the focus has been the continuance of our traditions and teachings with the children of our community. We hope to "plant" the seeds of understanding about our indigenous heritage with the hope that they will "grow" in this knowledge in the future. The corn is, of course, the most important plant of the Americas so it is the focus of our ceremony. It is symbolic of our relationship to this land and is a symbol of our people. NOSOTROS SOMOS MAIZ.

Each year, our group names a new Xilonen, that is, a young lady between the age of 13 and 21 who is charged with working throughout the year with all matters relating to children [and other community service]. She has the power to command 4 Palabras. This means that 4 times during her 1 -year reign she can demand the presence of all our Danzantes to work on issues related to children and the community. She is picked from the community and [may or may not be] new to Danza.<sup>87</sup>

Danza Cuauhtémoc conducts their Xilonen around the teaching of indigenous knowledge and issues related to children and community; other groups take a similar approach but with variations. For instance, in other groups throughout California and Colorado, the young woman is not "new" to Danza but rather she has been in the dance circle for most of her life or for several years and eventually she makes the decision and commitment to be a Xilonen. Her participation is therefore voluntary. Nor is the responsibility of the Xilonen solely focused on the care of children but voluntarism, social justice, self-worth, cultural awareness, and critical engagement with the world at a young age.<sup>88</sup> One participant describes her involvement in this way: "I learned many ceremonial things. In my year there were nine girls total from different parts of the area. The boys have their

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<sup>87</sup> I have seen Xilonen's performed in San Diego, Los Angeles, Sacramento, and Denver, Colorado. For more information on Danza Cuauhtémoc visit: <http://Danzacuauhtemocbp.homestead.com/xilonen.html>

<sup>88</sup> There can also be multiple youth in a cohort for any given year; not just one Xilonen.

own ceremony too. It's called Cuauhtémoc. There are lots of platicas for us at ceremony the parents, elders, jefas, and people from the community will share their stories and advice with us. We will be recognized and acknowledged as a Xilonen. We go with our heart and take what advice is good for us.”<sup>89</sup>



Figure 2.1 Xilonens at ceremonial stations with Danza elder Senora Cobb (Rodriguez)

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<sup>89</sup> Interview, female 16, CA



Figure 2.2 Xilonens at ceremonial stations with elder Crowbear (Rodriguez)

The Xilonen ceremony is oppositional because it is a process of subject formation that actively rearticulates the status and social place of Chicana youth in a Eurocentric world. It is a politics of recognition because Chicanas in the mainstream are not represented as leaders, role models, or women of importance in American society. When faced with daily and structural sexism and racism, their lives are characterized around low expectations, high dropout rates, and teen pregnancy, and they are therefore forced into low skilled jobs and cycles of poverty. The Xilonen ceremony is a positive model for Chicana youth given that society cares little about their lives. With critical analysis, the Xilonen ceremony combines Danza Azteca with cultural and spiritual awareness as well as a political commitment to the future. The young women learn life skills, self-sufficiency, and independence. It is during this time they have the potential to discover the possibility of who they are, their interests, and begin to take responsibility over their

lives. A female mentor of a Xilonen says, “I have seen the young women grow, become role models within the group. They seem more mature and take their participation seriously. It teaches them how to stay committed not only in the Danza but for their lives. We try to instill in them cultural values and to be conscientious of the next 7 generations. Things we cannot learn from American culture; it’s definitely not a sweet 16 party or anything like that [chuckles].”<sup>90</sup> In this way, the ceremony signifies a non-Eurocentric concept of womanhood or celebrating women; the girls’ participation is inherently a form of indigenous feminism, which embodies a deep reverence for indigenous culture, the power of women, and a vision of a better future for the next generations.

Unlike the rite of passage for European women, the ritual of “Sweet 16 and Never Been Kissed,” more commonly known as “Sweet 16,” originated in England during the 17<sup>th</sup> century primarily to enforce conventional European gender roles. Young girls were presented to the royal court for the first time as women and possible brides for men of power (Walsh 1997). This event is solely tied to the ways that European women were presented as sexual objects for marriage to wealthy or powerful men by policing their sexuality and making sure they were virgins or had “never been kissed.” “Sweet 16” thus reproduces the patriarchal structure of the Christian family. Today Sweet 16 celebrations are more commonly known as birthday parties. For instance, MTV’s “My Super Sweet 16” showcases the incessant glorification of material consumption and wasteful spending habits. The show glorifies spoiled behavior and entitlement. This so-called rite of

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<sup>90</sup> Interview, female 25, CA

passage therefore holds very little meaning beyond and materialism or individualism.<sup>91</sup>

In contrast, the Xilonen ceremony instills a sense of self worth and a young woman's mindfulness about her impact on the current Moment and coming generations. Some Danzantes have referred to this as the next seven generations.<sup>92</sup> This, of course, is the foundation of many indigenous belief systems that teach that we must live our lives thinking of the next seven generations, placing youth, women, and the future at the center. Community survival is in balance with the needs of the family, community, and humanity as a whole. A Xilonen from California reflects on this rite of passage and discusses her entire personhood not simply one aspect of it:

The Xilonen for me was very meaningful; first it was recognition as a Danzante. It was a very special moment for me. The Danza has been instilled in me throughout my childhood. I apply these teachings in life, as a student, and a person. The most important thing Danza taught me was respect for myself and other people. My family isn't very religious and we don't go to church. At Danza we offer our prayers to the creator. We are respectful of all religions; there are so many ways people offer themselves to the animas. It has shaped me as a person being in the Danza, I feel fortunate because not many kids my age are [exposed] to this. I want it to be a part of my life. It is a second family to me.<sup>93</sup>

This quote encapsulates many of the themes the young women reported as being valued through their participation in Danza and their experience as a Xilonen, such as gaining a deeper respect for self and others, seeing themselves in more complex terms not only as Danzantes and not only as young women, and ultimately they described having a purpose

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<sup>91</sup> For the scope of this dissertation I do not detail the various rites of passages for Chicanas. It can however be noted that quinceañeras have indigenous origins in Mesoamerican culture that exemplify indigenous notions of reciprocity (Candelaria, García, and Aldama 2004) yet today it can take on the tone of a festive celebration rather than a rite of passage for Chicana/Mexican youth.

<sup>92</sup> An indigenous concept of "looking out" for those that will come after you, 7 generations ahead of your time.

<sup>93</sup> This 16 year old Danzante from Southern California conducted her ceremony in June 2012 at the age of 14. Follow up interview December 7, 2013.

in their communities or homes and envisioned their futures in healthy ways. All attested to the ways that Danza has “shaped” them as people and taught them commitment. The above interview is compelling because even though she was proud to represent her culture during her Xilonen, she discusses an overall respect for other religions and others that do not necessarily participate within Danza. She sees herself as an entire person and has applied the skills and leadership she has learned from her involvement with Danza to other aspects of her life such as being a student and her commitment to eventually attend college.<sup>94</sup>

Though the celebration is to honor the young women and their development in many areas of their lives, it is also an expression of the commitment that the adults make to the youth in their communities and Danza circles. The adult dancers ensure the ceremony functions smoothly and the young women have all they need, making a commitment to the Xilonens to be present at the ceremony and during the year long process. The elders will give the young women advice about life and various topics however this guidance does not end when the ceremony is over, and in fact the adults make lifelong commitment to their progress. At some point during the ceremony the Xilonens will select a mentor or spiritual parent whom they trust and respect and this mentor agrees to take on the responsibility of being a lifelong guide. The mentor can be a man or a woman within the Danza community. This is especially important for young women that may not have positive guidance in their immediate homes or larger

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<sup>94</sup> She is a mature sixteen year old and has been involved with Danza since her mother was pregnant. She also represents the generation of youth that will always remember Danza as “being around” and a natural part of her life.



communities. In this way, Danzantes create alternative family structures and the notion of Danza being a “family” is common amongst most participants.



Figure 2.3 Xilonen Mentors (Rodriguez)

Danza Azteca circles provide a foundation for Chicana/o youth and families because it is an activity that the entire family can participate in, while also fostering positive community formations. The Danza structure can be understood to welcome “families” or be seen as a family friendly environment because it does not separate children, youth, adults, or elders; despite age differences all participate in the same way. Though idealized notions of the family can be problematic, it is important to mention that within Danza family structures are diverse. Danza families are not only heteronormative or large, usually a stereotype of the Mexican family, but consists of multiple arrangements. There are divorced families, single parents, married couples, gay couples, and single people of all sexual orientations, transnational families, and biological families

that participate. There are also participants who are not Mexican but are Latino, Black, white, biracial, and U.S. Native Americans who participate, but it is safe to say that the majority are Mexicans.<sup>95</sup> Throughout interviews for this project the notion of family was often referred to as a way to describe the Danza community revealing more inclusive understandings of family. Interviewees variously used “family” to refer to a family of Danzantes; a community, political and cultural solidarities, humanity as a whole (as in “the human family”); and both ancestors and future generations, which is to say that in Danza “family” is part of a larger discourse that is not reducible to biological, heteronormative, or nuclear versions of family. When moving beyond the surface of static notions of what the “family” represents, most understood this to mean a genuine care for and looking after one another, considering their immediate circles, ancestors in the spirit world, and future generations that they will never meet.

### **Studying the Timekeeper: Cuauhxicalli**

In addition to using ceremonies such as Xilonen as teaching tools, Danzantes also organize workshops to teach about Mesoamerican cosmology. These oppositional spaces of learning are multidimensional as they address issues of politics and history, time and space, the cosmos and spirituality. These workshops are made available to all people or community members that desire to learn and engage these teachings. Some workshops are organized around traditional ways of learning such as utilizing a classroom or lecture approach, yet other workshops are more interactive.<sup>96</sup> These oppositional learning spaces are often created due to the dissatisfaction with dominant history and they provide

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<sup>95</sup> I witnessed this trend grow slightly in the last several years.

<sup>96</sup> For example, interactive workshops include, making Day of the Dead sugar skulls or even “birthday” astrology on the Sun Stone.

information about historical events, peoples, and accounts suppressed in mainstream school and dominant history. The primary objective of these efforts is to provide information necessary to eliminate confusion brought about by deficient research, racist stereotypes, and fictitious interpretations of indigenous peoples and lifeways.<sup>97</sup> One dancer describes his interest and the reasons he attends these workshops: “I want to know what it is about, study the culture, see how advanced our people were, there is not a lot of our history because it was destroyed by Catholic priests.”<sup>98</sup> It is not unusual for some Danzantes to take seriously the study of Mesoamerican civilization, “codices,” or Nahuatl even within formal educational institutions in the U.S. and México. Other workshops include a thorough study of ancient Mexica civilization focusing on architecture, mathematics, medicine, language, farming, and technology and highly developed and complex class structures and government. In addition, dancers study the artistic elements of the society such as art, poetry, dance, games, and sports.<sup>99</sup> Yet other workshops focus on how ancient civilizations of Mesoamerica developed complex calendar systems based on overlapping cycles of time. For instance, teachings on the Sun Stone are significant because this calendrical device is key to all that happened in Mexica society. Today Danzantes study the Sun Stone to gain awareness, learn something new, or dedicate their lives to this type of research and spread awareness. These oppositional teachings provide opportunities to delve into various aspects of the Mexican culture, Mexica cosmology, and its relevance today.

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<sup>97</sup> Personal Observation, De la Rosa Workshop Sacramento and Los Angeles.

<sup>98</sup> Interview, male 18, Phoenix, AZ. March 2010.

<sup>99</sup> Workshop Los Angeles

Though not all groups take on the task of disseminating information regarding the Sun Stone, I chose to highlight this type of workshop given its importance in Chicana/o art, murals, tattoos, and Danza regalia. The calendar was popularized during the Chicano Movement and through Chicana/o aesthetics. Considered an iconic image today it was interesting to learn that it was more than a representational image, but how Danza workshops provided sophisticated and detailed teachings that revealed the Mexicas' concept of the universe. For example, one dancer describes why she wanted to learn about the calendar, "Before this workshop my knowledge was minimal, this ancient stone proves to be more than a simple calendar. Once deeper meanings are analyzed within the carvings, even more compelling was understanding how it reveals an entire cosmology of the Mexicas and how they were influenced by their ancestors, just as we are today. I really learned a lot."<sup>100</sup> Participants got a better sense of where it came from, how to interpret it, the meaning of its various components, and why knowledge of the calendar remains important.

For example, group leader and researcher Tlahuizcalli De La Rosa and her Danza group from Los Angeles had researched the calendar for over a decade.<sup>101</sup> Frustrated with the misinformation online and "new age" interpretations the group decided to provide people with more accurate teachings about the calendar. They had dedicated their time to providing free workshops to Danza groups around the country and other communities. In the workshop I attended the presenters covered the various purposes of

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<sup>100</sup> Interview, female 20, Sacramento, CA

<sup>101</sup> I attended a workshop on the Sun Stone in Sacramento, California at the Galleria la Posada. It was a free event that was open to the public but most in attendance were Danzantes, parents, and siblings, about 30 participants in total. Out of respect I would like to mention here that group leader Tlahuizcalli De la Rosa, along with her son and two other group members died in a car accident.

the calendar such as the agricultural, mythological, and astronomical significance of the Sun Stone. For instance, participants learned how the Mexicas developed and lived by two calendar systems that served different purposes: a solar calendar that measured time, and a ritual calendar for ceremonies and festivals. One calendar, called the Xiuhpohualli (year count), has 365 days. It describes the days and rituals related to the seasons, and therefore considered the agricultural year or the solar year. The other calendar is comprised of 260 days. It is called the Tonalpohualli or, the day-count, which is the sacred calendar used for ritual purposes and holds cosmological significance.

Historically, the Mexica called this timekeeper, Cuauhxicalli or “Eagle Bowl,” but it is generally known today as the Aztec Calendar. It was during the reign of Axayacatl, the 6th Mexica monarch in 1479, that this stone was carved and dedicated to the principal Mexica deity, Tonantih. On its most basic level, it served as an agricultural calendar, which indicated when to plant and reap crops, and when to hold festivals for the gods who regulated the elements.<sup>102</sup> This agricultural worship imbedded in the symbols of the Sun Stone, belied concerns and beliefs about the natural world in which they lived, the gods who controlled that world, and their attempts through ritual and worship to communicate with those gods, and thus gain control over their environment.<sup>103</sup>

In addition, participants analyzed the images on the stone and learned to interpret its’ symbolism, detailing the symbolic portrayal of the four disasters that led to the

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<sup>102</sup> The notion that the Mexica believed in “gods” is somewhat controversial not all Danzantes believe that their ancestors believed in gods but rather in energies that were manifestations of Creator. Some believed that the Spaniards misinterpreted scientific and spiritual beliefs by imposing the idea of gods because they were familiar with Saints through Catholicism and also because they were familiar with the Greeks’ (and other Europeans cultures) belief of polytheism.

<sup>103</sup> Not meant to be a definitive history of the Sun Stone. I provided a brief explanation of what was learned at the workshop.

demise of the four prior universes (the four past suns) in Mexica cosmology. These cycles forced change and indicated cycles of life and destruction as a circular transformation of birth, life, death, and rebirth on Earth. The Earth had lived four epochs, called Suns, and had survived the catastrophes. This narrative is detailed in the carvings of the Four Past Suns (Nahui Ocelotl, Nahui Ehecatl, Nahui Quiauhuitl, and Nahui Atl) that border the central face on the Sun Stone. This glyph is more complex and encompasses the most significance because it represents the four past epochs and symbolizes the movement (Nahui Ollin) of the universe. Participants were able to understand the significance of the hieroglyphic and pictographic layout of the Sun Stone, learn concepts of duality and knowledge of the cosmos but more importantly grasp a different concept of how the ancient Mexica measured time by using a variety of calendars (tonal, long count, and solar year).<sup>104</sup> Danzantes consciously highlight Mexica worldviews and practices and articulate non-Christian and non-western understanding of the world and in turn challenge the very concepts of time and history most prevalent today. Time keeping or thought patterns in the Americas are very different from linear systems of time and thought used in Europe and later transported and imposed to the Americas. In this sense the Gregorian calendar and western concepts of time and space are displaced and Danzantes reclaim suppressed histories and indigenous cosmology by creating sites of knowledge production that are oppositional to western ways of

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<sup>104</sup> For the scope of this dissertation I do not go into depth of how the ancient Mexica measured time. Information of the Sun Stone in this section is not meant to be an exhaustive explanation or in-depth history but rather I use this as one example of how Danzantes create oppositional spaces of learning within their communities. Other “Aztec Calendar” workshops have been held in San Jose, California during the annual Mexica New Year Celebration. In August of 2011 in Albuquerque, New Mexico Kalpulli Izkalli hosted a series of workshops focused on the Vientenas, or the 20 day count, in Spanish, Nahuatl, and English. They also invited Mexican elders to speak on these topics. For more on this topic see the works of Miguel Portilla.

understanding time. In their book, *The Aztec Calendar*, Randall Jimenez and Richard Graeber (2006:47) challenge us to consider these differing temporal realities for natives and non-natives:

The native concept of reality is that moving “forward” in time is moving to the “past” and moving “backwards” in time is moving to the “future.” A straight-line thinker moves “forward” into the “future” and “backward” into the “past.” The deficiency is that life is a cycle with a start point and an end point. It has a continuous rhythm wherein night follows day. For the cyclical thinker, studying what the linealist calls the “past” is the study of the future. In fact, for many native philosophers, this is a responsibility that the Creator assigned to them within the context of the “Cosmic Process.”

Danzantes study Mesoamerican culture or the Sun Stone not because they see it as backward or in the past but rather because it is something relevant in the present. They also describe their dedication to Danza and its many aspects as a life commitment or as a type of “calling.” They are not trying to idealize a mythical past but rather learn from the past and keep the past alive yet simultaneously move forward into the future with the knowledge of their ancestors. These are not simply Mesoamerican ideologies but are practices that are embedded in the practice of Danza and everyday thought patterns.

For example, the spatial arrangements during Danza practices or ceremonies mimic the circular shape of the Sun Stone and thereby mirror its cosmology. In the circle everyone is equal and at the center of their own universe even when the group(s) dance in unison at all levels and ages it is an ordered chaos.<sup>105</sup> The dancers represent their larger communities, families, and histories. Women, men, youth, elders, small children, and even the spirits of ancestors are believed to be present. The drums and the altar with

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<sup>105</sup> Historically circles have been important to Native communities. Also, see Aguilar (2009) on the meaning of the dance circle and dancing as one heart beat.

copal burning lay in the center, the copal calls the spirits and cleanses the energy. The drums are considered elders or grandparents because they represent wisdom and a time before, yet they remain in the present and continue to teach their “children.” The Danza circle has a unique energy often described by Danzantes as a powerful sacred space. Time, space, and history are compressed within the circle; there is no beginning and there is no end. Everything is one in the same, the drums, the smoke, the spirits, the elders, and children, whether practiced in pre-Cuauhtémoc time or today the essence remains. Danzantes draw on the past to construct a better future.

This is why Day of the Dead celebrations are easily accepted within Danza Azteca groups and have become one of the more “popular” ceremonies. Day of the Dead is a lively, colorful, and joyous celebration of departed loved ones, in contrast to the solemn way white Americans view death.<sup>106</sup> This is a time when traditionally, Mexican families and Danzantes visit cemeteries, clean up, and decorate in preparation for welcoming the souls of the dead and celebrating with them. During this time of the year cempoaxochitl (marigolds) are in high demand because they are used for ritual and ceremonial purposes, and are considered to have medicinal and spiritual attributes. Marigolds in particular are used because they hold an important meaning in Mexican culture. Sometimes the petals of the flowers are scattered on graves or altars, and other times the flowers are used to make intricate glyph arrangements during Danza ceremonies. It is believed that the scent of the flowers help guide the departed back to

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<sup>106</sup> White Americans usually grieve in private or use euphemisms such as “passing” or “passed” when discussing the death of someone. Health and funeral institutions dominate the procedures surrounding death in the United States. In addition, details of Day of the Dead vary by regions in México and Latin America.



earth and connect them to their loved ones. Danzantes will also dance at cemeteries; conduct their own ceremonies across the country and in Mexico. It is not uncommon for full regalia to be made specifically for this event and for many adorn themselves with “muertos” (skeleton) face paint (Figure 3.4). This indigenous origin holiday is another example of how Danzantes and Mexicans who practice this celebration think about time and space, life and death not in a linear fashion where life begins and ends but rather in a way where life and death coexist; there is no separation between the dead and the living. The distinction between life and death is not so absolute. In some ways it is a triumph over death and therefore becomes a celebration of life. The deceased make the journey through multiple worlds to visit family and friends if only for a brief time.<sup>107</sup>

These rituals and ceremonial events surrounding Day of the Dead demonstrate a strong sense of love and respect for one’s ancestors; celebrate the continuance of life, family relationships, community and transnational solidarity; and allows people to talk about, and even find comfort in death. According to the beliefs of the Nahuatl people (Mexicas, Chichimecas, Tlaxcaltecas, and Toltecas) life was seen as a dream and only in death did a human being truly awake. This is a prime example of how indigenous traditions and philosophies have enriched Mexican attitudes regarding death in the present. A young male Danzante echoes Nahuatl sentiment on death and life, saying, “For Mexicans, death is something good; it is a beautiful way to pray like this, to honor our ancestors. We say death is like waking up and being fully alive, we are not afraid of death, we embrace it.”<sup>108</sup> In a similar vein, Mexican anthropologist Guillermo Bonfil

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<sup>107</sup> I attended Day of the Day celebrations from 2008-14 in San Diego and in Los Angeles.

<sup>108</sup> Interview, male 19, Phoenix, AZ. March 2010

Batalla argues that Mesoamerican civilization is an ongoing and undeniable force in contemporary Mexican life. What he refers to as México profundo, it is a country whose majority population continues to be rooted Mesoamerican civilization and whose way of life reflects cultural patterns and values with thousands of years of history. The peoples embodying this Mesoamerican civilization include Danzantes.



Figure 2.4 Danzante dancing for Day of the Dead 2013 (Dixon)<sup>109</sup>

## Conclusion

My data reveals that Danzantes oppose dominant institutions that have systematically erased the Mexican presence in the United States. Dominant institutions teach Mexicans and other people virtually nothing about their cultural traditions, their history in the Americas, or about the long tenuous relationship that the United States and

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<sup>109</sup>[http://www.theindependent.com/news/local/aztec-dancers-please-crowd-at-celebration/article\\_6dd62a42-3eae-11e3-a141-001a4bcf887a.html](http://www.theindependent.com/news/local/aztec-dancers-please-crowd-at-celebration/article_6dd62a42-3eae-11e3-a141-001a4bcf887a.html)

Mexico have had for hundreds of years. This leaves Chicana/o youth searching for different answers about history and themselves. The process of decolonization begins in the mind allowing for critical assessment of oppression, and by contesting the curriculum of schools Danzantes challenge the hegemony of Eurocentrism. Looking for spaces outside of dominant education to embrace their culture all participants described an intense calling, a sense of place and belonging within Danza. Oppositional teachings, cultural knowledge, and the proliferation of knowledge production within Danza Azteca undermines European paradigms and recenters indigenous cosmologies.

### **Chapter 3: Women Leaders of the Danza Azteca Movement**

It is one big mess of beauty: color, music, and dancing feet. The Danzantes, overwhelmingly women, wear headdresses with yellow and blue macaw feathers, as they turn in sync to loud drumbeats, armadillo guitars in hand, and seed pod rattles around their ankles. Some of my observations come simply from sitting on a cold black bench in this place that some people call home. Today Chicano Park is shared by homeless people and families on this cold Saturday morning; together we gaze at the dancers in movement.<sup>110</sup> The park itself is representative of the larger struggles for Chicana/o identity, survival, and resistance. Through the creation of their own cultural spaces the park is a way to preserve Chicano/Mexican history and this is one reason that many Danzantes from all over the country come to dance at Chicano Park (Griswold Del Castillo 2007).

I watched old women keep rhythm, limber men jump into the air, and babies learning to walk for the first time in a park alive with murals that simultaneously seem to embody the past, the present, and the future. The vivacious colors against grey cement tell a story of Chicano history through pictorial images of Aztec hieroglyphs to the commemoration of community leaders. Farm worker organizer Cesar Chavez is painted with a big smile and friendly face, while poet Corky Gonzalez flaunts a thick mustache and a microphone in hand. A life sized bronze statue of Mexican revolutionary icon

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<sup>110</sup> In April from 2009-2014 and in June from 2008-2013, I spent time in Chicano Park with various Danza groups that attended the annual events of Chicano Park Day and the ceremony hosted by the Danza group, Mexicayotl. This chapter reflects those observations and frame my interest in focusing a piece of my study on the Women leadership in Danza.

Emiliano Zapata wearing an oversized sombrero and cowboy boots is positioned at the center of the park. I scan the rest of the murals to identify the female leaders.

I see a colorful image of the Virgin Mary with flowers placed at her feet; people are praying and kneeling next to her, perhaps asking her for forgiveness or begging for a favor. My eyes continue to roam over the images. In the distance, in a not so busy part of the park, there is another image of a young woman, a silhouette with no face. She holds a picket sign and with her fist toward the sky (Figure 3.1). Though it can be interpreted as an empowering image, it nonetheless remained lifeless, barren, and lacked detail for over 30 years.<sup>111</sup> In such visual imagery the women's roles are limited to the image of the Virgin Mary or the faceless woman that is silenced throughout history. Male figures are the "well known" Chicano leaders in a variety of historical moments. The men embody a range of identities such as, poet, activist, and war leaders including Cuauhtémoc. Similarly, the women who participate within Danza Azteca are historically overshadowed by their male counterparts and little analysis has been conducted of the women of Danza Azteca.<sup>112</sup>

My attention comes back to the drums; they seem loud enough to drown out the roaring of city traffic and speeding cars on Interstate 5. There is a sweet scent that permeates the air, and I inquire about it: "What is that sweet smell?" I am told by one of the dancers that in Nahuatl it is called copalli. In pre-Cuauhtémoc time indigenous

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<sup>111</sup> Since this writing the murals have been restored. See original image of "faceless woman" photograph by author.

<sup>112</sup> See Luna (2011) on the leadership of Señora Angelbertha Cobb.

people burned this resin for their ceremonial events.<sup>113</sup> It is said to cleanse the air and invite good energies to be present. Despite the legacies of repression of indigenous peoples and their traditions, they continue to burn copalli, in hand-held clay pots in the middle of city streets and fast food shops, as a testament to their continued legacies of resistance and self-respect. On this morning, research brings me here into the lives of these women and the million things they do, including Native dance.



Figure 3.1 “Faceless Woman with UFW Flag” Chicano Park Mural, San Diego, CA (Yañez)

The question of women’s involvement began to capture my curiosity because the majority of Danza Azteca events I observed foregrounded women: they were dancers,

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<sup>113</sup> Term coined by Carlos Tortolero to de-emphasize the Eurocentric view of Mexican history (pre-Hispanic, pre-Conquest, and pre-Colombian). Given that the ancient cultures of Mesoamerica were more advanced than European cultures in the fifteenth century, regarding measuring time and creating an accurate calendar, Tortolero found this puzzling and inappropriate. Cuauhtémoc was the last Aztec ruler to preside over Tenochtitlan (present-day Mexico City and the seat of the Aztec empire), who was later tortured and executed by Hernán Cortés and fellow Spanish conquistadors.

group leaders, and held positions within the circle.<sup>114</sup> Even if women (usually extended family members or other supporters) were not dancers themselves they helped organize within Danza groups and events. I selected women to interview based upon their recognized leadership roles within Danza Azteca because I wanted to glean information about Danza development overtime and their experiences across regional differences in California, Arizona, and Colorado. Utilizing an interview-based examination (Crouch and McKenzie: 2006), the following revolves around three long time leaders' experiences over the last four decades and explores their involvement as group leaders or Capitanas (official title for group leaders)<sup>115</sup> these women include Donna Vigil-Castañeda, Earthy Montiel, and Beatrice Zamora-Aguilar. Their reflections bear witness to major historical events in the United States and their experiential knowledge teach about gender relations, Danza spirituality, and the use of culture as a political strategy.

This chapter will therefore focus on the ways that Danza Azteca is a politically charged activity that carries important implications for women's resistance and leadership. I investigate the intersections of spirituality and politics as it pertains to Mexican women who participate in Danza Azteca in the United States. I do so by analyzing their gendered and racial experiences, paying particular attention to the women's levels of participation through their leadership. This chapter identifies their political views regarding the dance form while also highlighting the women's historical legacy to this cultural movement since the 1970s.

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<sup>114</sup> The circle is also known as the Danza group.

<sup>115</sup> In addition to in-depth interviews, I also utilized ongoing communication, ethnographic observation, and field notes from 2008-2014.

I contextualize their oppositional leadership style which provides alternatives that help to empower not only themselves but their communities. This leadership style encourages community wellness and takes a holistic approach to the needs of the community. Moreover, I elucidate their oppositional leadership style, arguing that the women draw upon what I identify as “spiritual matters” and that their participation within Danza is simultaneously about political, cultural, and spiritual approaches to community building. Danza spirituality therefore revolves around a material analytic that understands the legacies of colonization and is a form of decolonization of the mind, body, and spirit. Though seemingly contradictory to combine the spiritual and material, this worldview embraced by the women leaders, reflects their understanding of the multigenerational effects of oppression taking place within the Chicano/Mexican community.

### **The Chicano Movement and Danza Women’s Grassroots Leadership**

The women in this study do not readily point to their visibility as leaders, but rather see themselves “behind the scenes” or part of a larger group network. I nonetheless identify these women as community leaders because they have been at the forefront of Chicana/o cultural politics and remain active leaders in their respective communities. The leadership that women have cultivated within Danza Azteca groups is largely based on the politics of Native dance and community empowerment. Their leadership strategy centers a community based model which takes the group into account and engages a relational processes of interaction, where each individual is accepted as an integral part of the group and process. Though their leadership is predicated upon collective community cohesion it does not deter the women from being central leaders



such as making group decisions or being willing to lead in difficult situations. Other major duties include organizing costly and lengthy ceremonial events, fund raising and grant writing, traveling great distances to teach, or be present at community events, rallies and supporting other Danza groups outside their immediate area. In this way, leadership is not about personal gain or the power of one individual within a group setting. The women within Danza carve out a space for leadership by redefining it. Rather than subscribing to dominant definitions of leadership that are male centered and include political participation within governmental institutions, women defined their leadership around ideals of social justice with a community consciousness. The women articulated that cultural knowledge which was already grounded in the community (and their families) was vital to community building and in creating alternative formations. They not only placed importance on Native dance and indigenous traditions as a political strategy but elaborated upon the need for personal and spiritual growth of the community.

In working toward cultural and community empowerment, Donna Vigil-Castañeda, Earthy Montiel, and Beatrice Zamora-Aguilar have a long history of community mobilizing and their experiences serve to illustrate a critical awareness of Chicana/o subjugation within dominant society; thus the women draw strength from their experiences and use culture as a political strategy which builds on a foundation for cultural and community survival.<sup>116</sup> The women leaders of Danza Azteca were involved in political activism during the Chicano Movement. As a result, became interested in cultural revitalization.

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<sup>116</sup> For the scope of this dissertation I focus on these specific women though I have witnessed many others in different communities that include Sacramento, Los Angeles, Seattle, Tucson, and New Mexico that organize around Danza Azteca.

Studying women's leadership within Danza Azteca offers insight into the complexity of community activism, cultural resistance, and women's roles and reconsiders the limited ideas of their activism (Prado 1998). Professor of Chicana/o and Women's Studies Maylei Blackwell (2011: 37) suggests that, "Chicanas are critical to document because they created political identities, solidarities, forms of consciousness, and artistic modes of production, and most important, because they show how Chicana organizing in the 1960s and 1970s, whether in mixed organizations or in women's groups, created new ways of being political and organizing in ways that empower others." In this way Chicana's embodied multiple subjectivities that revealed feminist alternatives that helped to empower not only themselves but their communities. Today this remains a critical component of women's leadership within Danza groups. Women leaders create an alternative sphere where they engage their political, cultural, and spiritual agency outside of mainstream institutions.

Seldom, however, are Mexican women seen as actors rather than as victims of poverty and injustice. Only in the last two decades have scholars of Chicana and Chicano experience begun to document instances of how men and women have fashioned and gathered resources to attack social problems and empower themselves. In the book *Mexican American Women Activist* by Chicana/o Studies Professor Mary Prado (1998: 6) provides an assessment of political participation and grassroots activism as it pertains to gender:

For many decades political participation meant taking part in electoral politics or holding office in a political organization. Despite much feminist research that challenges established political science concepts, feminist theories, questions, and conclusions have not been integrated into the field. The significance of politics occurring outside of political

institutions, and women's community activism particularly, continue to be largely excluded from conventional notions of political activity. Since local activism takes place outside of political institutions, many social scientists view it as unimportant, marginal, parochial, and therefore theoretically unimportant.

Prado helps us distinguish how political participation within governmental institutions is considered legitimate and male centered whereas political participation outside of these institutions is given little value especially women's community activism. Much in the same way that Danza Azteca has been under-theorized Mexican women's participation within it has also been neglected. Shifting our concept of what "counts" as political activism we can re-image what is considered political forms of participation and the roles that women play and especially those women who are that forefront of community building, communal prayer, and cultural resistance within Danza groups and within Chicano communities. It has not been solely within dominant institutions that Chicanas have been denied access to the public spheres of politics moreover their labor and political contributions within their own communities have been rendered marginal (Flores Niemann, Armitage, Hart, Weathermon, 2002).

Chicana scholars have critiqued the sexist and homophobic standpoint of the Chicano Movement and have sought to address the contributions that women made during this era (Moraga 1993; Broyles Gonzales 1994; Angie M. Garcia 1997). Mexican women's undervalued labor during the Chicano Movement was the subject of research by Professor of Chicana/o and Women Studies Maylei Blackwell. In her book *Chicana Power!* (2011: 28) Blackwell details the politics of gender and feminism during the movement,

Telling the history of the Chicano movement has not only erased women's early participation; it has produced a masculine hegemony within those narratives, reinscribing dominant gender relations that were widely debated at the time. By examining the contested histories of gender and feminism in the Chicano movement, this study opens a path to telling the histories of women's mass involvement and their roles in changing our notions of Chicana/o politics in ways that have not been fully acknowledged or documented.

Women's involvement within the Chicano movement has been erased through masculine narratives denying the importance of women's work in creating change and organizing the community. Despite the fact that much of the work of organizing Chicano resistance was dependent on women's labor while simultaneously making it invisible. The gender division of labor depended on the notion that Mexican women needed to occupy that status of supporting male leadership rather than being leaders themselves. For instance, labor considered "women's work" was largely around preparation of food, secretarial or cleanup work, or other forms of internal organizing in the private sphere. Women were seldom given leadership roles that allowed for their involvement in public spaces as visible or outspoken leaders or community activists. Women's mass involvement in addition extended to other aspects of the movement such as the arts and cultural revitalization, Cherrie Moraga explains that, "much cultural recovery and celebration was made possible by the labor of women who made sure that Aztec warriors and (dancers) *Danzantes* had their regalia, or, symbolically, their feathers ironed" (1993:158). For that reason this chapter looks at the different dimensions of leadership that Chicana women have participated in since the Chicano Movement and afterwards within the cultural circuit and *Danza* groups.

## Leadership Roles within Danza Groups

Each Danza group is considered an autonomous circle and each group has its own set of positions and organizational structure. For example, Mario Aguilar (2009) describes the Danza circle formed by Danzantes as “teoyahualli,” sacred circle or family. He elaborates (2009: 27):

It is not just a circle in the physical sense, but it also speaks to the circle of meanings of Mexcoehuani identity, agency, empowerment, and transgenerational communication. The divine circle in Mexcoehuani sacred space connects the ancestors with the living and the descendants not yet born. The divine circle replicates the sphere of the dimension of time that envelops the other seven dimensions of indigenous thought: East, West, South, North, Up, Down, and Center.<sup>117</sup>

Aguilar describes the ways that the Danza circle has multiple meanings. The circle is considered profound and sacred and engenders transgenerational communication; where the past, present and future are one in the same. On a fundamental level each Danza circle is internally organized around several leadership positions. Beatrice Aguilar-Zamora describes the roles held within her group and provides details about the way Danza is internally structured. She explains, “in our mesa those are the people who have palabras in our circle and those people who are [sahumadoras], herederos de la palabra, segundo captains and then [Co-Captains]” (personal communication, October 14, 2011).<sup>118</sup> This structure is the general organization of most groups. More specifically, she details her permanent role as a Capitana:

So to me Danza is a fun thing that I do. It is a place that I go to release and enjoy and really relish my cultural heritage and at the same time because I married the Capitan of the group. I was given that role as

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<sup>117</sup> Aguilar (2009:5) defines Mexcoehuani as a unified, cultural, political, and spiritual identity that encompasses all the Mexican origin communities of Aztlan.

<sup>118</sup> These positions will be described below.

Capitana but I never think of myself as a Capitana in the way that I see other people who carry themselves as Capitanas. I don't feel like I have to do anything in a particular way for people or to tell people what to do [...] I know that I have this certain personal power and in our dance group I find myself being a leader kind of behind the scenes. I am the one asking the right questions to make sure that the right things get addressed.

More recently especially in the United States you have more women who are Capitanas on their own and they may be married or not or have a partner but they are actually the leaders of the group. (personal communication, October 14, 2011)

The title of Capitana is considered a high ranking leadership position within traditional Danza groups and indicates alliances with other groups in México. Though not all groups abide by this structure other terms include *jefas*, *palabras*, or simply group leader.<sup>119</sup> Though Zamora-Aguilar explains that women co-leaders are usually married to a Capitan (group leader) in which they are automatically placed in a high ranking leadership position through marriage. Over time however this practice has changed and more women become group leaders without being married and thus take on a more formal leadership role within the Danza circle. For instance, Earthy Montiel's group (Yolloincuahtli) co-Captain structure is different and she was granted full leadership as Capitana with another woman leader named Momé Anowos. She elaborates on how she received formal recognition to inherit group leadership in 1987:

At that time there were only twenty groups in the U.S. mainly in California around [1980s] and there were no groups in Arizona. We did not have *palabra* and we mainly practiced. Ed Mendoza and Max Martinez had received *palabra* from Tlackael. [At that point the group consisted of] four women and two men. Tlackael was here for awhile and gave them *palabra* and I continued with the guys. [Danza] was very new. They got really involved with the Native American church and they run those ceremonies. (personal communication, March 25, 2012)

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<sup>119</sup> In Spanish *jefa* means woman boss and *palabra* literally translates to word and in this context this term refers to the group leader and the sacred meaning of one's word and responsibility to the group.

I recall that Señora Cobb knew we had started practicing at my home on the reservation after I moved from Red Wind, a community located in the Los Padres National Forest (CA), about 1985. We did not want to forget the dances we had learned and there were a few danzantes in Arizona, but there were no other grupos in the state back then. I recall Señora said to Momé Anowos and I that ‘we didn't ask for palabra, but the elders have decided.’ The ceremony was not conducted during the actual symposia, but privately with danzantes and family present at the home of one of the danzantes. Momé and I conducted the grupo together until 2000, when she took a leave of absence. Momé previously danced with Toltecas during its first few years. She's the sister of Anai Aranda—who was also in Toltecas. Anai was my first maestra en la danza during the Red Wind years. Anai carries palabra for the grupo in Watsonville, California. I have continued carrying this fuego, Yolloincuahtli Danza Azteca [Corazon de la Aguila], aqui in Arizona for 27 years, since the age of 33. A short time compared to others in la danza. (personal communication, September 1, 2014)

According to Montiel in the 1980s Danza Azteca was primarily concentrated in California and had not developed in other places; at this time Montiel and Anowos continued to dance as an unofficial group. At the request of Danza elders including Florencio Yescas, Señora Cobb, and “Kuiz” Lopez, a symposium at the Heard Museum in Phoenix occurred in September 1987.<sup>120</sup> This gathering facilitated the need to begin a formal Danza group in Arizona and a ceremony was conducted in order for Montiel and Anowos to be recognized as official co-Capitanas of the Danza group, Yolloincuahtli (personal communication, March 25 2012). Montiel further explains that the lineage of her group came directly from Yescas.<sup>121</sup> He was supposed to attend the gathering in

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<sup>120</sup> Señora Angelbertha Cobb moved to Sacramento, California in 1963 and forms the first dance group in Otay. By 1967 she founded Quetzalcoatl, an Aztec and Folklorico dance group later named Folklor Mexicano de Angelbertha Cobb. Born in 1932 in Puebla, México she later became a professional dancer under the instruction of Florencio Yescas in México City between 1937-1948 (Luna 2011).

<sup>121</sup> Florencio Yescas is one of the first practitioners and teachers of Danza Azteca to arrive in the United States in 1975. He was born in 1920 in San Juan Tezompa, México and learned the Danza from his grandparents and mother (Aguilar 2009). For more on Florencio Yescas see: Aguilar (2009) and Luna (2012). It is also important to note that Andres Segura is considered the first “Mexican national” to practice and teach Danza Azteca in the United States in early 1970s. “Kuiz” Lopez assisted Señora Cobb

Arizona however he died in July of 1985 in California and Señora Cobb represented his palabra at this ceremony (personal communication, September 1, 2014).

The women's formal leadership thus came about in various ways, for Zamora-Aguilar she was granted the title Capitana because she married the groups primarily leader and for Montiel Danza elders looking to spread Danza Azteca across the southwest had sought her leadership because of her consistency within the unofficial group (personal communication, March 25 2012). Other ways that group leadership is acquired includes a change in leadership. Though this is rare, Vigil-Castañeda explained that she acquired a formal position in 1980 due to a shift in leadership. Between 1980 and 1982 Chicanas/os that attended Metro College in Denver and were activist in MEChA began to develop a Danza Azteca group which came to be known as Los Danzantes de ColorAztlán and then later Grupo Tlaloc (Donna Vigil-Castañeda, personal communication, June 23 2012).<sup>122</sup> Though her initial intentions were to study the traditions of Danza Azteca, Vigil-Castañeda chose to commit her life to "carrying on the culture" and accepted the position as primary group leader with her husband, Carlos Castañeda (personal communication, June 23 2012).<sup>123</sup> The position of group leader is usually permanent and entails a life time commitment to the group and the study of Danza Azteca.

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during this ceremony. Lopez is a Nahuatl-Huichol healer/medicine person. (personal communication, Earthy Montiel, September 1, 2014).

<sup>122</sup> For more on the development of Danza Azteca in Colorado see Maestas (1997)

<sup>123</sup> Vigil-Castañeda for over 30 years has been committed to position as lead group *sahumadora*; learning from other women within Danza and teaching these traditional practices to a younger generation of women in her group (personal communication, June 23 2012).



Aside from the position of group leader there are a number of other leadership roles that include: *sahumadora*, person who takes care of burning copal throughout practice or ceremony, *sargentos*, person who keeps order in the circle, *herederos de la palabra* are heirs usually children or family that inherit group leadership, and *segundo captain* who represents captain when not present. Zamora-Aguilar discusses the process of assigning leadership positions within her group, she says:

It depends on who you have in your group. A lot of time it's who you have in your group, that has been around long enough that you trust them to understand what needs to be done, that can help you with that, it's really that. I think some people see it as, 'Oh, I have a position and it's power' for us, we consider who has been around long enough, that we can trust, that they understand what it is to create a certain order in the circle. How should we lay the circle out? How should we make sure that there is order? [We] make sure that people are not destructing the flow of the energy of the circle. (personal communication, October 14, 2011)

She considers which person is capable of performing specific duties in order to maintain harmony within the Danza circle and this is a primary consideration in order for one to take on a leadership role. The duties or positions within a group are therefore not strictly defined by one's gender, but rather by the composition of the group and one's experience. She also points out a critical aspect of the Danza circle and the flow of the energy this usually entails creating a circle that will have "balance" and "harmony" perhaps placing an equal number of women and men on one side of the circle or placing a child next to a veteran dancer.<sup>124</sup>

Vigil-Castañeda explains the concept of duality within her Danza group, "We have duality within the circle. I hope that I have taught my nieces and some of the

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<sup>124</sup> This is very common for Danza practices and ceremonies. The sargento is in charge of placing people accordingly and making sure there is balance in the circle.

women to have an opinion in a good way. To respect men's roles, but also to know your role not to be stepped on because we are with our men and in Danza I have tried to let Carlos [Castañeda] take care of certain things because he is better at it and he has asked me to talk to women because I am better at it. He can't talk to women the way I can, like explaining protocol, or issues related to the women." Like Zamora-Aguilar, Vigil-Castañeda describes that people will be called upon to help based on what they are good at or the experience they have in maintaining group order. Vigil-Castañeda addresses how leadership roles for men and women are not necessarily different; however, the work women do is valued and unlike Western concepts of gendered labor, there is the potential for equality or what has been referred to as "duality" achieved within the circle. Vigil-Castañeda description of the group's duality is also known as gender complementarity within indigenous communities. As observed by Emma Cervone (2002), this concept is quite different from gender equality in liberal Western feminism. While gender equality argues that men and women are the same, and therefore should be given equal opportunities; on the other hand gender complementarity argues for "equality in diversity." Cervone (2002: 190) explains that, "women are not just like men, they are different; but it is precisely their difference that legitimizes their capabilities and establishes their rights to the same opportunities as men." Other Danzantes interviewed expressed similar views of gender complementarity within Danza circles. For example, a California male dancer explains that Danza is a place where he recognizes that Danza groups have the potential to achieve gender balance, "There is no separation of duties—a child, a mother, a father, man, woman, or whatever can do all the same things. We lead group, carry smoke, in our group that doesn't matter [gender separation]. Through the

genocide of our people we have become closer at least in our circle.”<sup>125</sup> In this way, indigenous ideas about gender, leadership, and working together center anti-colonial practices within Danza groups. This is critical today when mainstream ideas of gender and feminism often see men and women as separate, thus incapable of working together. This also challenges rigid notions of gender relations.

Yet it is not to say that Danza is an ideal space or that men do not garner male privilege or that men and women within Danza are incapable of harboring sexist attitudes or practices.<sup>126</sup> Like many other social or cultural communities, Danza is not exempt as a microcosm of the larger society, where white men and men of color in any social setting garner male privilege and politically have more power over women. In this way, all men are supported by patriarchal societies to enact sexism and therefore male privilege as they enter any sphere in society including alternative spaces.

### **Consciousness, Community, and Culture**

Each woman spoke of her awareness of racial differences and marginalization within dominant society. They critiqued the ways that dominant society repressed their histories or cultural experiences and therefore they began with the need to center culture as an importance part of history and their daily experiences. This was the impetus for their ideas regarding cultural survival and community empowerment. The women did not reject who they were within their culture nor did they readily assimilate into dominant culture as simply another “ethnic” group; instead, they resisted narratives of assimilation by actively participating in cultural spaces particularly indigenous traditions. For

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<sup>125</sup> Interview, male 34, San Francisco, CA. September, 2013

<sup>126</sup> For more on this topic see Luna (2011)

instance, Zamora-Aguilar describes the importance of maintaining cultural heritage, in this way:

You know we live in this society [on the] north side of the border. That is very color aware, very biased, and the easiest thing to do as a person of color is to opt out of that and totally buy into being “all-American.” The hardest thing to do is to hold on to what you have and to try to learn more about your own cultural heritage but the irony of that is by doing that I think you have a stronger comfort with who you are as a human being and what your place or role is in the universe. To me the Danza is very grounding and reminds me that life is a cycle, everything has its beginning, and its end. I don’t need to worry too much about all that stuff it’s all going to end anyway. So let me just enjoy the Momé nt. The Danza reminds me to enjoy the Momé nt. (personal communication, October 14, 2011)

Zamora-Aguilar and the women in this study realize that their cultural heritage is a source of empowerment and actively resist assimilation by not accepting a generic label or lifestyle of “all-American.” This empowered mental state is a way of thinking about oppression not necessarily as all defeating but engaging resistance. In other words, women leaders identify their oppression as a social construction and find ways to make their lives livable, bearable, and dignified. In this way, Danza is a radical space because it requires a “change in thought or consciousness,” one must first identify their subordination and then actively participate in socially conscious spaces that resist the status quo. Similarly, Vigil-Castañeda believes that through Danza people can gain cultural and historical awareness. She explains why Danza is important to maintain for the next generation.

So our people will continue to grow. So our history is not rewritten by people that know nothing about it and don’t have it in their heart. It’s different to know about it but to be from that heritage. It’s not the same for other people. To have it documented so we have a history and legacy to tell our kids so they know the truth by us, by their true ancestors and elders. [...] If we don’t sacrifice and do these ceremonies every year, if we

don't do this, who will do this? Who will carry it on for our kids? It will die and people will rewrite our history again, and we can't let that happen. Our people have struggled and died, and we always say we pray for those who have left and gone but did their best to carry this on and did their best to teach us, and to me it worked. We still exist. (personal communication, June 25, 2011)

In this way, Danza is also an archive of information and through this embodied knowledge, alternative versions of history unfold. Vigil-Castañeda addressed two major themes amongst the women interviewed one being the recovery of history and the maintenance of Native heritage. The importance of fostering an exchange of knowledge between generations of youth is necessary in order to sustain the cultural movement of Danza especially through the transmission of intergenerational teachings. For instance, the women teach and create opportunities to learn about Danza Azteca. Similarly, Montiel discussed the need to utilize the Danza ceremonial space as a teaching tool to promote cultural awareness amongst various indigenous communities. For instance, during her annual ceremony she makes it a point to provide a space where the cultural exchange of indigenous knowledge between Yaqui dancers and Danzantes are able to have an “informal” classroom.<sup>127</sup> She finds it important for indigenous communities to keep their stories and knowledge “alive” because she maintains that communities of color cannot depend on dominant institutions to preserve their histories or cultural knowledge (personal communication, March 25, 2012). The women’s leadership encompasses simultaneous activities such as alternative learning and communal prayers with the goal of contributing to community building and overall wellness.

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<sup>127</sup> Personal Observation March 24, 2012. Earthy is referring to the HB 2281—an Arizona law that banned Mexican American Studies classes in Tucson, Arizona in 2010.

### **Spiritual Matters: Politicizing the Spiritual**

When describing spirituality the women make a clear distinction between spirituality and religion, grounding the concept of spirituality within an indigenous framework and considering Danza as a form of “community prayer.” For instance Vigil-Castañeda, views the Danza community in a larger context by describing how the Chicana/o community benefits from the spiritual and healing aspect that Danza provides. She maintains that indigenous knowledge has the power to facilitate healing for the community.

Our people want that prayer and are more aware of our traditions and how our people use to pray to heal themselves and heal each other. People in our community call upon us because we are involved in this type of prayer—the way our indigenous ancestors used to pray. We express ourselves and give good words. I have seen a lot of healing in our community because of that. I have seen community prayers do more healing than going to Catholic Church and confessing on Sunday. It is the prayer people want; prayer and spirituality and in our community that is the connection we have as Chicanos. We all want the traditions of spirituality and prayer and that is how we connect with each other. We have been exposed to these traditions and we know the power of the prayer.

Tradition and culture has healed our people. A lot of our people and kids are still suffering. Now I really see Danza grabbing people by bringing happiness and spirituality in their lives. Learning to live in these different worlds, healing from society, drugs, alcohol, T.V., video games all this stuff is corrupt. We were not taught to have spirituality in our life. You have to have that to heal when things are going bad! These traditions and ceremonies help teach our people to be good mothers and father. To be good people in general. We need this in our community. Dancing and community prayer and to show people that there is a way to keep goodness in your home and your community. This starts in your home and spreads to the community. (personal communication, June 23, 2012)

For Vigil-Castañeda Chicana/o oppression and the intersection of Danza spirituality is capable of community empowerment. Her analysis of Danza spirituality is firmly rooted to the material reality of the experiences of Chicanas/os. In this way Danza has the potential to offer physical or emotional healing as spiritual empowerment and internal strength can be realized. This is one of the spiritual and yet practical lessons that Danza teaches. Danza spirituality is not simply a blind faith but instead used as a strategic tool for community building and wellness that has demonstrated results. In addition, Vigil-Castañeda emphasizes the importance of community healing and challenges us to consider the various strategies deployed to deal with community problems and she maintains that indigenous spirituality has the power to facilitate healing. Community problems of violence and drug abuse are both systemic and personal as indicated by Vigil-Castañeda (personal communication, June 23, 2012) and through the course of this research I have witnessed many Chicanas/Chicanos (non-Danzantes) reach out to Danza circles and group leaders for blessings, prayers, and other times seek ritualized ceremonies to help with trauma and healing.

Other ways that women leaders conceived of spirituality in practical ways contributed to community building within Danza. For instance, Zamora Aguilar describes the ways that Danza does this, she says:

The spiritual aspect of Danza gives me a very practical way to express a spiritual cycle of life. The daily interactions with people in the Danza, weekly practices, fiestas we have. The way that compadrismo has happened and all of that has created the family peace. People choose to be together— not a family that is born together but we have a connection of compadrismo to help each other through life. We all need that in our life, we are really alone in life at times—that is spiritual, giving thanks for the blessing we have. How do we support one another along the way? To me that is the spiritual piece of the Danza, and the ritual ceremonies that

we go to. The connection with people, you have something in common with these people you don't have with anyone else—not even your own families—it's almost like a different language that you speak when you are in those people's presence. It's a total acceptance of who you are. (personal communication, October 14, 2014)

For Zamora-Aguilar Danzantes choose to come together and support one another in their daily struggles. Danza spirituality is both a strategy for community building and necessary for ritualized ceremonies. The women of this study debunk limited ideas of activism by illustrating what I call “spiritual matters.” Spiritual activism is a practice and theory that concerns itself with the material conditions of oppression, while maintaining that the spiritual condition of the community is equally necessary for community empowerment. This approach can also be read as a feminist critique of patriarchal society, because women and people of color have been largely seen as objects rather than rational or spiritual beings. Ultimately mind, body, and spirit are critical to understanding how Danza Azteca is more than a cultural performance but a space for women to assert their agency.

Arizona group leader of Danza Yolloincuahutli, Earthy Montiel elaborates on the sacredness and the spiritual elements within the Danza circle, she says: “In the circle around the altar we are all connected to each other. There is an umbilical cord that each of us has to the center, to creator-god. All the elements are there—smoke, air, earth this represents all of creation. It's a personal and spiritual connection we each have to this camino de la luz other tribes call this the red road.<sup>128</sup> This is a basic principle of Danza (personal communication, September 1, 2014). In this way, Danza is sacred, personal, and communal though the dancers come together to create a circle and each are

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<sup>128</sup> El camino de la luz translates to the road of the light.



connected to the life force and earth's elements. Water, fire, and air are placed on the altar at the center of the circle and each dancer has a personal and spiritual connection to their journey in life and within Danza.

Danza Azteca is a practice that refuses to separate mind, body, and spirit from decolonization and social justice. Danzante and community counselor from Colorado, Veronica Ramirez provides a holistic understanding of community wellness and the ways that dancers benefit from participating. She writes, "Danza Azteca is a culturally relevant structure that also uses rhythm, space, circle and prayer as a fundamental element to support expression, identity, cultural awareness, and positive community."<sup>129</sup> I would further add that people use Danza as a way to empower their everyday lives and see it as a useful way to engage their communities and their families. In addition to community building and spiritual centering women described other "practical" and personal ways that danza enables self-growth and learning. Mexicana women's leadership within danza offers insight into the complexity of community activism, cultural resistance, communal prayer, and women's roles; as well as expanding limited ideas of their activism.<sup>130</sup>

### **Danza as a Way of Life**

Finally, in our conversations the women reflected upon their first encounters with Danza and their continued commitment and loyalty. Montiel describes how she was called to Danza. She details her vision:

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<sup>129</sup>Veronica Ramirez M.A. in Somatic Counseling Psychology thesis Boulder, CO.

<sup>130</sup>To date most studies focus on the history or the structure of Aztec dance and its cultural embodiment of the Mexican experience. See Veronica Valadez, Jennie Luna, Mario Aguilar, Susana Rostas, Teresa Cesena, etc. I will provide an extensive bibliography on danza resources at the end of this document. For more on this topic see *Chicana Leadership: The Frontiers Reader* (Nebraska: University of Nebraska Press, 2002) edited by Yolanda Flores Niemann, et al.

One time I was at this Christian church, and I had a vision; there was la Luna, the moon, and this dancer was on the moon and it came down and said, “Pray to me”. He said, “You’re going to dance for God; that is how you are going to pray”. I am in this church and they say they don’t dance; it’s against their rules. So I walked out and never went back. I thought it meant Sundance, and I did Sundance for three years. I kept remembering that vision that I would dance for god. (personal communication, March 25, 2011)

Each woman describes it as a “way of life” and express a deep love for the practice, for instance, Vigil-Castañeda reflects on her first encounter with Danza, “When I first saw the Danzantes it grabbed my heart, it was beautiful and I wanted to learn” (personal communication, June 25, 2011). Similarly, Zamora- Aguilar details her first encounter with Danza as a life changing Moment. She elaborates on her experience at Cal State Fullerton in 1976:

One day I was involved with the Chicano Studies Department and we were having a taco sale. I am making tacos and all of a sudden these Danzantes come in. I had never seen anything like it in my life. I didn’t even know that Native Americans still danced. I didn’t know anything even though I had read a lot of Chicano Studies books. I see these Danzantes coming. I still remember—I am cutting meat—I *was like oh my god!* I put everything down and said, ‘*I will be back.*’ I had to go see these Danzantes. I go over to sit and they didn’t have a microphone there was no communication with the audience except the Danza. There was no talk but it was such an emotionally moving experience for me. I was sitting on the grass watching them, getting chills— that feeling when all the little hairs stick up. I felt like, *oh my god*, what is going on, actually getting teary. I did not know what I was watching but this thing was really powerful. So I watched them dance. They came in, they danced, then they left—that was it. (personal communication, October 14, 2011)

All the women described their powerful connection to witnessing Danza for the first time however; it was more than a “beautiful” first encounter eventually the women would commit over thirty years to the practice of Danza Azteca. What motivates these women leaders to serve their communities is both profound and political as they recover the

sacred. Their leadership and participation are not singular rather they are layered and multidimensional which encompass both political and spiritual reasons. As I got to know them throughout the years I witnessed a deep, private, intimate, spiritual, and political motivation for their continued commitment to maintain the cultural space of Danza Azteca. For many practitioners, and especially for group leaders, Danza is a lifelong commitment; it is a way “a way a life” that comes with a great deal responsibility. The women within Danza weave their notion of leadership into the range of their everyday life. They articulate ways that culture and Danza are an integral aspect of improving the quality of life for their group, the larger network of Danzantes, and the larger community. All expressed that maintaining Danza groups results in a better environment for themselves, their communities, and their families. Each woman has the goal of making a difference in the community and through Danza provides positive community spaces and healing.

The women’s dedication to keeping indigenous heritages alive and the need to continually resist assimilation has been grounded in their ongoing participation. The women were invested in keeping indigenous cultural traditions alive by engaging the community and being present and in doing so, they incorporated Danza into their daily lives and surrounding communities as cultural workers. In this way, prayer, dance, and culture contribute to community cohesion made possible by the organizing that the women created through their leadership. Women’s leadership in Danza is multifaceted, and their participation and membership ensure the recovery and survival of the dance tradition though they not only recover indigenous knowledge through the body—their leadership is rooted in survival strategies of the colonized. These strategies refuse to

allow the dying of people, of culture, and of indigenous wisdom, and spirituality in order to empower their communities as a response to devastating community problems. Their dedication to Danza Azteca allows for an alternative form of community as a way to negotiate colonization.

By allowing us to view their lives, even from afar, Vigil-Castañeda, Zamora-Aguilar, and Montiel gives us a glance of daily life as a Chicana in Danza leadership, expressing their ideas about Danza spirituality, history, and the next generation. Through their experiential knowledge and narratives we are able to learn more about women's leadership and cultural politics within Danza Azteca. The leadership that women have cultivated within Danza Azteca is largely based on the politics of Native dance and community empowerment. The women leaders of Danza conceptualized leadership in terms of collective community empowerment rather than the power of one individual. Their participation through cultural and political work has fostered positive community formations for youth, men, and women, providing an empowering atmosphere that attempts to deal with real life community challenges. Though the interviews do not provide a complete picture of their lives as Chicanas in Danza it does however begin to place Chicanas into the history of the region in relationship to Danza leadership and larger Chicana/o cultural politics.



Figure 3.2 Donna Vigil-Castañeda San Diego, CA 2011 (Yañez) Donna Vigil-Castañeda has been a consistent group leader in the Denver area for over three decades and has firsthand knowledge of the growth and development of Danza Azteca in the region. As a teenager she attended Escuela Tlatelolco Centro Estudios and is a primarily leader in maintaining Danza Azteca with her group Tlaloc for the youth and larger community in the Denver area.



Figure 3.3 Beatrice Zamora-Aguilar San Diego, CA 2012 (Yañez) Beatrice Zamora-Aguilar is one of the first women in the United States to be recognized as co-Captain of the Danza group, Mexi'cayotl. She is currently co-founder of Mexi'cayotl Indio Cultural Center that dedicates itself to the preservation of Native American traditions in the Southwest.



Figure 3.4 Earthy Montiel Sacramento, CA 2013 (Yañez) Earthy Montiel was involved in key movements throughout the United States such as Wounded Knee in South Dakota, Red Winds in California, and the development of Danza in Arizona. Today Earthy lives on the Pima Maricopa Reservation in Arizona. She continues as Capitana in the Phoenix area of the group Yolloincuahtli. She is the health systems analyst for the intertribal council of Arizona and has helped write proposals that helped make it possible to get a deep water well funded, a green house, and many other projects related to Chicano and Native issues.

## **Epilogue: Sacrifice My Heart: Danza Azteca Style in the Streets**

I live near San Ysidro, a small border town that lies minutes away from Tijuana, Mexico. The U.S.-Mexican border is one of the busiest borders in the world, with hundreds of thousands of people moving back and forth every day to visit family, get to work, or shop on the American side of the border; it is estimated that close to four million people cross within a year's time. Through the movement of so many brown bodies I witness policing and surveillance on a daily basis and how whiteness is maintained through phenotype, accents, legal documents, and citizenship status. Policing and surveillance are not limited to this border town; I can also visit UC San Diego in La Jolla or turn on the television or search the web and see these same types of things taking place. The panopticon seems to be everywhere; even my neighborhood taco shop is crawling with cops and border patrol agents who glare at me with harsh stares. Yet, on other days in the same neighborhood I see Mexicans living their lives, celebrating their culture, speaking in Spanish, children playing in the grass, and Danzantes performing at community events. These brown people do not only come to toil in the United States nor are they merely victims of racial, classist, and sexist hierarchies. Mexicans have migrated and moved across this continent for centuries and within this movement they have done many things in the United States.

As an ethnic studies ethnographer I am interested in the ways that oppressed people organize and mobilize themselves, build community in the face of repression, think about and discuss their racialized, sexualized, and classed positions within American society, not merely as victims of oppressive social hierarchies but as agents in their own lives. How then do aggrieved peoples take control of their destinies and the



very bodies they inhabit, as people of color who are under constant surveillance and suspicion? One way is the documentation of history through images—such as Elizabeth Martinez’s *500 years of Chicana Women’s History* (2008) and Spencer R. Herrera’s *Sagrado, A Photopoetics across the Chicano Homeland* (2013). Similarly, Mexican Danzantes, through documenting their own stories in pictures have taken control of their bodies through the politics of Native dance and kinetic movement displayed in public spaces.<sup>131</sup> The dancers have turned the lenses on themselves and through the proliferation of information on the internet such as websites, blogs, pictures, and videos Danzantes have been able to produce their own knowledge, circulate their own images, and historical narratives surrounding their experiences as indigenous peoples. It is through the information age and of heightened globalization we are able to witness the interconnectedness of many different people and cultures across the Americas.

“Aztlán is everywhere I have walked” is a quote found in Roberto Rodríguez’s self-published book, *X in La Raza* (1996). This could not be more true when referencing the presence of Danzantes in the United States. Danzantes are everywhere, not just in my immediate community, but also in the greater San Diego area and across the United States: at the head of immigrant rights marches throughout California, protest rallies of all kinds, neighborhood and city parks, high schools and universities, performing at multicultural events along with Hula dancers and other traditional dancers from around the world; they “present” at academic conferences and dance at Native American powwows, weddings, funerals, and quinceañeras. On the surface, however it may seem

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<sup>131</sup> Kinetic movement or motion of material bodies and forces of energy associated with it; it is active, lively, dynamic and energizing.

like a spectacle; a Native dance performance with theatrical elements. Smoke and fire (copal resin burning) in hand held clay pots, dancers turning to the four directions and chanting in Nahuatl, conch shells blowing, women, children and men of all ages dressed in vibrant colors, shiny, and sparkling materials that glisten as they turn in the sun. Of course this type of cultural expression may catch anybody's attention and it often does. On-lookers of all ethnicities stop to take photos and video with their camera-phones, they watch, and they smile. Some even sit for hours to gaze at the dancers move in harmony to loud drum beats. When the dancing is done, or the dancers take a water break, people rush them for pictures. Spectators are happy and eager to take a photo with the "Aztec" dancer in full regalia as if they were a rarity or something come to life out of a museum; at the same time some dancers seem to relish in the attention. In addition, I too took photographs throughout the course of this research. While in certain ceremonial spaces or gatherings it was inappropriate for me to take pictures and so I refrained, at other times when it was acceptable for me to take pictures during public events it was difficult to get clear shoots of the dancers in action because the scene was overcrowded with spectators and dancers, and five-foot long feathers in movement, and a lot of turning and jumping so that I often captured the back of heads or blurred images.

The plumed dancers that adorned multi-colored "headdresses" or penachos and brown people moving in unison to indigenous instruments like the teponaztli and flutes, were not the only things that caught my attention. The dancers had something to *say* and simultaneously had something to "show" the community. I was surprised because as a young girl I received scholarships to dance at an exclusive and predominantly white dance studio in central California. I was taught primarily through European dance

teachings, that a dancer learns their choreography, typically to prerecorded music in preparation with other dancers. Our goal as performers was to dance in union to the beat of the music as we secretly counted in our heads. Once the performance was over we immediately rushed off the stage. We learned routines not necessarily with deep meaning but *to perform* with exaggerated smiles and acrobatic skill.

It was obvious at least to someone interested in dance that Danza Azteca did not operate in a western dance framework. It didn't seem like anyone was counting and not everyone was showing off, there was no center stage, just a circle of dancers. Toddlers and elders danced not necessarily instep with one another, some young men were limber and others were not, some women were graceful and some were not. When the performances were done dance leaders often spoke to crowds about the purpose of the dances. These dances had ancient meanings that resurrected their ancestors' indigenous epistemologies. For instance, a certain "paso" or movement in the dance called venado (the deer dance) symbolized lightening. As the dancer turned quickly it was imperative to arch and point the feet on the landing. In the dance called Quetzalcoatl<sup>132</sup> it was important to preserve every step because it had ancient meaning, "This step here is a very old step, a pre-Columbian step, it's very hard [you place your foot to the side and cross over with your other foot] some dancers are too lazy to do this paso," says one group leader. Other dances are about harvest, mother earth, fire, rain, or tell specific stories important to indigenous peoples in the Americas. Historical knowledge and ancestral memory is embedded in the movement itself, its preserved meaning connects the dancers

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<sup>132</sup> Quetzalcoatl is the feathered serpent deity of the Mexica, Toltec, and others of the Mesoamerican society.

to their ancestors that had once danced these steps. This type of dancing had a message about the “Mexican experience” in the Americas which allows for alternative forms of knowledge production and provides a variety of learning methods through bodily movement and oral tradition because the dancers have to be present in order to learn the dance but they also receive instruction about the meaning of the dance.

I learned something new when group leaders addressed the community in attendance. With microphone in hand many echo the same type of sentiments, “We are Mexican people. We are indigenous to these lands and we dance not in our costumes but in our traditional regalia. We dance to honor ourselves and our ancestors. We indigenous people are still alive. Many things have happened but we are still alive, don’t believe those lies. Let’s teach the young people. Know your history and you will know yourself.”<sup>133</sup> This quote summarizes some of the main themes addressed throughout the dissertation, including, the contestation of white history primarily reiterated in public schools and resistance toward anti-Mexican sentiment in American society that circulates stereotypical messages and images of Mexicans. Danzantes reiterated an interest in Mexican indigenous culture and connecting to their roots and ancestors, community uplift, and spiritual healing. Yet others described the love and the joy they experienced while dancing and being a part of a larger Danza community in the U.S. and México. For example, long time Danzante says, “We choose to be here, we choose to be friends and familia and we choose to be Danzantes [...] it is something that brings us a lot of happiness when we are dancing” (Aguilar 2009: 313). Yet others discuss their bodily

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<sup>133</sup>[http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xLpeuYbF0c&feature=results\\_main&playnext=1&list=PLD835EDA-AA4E653C7](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xLpeuYbF0c&feature=results_main&playnext=1&list=PLD835EDA-AA4E653C7)

sacrifice and see it as an offering, “To dance is to wake up mother earth and give her the offering of our energy and joy” (Luna 2011:45) and others describe their dancing as a sacrifice, “We dance for many reasons and we sacrifice our bodies, our flesh to dance upon the earth. First, we ask permission with our feet. We dance for hours upon hours enduring bloody feet and blisters but it is our sacrifice, our prayer to give of ourselves in this way, to honor all that has come before us and to honor ourselves. I leave a piece of my heart there for everyone.”<sup>134</sup>

The following photos document the joy of Danza, its cultural politics, and the modern day contradictions and its negotiation with American society. The pictures reveal how Native culture and identity is constantly changing and interacting with dominant society, yet it remains an important element in Chicana/o and Mexican life. I took to the streets to document “snapshots” of events, people, and places important to my research though it is only a glimpse into the entire scene, Moment, and movement; these images nevertheless provide critical ways to understand the practice of Danza Azteca in terms of cultural politics and visual representation. Visual methodology scholars refer to this as “street photography” a genre of photo making with the desire to capture life as it apparently is (Rose 2007). Though I do not think that any photograph, documentary, theory, or book can capture all of life’s complexity without leaving something out nonetheless these cultural productions are still useful in helping us understand the socio-cultural politics in everyday life. I am also aware of the fact that each viewer will have their own visceral reaction to the photos, however, Danza Azteca is situated within in a particular framework of cultural politics, self-representation, and the reclamation of the

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<sup>134</sup> Interview, female 38, San Diego, CA. October, 2013.

body and public space through Native dance. The photo archive offers additional lenses with which to consider the ideas and materials within this research. The photos below help to explain the insurmountable social problems and phenomena that theory can only attempt to describe. Textual analysis can be limiting, especially in regards to expressive cultural practices, because text cannot capture the visuality, the aesthetic, or the artistic dimensions of Danza Azteca. The photo archive thus enhances the text and situates the dancer in a particular context if only as a “snapshot.”

I analyze pictures taken at events such as protest rallies, Chicano Park, Powwows, and public Danza ceremonies. In addition, I have collaborated with long time Danzante and professional photographer from New York, Gustavo Rodriguez, and have utilized some of his photographs. Inspired by his work I became interested in documenting Danza’s visual culture. These images showcase places, people, and artwork in relation to understanding how Chicanos and Natives illustrate a hemispheric approach to indigeneity and other cultural politics regarding Native traditions. In this way, the images encourage the reader to contemplate Danza in all its complexity, contradictions, and especially its celebratory aspect. Dancing in the streets is a way of life and a celebration of community survival and like their ancestors the Mexica often danced in the streets. Danza practitioner and scholar Raquel Hernandez Guerrero (2003: 33-34) addresses the public life of dance and art for the ancient Mexica, writing:

Prior to the Spanish conquest dance was an integral part of the political, spiritual, and ceremonial sphere of the Mexica State. It was often on display for the entire community. At some point most community members would participate. There were always public festivities in preparation or in performance, and some festivities would overlap with others. Each month had its own special fiestas, performances, and sacrifices. Each demographic played important roles in ceremonial public

spheres depending on the festivity and/or deity being honored [...] Aztec public spectacle and ceremony included dance, song, poetry, and music in the main plaza and temples, as well as sometimes being taken to the streets and barrios of the city.

Similarly, Danza Azteca is always interacting with the community as an important aspect of the dance practice. These cultural workers create and support empowering cultural practices in their own communities. An ethnographic approach allowed me to connect theory and praxis. I went into the community to ask pressing questions about white supremacy and Mexican activism through group organizing and expressive cultural practices. As the research has shown, Native dance is not a passive dance form, but an act of social resistance—a living and evolving history that sabotages Eurocentric frameworks of who and what Mexicans are but especially the political implications of such a practice and how it undermines a hegemonic power structure. In this way the photographs help me tell these stories in different ways and from a different angle, yet support my ideas about the cultural politics of Native dance. They are organized thematically around the major issues of self-representation, visual culture of Mexican indigeneity, and protest within what I call the cultural circuit. Ultimately, this dissertation has been about the politics of being alive and surviving and choosing life—particularly Native lifeways in a colonial world.



Figure E.1 Red Bird touching Danza drum in San Diego, CA 2012 (Yañez) This image shows Kiowa elder Red Bird touching the “heart beat” of the Danza circle. The crowd awaits the opening blessing and dance performed by Danzantes for the celebration of Chicano Park Day.

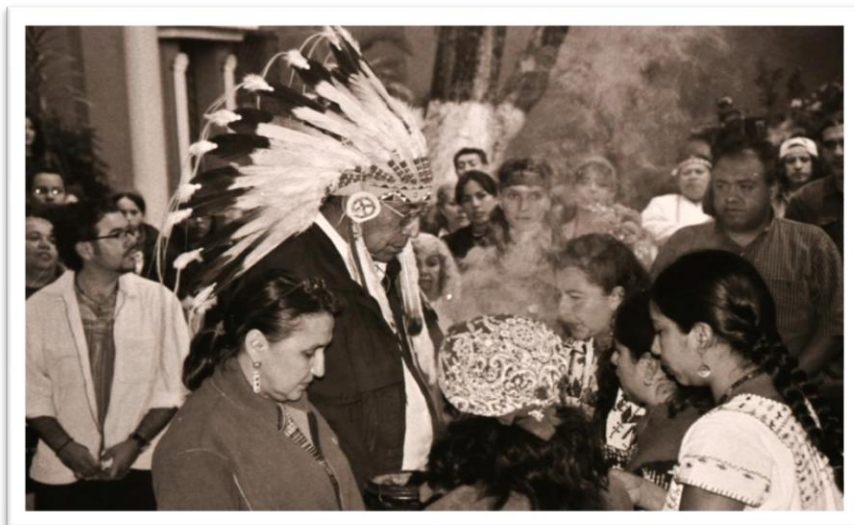


Figure E.2 Chief Looking Horse at Danza ceremony in México City (Rodriguez) This image shows Chief Looking Horse being blessed by copal at a Danza ceremony in México City. Both these images display social interaction cultivated in the cultural circuit and demonstrates relations between Chicano and Natives as a site of productive interaction.



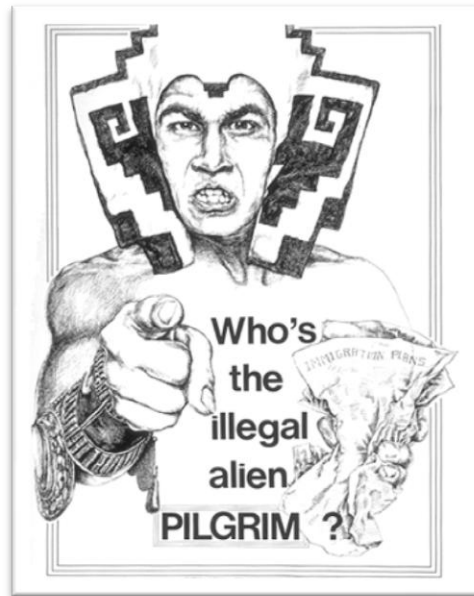


Figure E.3 Yolanda M. Lopez, 1978<sup>135</sup> Chicana artist Yolanda Lopez has been influential in subverting ethnic and gender stereotypes.



Figure 5.4 Velacion Ceremony, San Ysidro, CA July 2012 (Yañez) Chicana/os and Natives have often disputed the illegal occupation of the Americas and thus the imposition of colonial borders. Popular images like Yolanda Lopez's "Whose the illegal alien Pilgrim?" and slogans such as "We didn't cross the borders, the borders crossed us" as a way to subvert dominant paradigms of illegality, nation-building, and belonging.

<sup>135</sup> National Museum of Mexican Art Permanent Collection (Chicago, IL)



Figure E.5 Velacion (Rodriguez) The Velacion is an all night vigil performed before a major Danza ceremony.



Figure E.6 Florencio Yescas (unknown)<sup>136</sup> Florencio Yescas is one of the first practitioners and teachers of Danza Azteca to arrive in the United States in the early 1970s.



Figure E.7 Florencio Yescas, San Diego, CA (Yañez) This image depicts Yescas on a Chicano Park mural in Danza Azteca regalia.

<sup>136</sup> [www.pinterest.com](http://www.pinterest.com)



Figure E.8 “Modern Day Mexica” San Diego, CA 2012 (Yañez) This image juxtaposes an ancient past within the modern moment thereby creating subject positions that lead to seemingly contradictory identities yet speak to the evolution of all cultural practices. I consider Danzantes to be “modern day Mexica” who can navigate multiple social worlds and are skilled at many things such as multiple languages and cultures, traditional ceremonial practices, and various professions. Danzantes do not simply struggle to represent themselves as indigenous peoples but ultimately fight for their humanity within American society. Dancers often revealed how a stereotypical image of “Indianness” lead to narrow ideas of what it means to be an indigenous person in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. These stereotypes create static and prehistoric notions of indigenous peoples and their cultures. For example, Anne McClintock (1995) refers to as anachronistic space, in which the colonized are disavowed and are considered irrational and inherently out of place in the historical time of modernity. In this way a real Indian must be the pre-colonial Indian; one cannot be modern and Indian at the same time. While on the other hand, the humanity of whites or Euro-Americans is in no way questioned, they are “simply” human despite the colonial era. David Moore (2010: 45) makes clear of the ways the white manhood and American authenticity is never contested, he asserts, “True Americans or Europeans need not wear powdered wigs [clocks, breeches, stockings and low-heeled shoes], yet true Indians must wear feathers.” Native Americans are constructed, “only in counterpoint to White values, as a metaphor in the struggle between savagery and civilization” (Berkhofer 1949: 93). Native authenticity therefore is a European construct and colonial discourse of domination that polices who gets to be seen as legitimately indigenous and what that means from colonial perspective.



Figure E.9 James Luna “Half-Indian/Half-Mexican” 1991<sup>137</sup> James Luna’s self-portrait “Half-Indian/Half-Mexican” was intended to confront people’s expectations and fallacies regarding visual stereotypes of a “true Indian” and specifically authenticity debates about Mexicans and Native Americans as to, “Who’s the Real Indian?” The photographic triptych is Luna’s response to the stereotypical labeling and expectations about his mixed Luiseño and Mexican heritage. A dialogue accompanying the display states, “I am Half Indian and Half Mexican. I am half many things. I am half compassionate/I am half unfeeling. I am half happy/I am half angry.” Colonial Euro-American constructions of native authenticity and “Indianness” have served to manipulate and create tensions amongst indigenous peoples because they have endured mainstream’s essentializing, othering, and stereotyping. Jana Sequoya-Magdaleno (1995:88) has argued that an “administratively produced difference is [...] culturally inscribed as the standard of identity cohering American Indian diversity.”

<sup>137</sup> Luna, James. Archival Materials. Vertical Files. Museum of Photographic Arts, Edmund L. and Nancy K. Dubois Library, San Diego, CA.



Figure E.10 Female Danzante Holding Picket Sign in Los Angeles, CA (unknown)<sup>138</sup> It is common to see Danzantes at various political marches and rallies throughout the country. Some groups directly involve themselves with overlapping social movements and are considered more politically involved with direct action protests. On the other hand, other groups choose to support other movements in different ways and are less involved in those particular movements yet they focus on other issues relevant to Danza and their dance group. In my analysis whether a Danza group labels itself as “political” or not it nevertheless represents a “protest politics” given the history of Mexican marginalization and indigenous suppression in the Americas. Danza is a form of resistance against forced assimilation and erasure of their indigenous traditions. By being present at political events or other community gatherings Danzantes reclaim their bodies and public space to convey a political message and to represent themselves on their own terms. Note the police officers in the background of the photo.

<sup>138</sup> Photo from Facebook, unknown photographer accessed March 9<sup>th</sup>, 2013 at 5:32 p.m.



Figure E.11 Police Officers at Chicano Park Day, San Diego, CA 2011 (Yañez) Police surveillance within Chicano/Mexican neighborhoods and community events is common. The Chicano Park Celebration commemorates when residents demanded a park for Barrio Logan in April of 1970. Today this family event is free and open to the public. The day's events are easy going and peaceful and filled with music, dancing, vendors, taco stands, artwork, speakers, a car show, and many activities children can partake in. At least to my knowledge specifically from 2006-20013 there has never been any sort of violence or a need for such an excess amount of police officers readily available. In 2007 the Minutemen, a vigilante anti-immigrant group that seeks to patrol the U.S. - Mexican border, attempted to protest the community celebration. Chicano Park Day goes paid little attention to them and continued on with the festivities in the park and by noon the Minutemen groups from San Diego and Escondido had dispersed.



Figure E.12 “Barrio Logan” San Diego, CA 2012 (Yañez) Danzantes usually dance in barrios as a form of community empowerment and as a way to inspire youth and other community members. It is through this public and community visibility that those less familiar with Danza either learn about it for the first time or eventually join Danza groups.





Figure E.13 Powwow, Chula Vista, CA 2011 (Yañez) This image is from the first annual Chula Vista Powwow in 2011. It exemplifies that way that picture taking in the cultural circuit is common (note various photographers). Often when Euro-American academics “study” communities and history other than their own they are considered objective or neutral free and remain incapable of interrogating their white privilege and internalized dominance (Torres 2003). Yet when people of color conduct research on their communities they are seen as subjective and thought to be unqualified for such projects because they are “too close” to the research and therefore biased and in general their work is not taken seriously. The imperialist gaze has a long history that continues in the present constructing the “other” as deviant, irrational, lazy, stupid, and non-human. Anthropologists along with other Eurocentric academics have formulated racist and sexist opinions through empirical, qualitative, and quantitative research their misrepresentations are widely expressed throughout dominant culture. These images and narratives are circulated and articulated in literature, research, classrooms, textbooks, film, news broadcasting, popular culture, and the law. The uneven historical relations of power define the “other,” by those who look and those who are looked upon.<sup>139</sup>

<sup>139</sup> For more on cultural racism, academic racism, and scientific racism see: *From Negro to Savage and Anthropology and the Racial Politics of Culture* by Lee D. Baker, *Thicker than Blood*, by Tukufu Zuberi, “Telling It Like It Is: The Role of Race, Class, & Culture in the Perpetuation of Learning Disability as a Privileged Category for the White Middle Class” by Wanda J. Blanchett, *Disability Studies Quarterly* Vol 30, No 2 (2010), “Who Are We? The Hispanic Challenge” by Samuel Huntington, “The Instability of Human Types,” by Franz Boas, *The Children of Sanchez: Autobiography of a Mexican Family and Five Families: Mexican Case Studies in the Culture of Poverty* by Oscar Lewis, “The Negro Family: The Case for National Action” by Daniel Patrick Moynihan, *The Bell Curve* by Charles Murray, *Representation: Cultural Representations and Signifying Practices*, by Stuart Hall and et al, and the work of Critical Race Theorist.

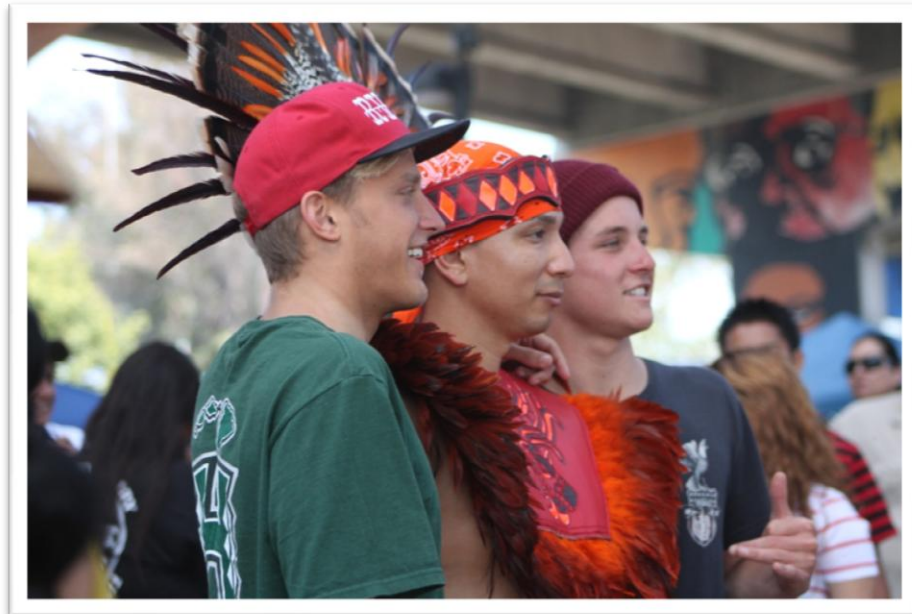


Figure E.14 “Cool” Chicano Park, San Diego, CA 2012 (Yañez) Picture taking in the cultural circuit is common. These images show how spectators make an effort to take pictures with Danzantes and most of the time dancers eagerly oblige.



Figure E.15 “Proud” Chicano Park, San Diego, CA 2012 (Yañez) In the above three images I captured people taking pictures of or with dancers; acting as a “third gaze.” It is important to note that none of these people personally know one another.



Figure E.16 “Pan de Muerto” Pro’s Ranch Market, New Mexico 2012 (Yañez) 30 years ago Danza Azteca was not a prevalent activity and few people practiced it in the United States. However, as the dance form became more commonplace amongst Chicano/Mexican communities throughout the Southwest and the United States other Mexican indigenous traditions like Dia de los Muertos became more widespread. Both these practices were not as common as one might think today. For example, it was impossible to buy Pan de Muerto at panaderias, a critical component in building altars for the departed (los muertos).<sup>140</sup> Annually Danza groups celebrate this tradition by honoring the dead through ceremonial rituals and the creation of altars. Over time these traditions became popularized entering mainstream venues like museums and universities; it is even practiced by non-Mexicans. On May 1<sup>st</sup>, 2013 Disney and Pixar Animation Studios Inc. sought to trademark "Dia de los Muertos" for an animated movie. “Disney had hoped to secure the naming rights for merchandise such as snack foods and Christmas ornaments.”<sup>141</sup> Many in the Latino community saw this as cultural appropriation and exploitation. A petition on Change.org circulated to stop the Disney effort and within a four day period 21,000 signatures were gathered. After the backlash Disney withdrew its application for trademark registration. These cultural practices now seem normal and no longer appear to be the result of collective efforts that sought to ensure these traditions for future generations of Mexicans. It is precisely because of the leadership and active participants in Danza that these traditions have been made readily available facing fewer stigmas and gaining some acceptance.

<sup>140</sup> Interview Mario Aguilar, Chula Vista, CA October 2010

<sup>141</sup> [http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2013/05/09/disney-day-of-the-dead\\_n\\_3246317.html](http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2013/05/09/disney-day-of-the-dead_n_3246317.html). Along with other merchandise such as jewelry, footwear, clothing, toys, backpacks, and clocks. For more on this topic see Rebecca A. Tsosie, Reclaiming Native Stories: An Essay on Cultural Appropriation and Cultural Rights 2002 in Arizona State Law Journal, Vol. 34, p. 299, 2002, Stanley Brandes, The Day of the Dead, Halloween, and the Quest for Mexican National Identity, The Journal of American Folklore, Vol. 111, No. 442 (Autumn, 1998), pp. 359-380, James O. Young, Cultural Appropriation and the Arts Kent Ono, Deciphering Pocahontas: Unpackaging the Commodification of a Native American Woman, Critical Studies in Media Communication, 18:1, 23-43, 2001 Routledge



Figure E.17 Young Girl with Muertos Face Paint (unknown)<sup>142</sup> Day of the Dead has become popular amongst non-Mexican people. The above image shows a young Euro-American girl participating in Day of the Dead events at her school.

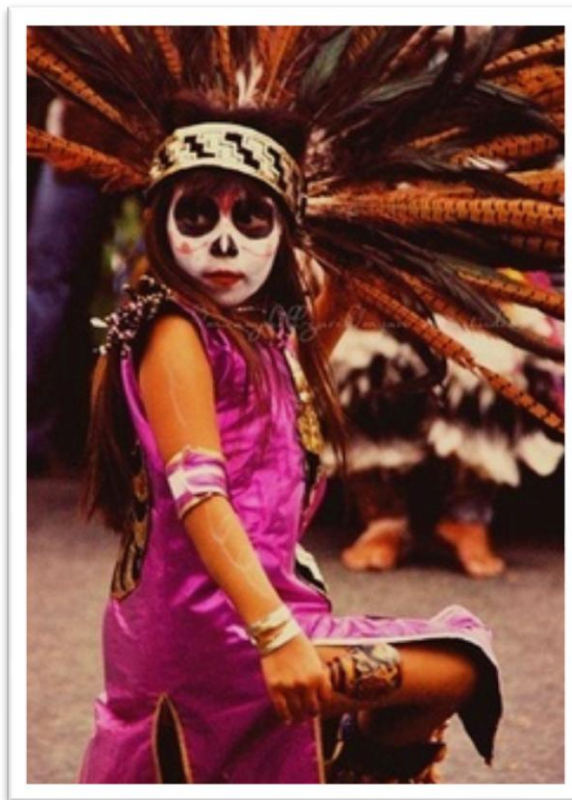


Figure E.18 Young Danzante dancing for Day of the Dead celebration (MayanSoffia)<sup>143</sup> This image depicts a younger generation of Mexicans participating in Day of the Dead celebrations in the United States.

<sup>142</sup> <http://beyondtheframe.files.wordpress.com/2013/11/dia1.jpeg>

<sup>143</sup> MyanSoffia Photography, Dia de los Muertos Los Angeles



Figure E.19 Dad carrying child, Pala Indian Reservation 2012 (Yañez) During my initial investigations for this project comments by others often referred to Danza as a “macho” activity.<sup>144</sup> People that had limited knowledge of the practice or had witnessed it a few times in public described images of Mexican men “beating” on drums as a common association in relation to Danza. These comments came within academic settings from professors, class seminars, and conference presentations. These assumptions of Danza being a male activity erase the large number of women and girl participants and leadership within Danza groups across the nation and in Mexico. These statements illuminate racist stereotypes of Mexican men while simultaneously ignoring the majority of female participants. On the contrary, Mexican men do much more within Danza groups than “beat on drums,” they make and sew regalia, they organize Danza events, they cook and clean, they care for their children, and mentor youth within Danza groups.

<sup>144</sup> For more on “machismo” see Castillo (1994), Garcia, ed. (1997), and Anzaldúa (1987)



Figure E. 20 Woman Drummer, Gina Carmelo Los Angeles, CA (unknown) Some women play drums within Danza groups, which are typically seen as an instrument that only indigenous men play. There are however diverging viewpoints about the role of women and playing drums. Some group leaders see it as a “masculine” activity and a skill that only men should be able to enact and in these Danza groups women are not allowed to play the drum. This ideology is heavily influenced by northern Native tribes that do not allow women to play drums in any type of ceremony. On the other hand, other men and group leaders within other Danza groups do not distinguish between genders and allow both men and women to play drums within the group.



Figure E.21 “Young Women” Danzantes San Jose, CA (Rodriguez) Chicana youth make up the majority of dance group members and to date no study regarding Danza Azteca provides a comprehensive gender analysis or investigates women’s membership or participation therefore; little theoretical or empirical attention has been paid to the influence of women within Danza.



Figure E.22 Xilonen Ceremony (Rodriguez) The ceremony of Chicómecoatl's origins lay in Mesoamerican culture to honor the harvest of corn, today it takes on a variety of meanings that simultaneously maintains an indigenous perspective and its' relevance in the lives of Chicana youth. Although more commonly known amongst Danzantes as Xilonen or the "Fiesta de Maize," it is a rite of passage to honor the young girls' transition into womanhood. The ceremony is dedicated to young women and celebrates their growth in different aspects in their lives; it also reflects their importance within the community.





Figure E.23 “Toddler” Danzante, San Diego, CA (Yañez) Babies and toddlers often dance within the circle with their parents. This toddler represents a generation of Danzantes that are “born” or raised within Danza Azteca traditions in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.



Figure E.24 “Young Female” Danzante, San Francisco, CA (Rodriguez) Young girls that participate within Danza range in age from “toddler to pre-teen.”



Figure E.25 “Young Woman” Danzante, CA (Rodriguez) Many Danzantes are college students and became interested in cultural politics through Chicano Studies college courses or organizations like MECHA. This woman is a Harvard College Student.



Figure E.26 “Abuela” Danzante, México (Rodriguez) Women comprise the majority of Danza groups and its overall “membership” differing in ages from newborns to elders in both the U.S. and México. The woman in the image began dancing in her early 80s and attended her first ceremony with only three 3 days of experience. This photo was taken of her participating in her first ceremony. The moral of the story is that it is never too late to become a Danzante.



Figure E.27 “Warrior Women” California (Rodriguez) To those less familiar with the practice of Aztec dance it is often conceptualized (or stereotyped) as a hyper-masculine space and automatically linked to the representational image of “Aztec warrior” predominantly associating Danza with the practice of indigenous masculinity performed by Chicano/Mexican men. This narrative ignores the fact that women primarily makeup membership in most groups across the country erasing the female presence within Danza. The representational image of “female warrior” can be considered gender deviant behavior because female dancers deconstruct stereotypical views of what Mexican women should be doing with their time and bodies. Mexican women in danza reclaim their humanity outside of stereotypical roles of submissive and passive wife and mother or domestic laborer in American society. By contrast, they assert themselves as “warrior” women adorned with headdresses and shields; they dance in public venues alongside men and youth. The visibility of Aztec dance in public spaces has the ability to dislocate normative images of Chicanas-Indigenas-Mexicans through the production of “female masculinity” because they are seldom seen as embodying strength and having power.<sup>145</sup> When one juxtaposes this image to dominant representation of Chicanas they are in stark contrast to one another therefore producing non-textual form of representational resistance. The female Danzante is able to display confidence, endurance, and vigor offering an empowering model of Chicana strength this can be interpreted as non-normative femininity because these traits are often associated with men especially when we consider the use of the headdress worn by women in public spaces.

<sup>145</sup> J. Jack Halberstam refers to this as the embodiment of masculinity without (white) men to explore queer positionality; usually in references to stone butch, the tomboy, and the androgyny in terms of pathology or deviant female bodies deploying socially “inappropriate” ideas of masculinity, however I deploy this term in a different context and maintain that female masculinity can manifest in a variety of expressions and subverts the current model for identity. Specifically for Chicanas when they defy traditional gender norms or exhibit “male characteristics” are chastised as traitors, lesbians, mujeres malas, bitches, pachucas, cholas or whores. See *Chicana Adolescents: Bitches, ‘Hos,’ and Schoolgirls* by Lisa, C. Dietrich and *Chicana Gang Members: Resistance to Traditional Women’s Roles*, by Patricia Acevedo.

**Conclusion**

Danza Azteca is an embodied history and knowledge “source” of Chicana/o indigeneity in the Americas, a dynamic process that maintains its historical relevance. By uncovering their own historical narratives and ancestral heritages what emerges are critiques of western concepts and engagement in a “living history.” Danzantes use their bodies as battlegrounds for self-representation and recognition of who they are as a people, in an attempt to more accurately represent their experiences. By reclaiming their physical beings they not only take control of their bodies but also use them as a form of embodied memory, resistance, and agency. The images captured throughout this research represent the profound space of Danza Azteca blurring protest politics with prayer.

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