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**Choreographing Borderlands: Chicanas/os, Dance, and
the Performance of Identities**

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by

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Dedication

To those who imagine through dance,
and to those that have courage to dance it.

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Choreographing Borderlands: Chicanas/os, Dance, and the Performance of Identities

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The University of Texas at Austin, 2015

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Abstract

“Choreographing Borderlands: Chicanas/os, Dance, and the Performance of Identities” examines the unexplored work of barrio-based dancemakers who choreograph and rehearse the diverse political, cultural and emotional contours of Chicana/o life, thought, and borderlands worldviews. As creative concert dance practices that figuratively and literally per/form at the margins, the borders of both American and Mexican national cultures, I argue Chicana/o concert dance operates as an embodied site to house memory, acts as an important archive for Chicana/o history, structures space to interrogate culture, and in the process asserts a new aesthetics (repertoire) for Chicana/o dance and American concert dance more broadly. My project departs from the 1960-70s Chicano Arts Movement and situates today’s contemporary works within the cultural and artistic legacies produced through decades of innovation and reinvention.

My dissertation brings the fields of dance, performance, and Mexican-American/Chicana/o Studies into conversation to consider the Chicana/o dance body as a site for identity production and contributes to larger conversations about race, class, gender and ethnicity and how they are per/formed through body and movement. The choreographies I analyze are Danza Floricanto/USA's *Alma Llanera: Spirit of the Plains* (2009, 2014), Guadalupe Dance Company's *Historias y Recuerdos* (2010), Latina Dance Project's *Coyolxauhqui ReMembers* (2009), and the Aztlan Dance Company's *Loterialandia* (2013). These case studies illustrate how dance chronicles Chicana/o barrio history, claims agency to remake tradition, and opens space to articulate contemporary Chicana/o aesthetics in movement culture. Each chapter is arranged thematically around recurring Chicana/o tropes and aesthetics practices. By locating Chicana/o choreographers and their respective companies in space, place, and time, I demonstrate how dancemakers actively participate in giving voice, body, and visibility to Chicana/o subjectivity through dance and contribute to larger genealogies and trajectories of Chicana/o cultural production and performance.

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Chapter 1: Introduction

“We cannot seek achievement for ourselves and forget about progress and prosperity for our community... Our ambitions must be broad enough to include the aspirations and needs of others, for their sakes and for our own.”

~ Cesar Chavez

VISIONS AND VISIONES

The landmark PBS national broadcast of *Visiones: Latino Art and Culture* (2005) marked a significant milestone in documenting American Latino cultural production for the national archive. The six-part, 180-minute documentary series, produced collaboratively by the National Association of Latino Arts and Culture (NALAC) and award-winning filmmaker Hector Galán, of Galán Productions, Inc., reveals the rich and diverse artistic creations produced by Latina/o artists and cultural organizations across America, and the complexity of identities enveloped within the broad term Latino.¹

¹ The term “Latino” defines pan-ethnic identification in the U.S. amongst Central and Latin American populations that share similar de-colonial relationships to western European imperial histories, neocolonial global formation, and economic forces Arturo J. Aldama, Chela Sandoval, and Peter J. García, *Performing the US Latina and Latino Borderlands* (Bloomington & Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 2012). 4. In this document I use the terms Latino for macro considerations relevant across groups and Chicano for defining Mexican-American activism and identity. Gender and feminist scholarship has enabled the “a/o” suffix for more inclusive readings (i.e. Latina/o, Chicana/o). For more on Latino/a definitions see: Angie Chabram-Dernersesian, ed. *The Chicana/o Cultural Studies Forum: Critical and Ethnographic Practices* (New York: NY University Press, 2007).; Angie Chabram-Dernersesian., *The Chicana/o Cultural Studies Forum: Critical and Ethnographic Practices* (New York: NY University Press, 2007); — — —, ed. *The Chicana/o Cultural Studies Reader* (New York: Routledge Press, 2006).; Alicia Arrizón., "Mythical Performativity: Relocating Aztlán in Chicana Feminist Cultural Productions." *Theater Journal* 52 (2000): 23-49; Maria Lugones, "On Borderlands/La Frontera: An Interpretive Essay." *Hypatia* 7.4 (1992): 31-37; Rosa Linda Fregoso and Angie Chabram-Dernersesian. "Chicana/o Cultural Representations: Reframing Alternative Critical Discourses." *The Chicana/o Cultural Studies Reader* (New York: Routledge, 2006): 26-46.

Viewed by a reported 100 million households, the documentary showcases and engages diverse artists, scholars, and artistic mediums in a public conversation about the role and value of artistic traditions and practices that give voice to their communities.² Within Latino communities, the arts empower their constituents to express themselves within shared culture(s) and traditions, creating promise for a bright future. From Chicano theater to Latino music; from visual arts to the Mexican and Mexican-American tradition of Día de los Muertos; and from Puerto Rican poetry to independent Latino filmmaking, *Visiones* explores how contemporary Latino artists continue to build on rich grassroots traditions that reflect a unique multi-ethnic experience by taking established art forms and reinventing them, constantly challenging themselves and the communities that nurture them. *Visiones*, along with *Chicano! History of the Mexican-American Civil Rights Movement* (1996), *Latin Music USA* (2009), and *Latino Americans* (2013), are among the few nationally televised public broadcast documentaries that endure as valuable and essential Latina/o resources within educational and cultural settings.

Of the twenty segments that comprise *Visiones*, three episodes are dedicated to U.S. Latino dance practices. Two of these feature Latina/o dancers performing within the Euro-Western informed concert dance traditions of classical ballet and American modern dance, and the third segment focuses on New York street-inspired hip-hop dance culture. The concert dance segments highlight the artistic achievements of Mexican-American dancer Evelyn Cisneros, prima ballerina of the San Francisco Ballet, and Puerto Rican

² Statistic provided by the National Association of Latino Arts and Culture and notes that subsequent broadcasts supplements these initial estimates. For more see: <<http://www.nalac.org/visiones>>.

postmodern choreographer Rudy Perez of New York who studied with Martha Graham and Merce Cunningham, eventually becoming one of the founding members of the Judson Dance Theater. The Latino-produced documentary renders these two “brown” concert dance bodies as products derived from, tied to, and performing within cartographies of Euro-Western informed, American high-art (read: white) dance practices and histories. While documenting the groundbreaking “exceptions to the rule” that these two Latino dancers represent as they perform within circuits of the American “white” dance imaginary, the *Visiones* documentary inadvertently produces critical disjunctures for Mexican-American dance practitioners by reinforcing white dance ideals that further reinforce the marginalization of the Chicano “brown” body in dance and the experiences of dance culture. Amid the series’ colorful backdrop of Latino-inspired, grassroots, barrio-based cultural arts and artists from across artistic disciplines, such as Luis Valdez’ Teatro Campesino, the Taco Shop Poets, performance artist Guillermo Gomez-Peña, and musician Lalo Guerrero, I found these two theatrical concert-based dance segments in conspicuous contrast to the program’s overarching goals – despite the fact that there are numerous Chicana/o concert dance companies and artists in the country that are rooted in community-based, culturally affirming practices, as with the other disciplines featured in the show.

The filmmaker’s decision to inscribe Latina/o concert dance practices through the matrices of ballet and modern dance in mainstream epicenters is troubling as it serves to reify and inscribe dominant cultural systems of wealth and power that are endemic to these dance fields and which, through its institutional predominance, makes it difficult for

other works, especially community works, ethnically informed works, or works by Chicanas/os, to be valued. The result, I argue, is that the series promotes and advances assimilationist narratives through these segments. The elevation of mainstream institutional “white” dance forms within the documentary’s Latino “brown” grassroots focus at once devalues and disciplines non-white dance and dancers to subordinate “othered” or “ethnic” status, while also dismissing our important creative contributions to the diversity of Latino/a and American expressive cultural heritage.

Rather than engage the valuable opportunity as a public platform to present the diverse concert-based dance practices that emerge from Latina/o communities; or discuss the rich, sustained dance histories from working-class barrio neighborhoods that reaffirm and nurture Latino identity and everyday life; or look at Latina/o dancemakers as intellectual and creative assets in their own, the documentary rendered the two “brown” concert dance bodies as products derived from, tied to, and performing within cartographies of mainstream American high-art dance practices, histories, and their respective institutional heritages. *Visiones* too easily fell prey to the hegemonic ruse that valorizes the artistic spaces of the racially and culturally unmarked. It inadvertently overlooked and excluded an established and significant body of Latina/o dancemakers and dance practices from across the nation that day-in and day-out nourish the body, soul, and spirit of their communities – practices that include folklórico, flamenco, and danzas indígenas, as well as emerging hybrid dance forms such as the new works in Chicana/o choreography that I discuss in this dissertation, among others. As a groundbreaking overview of Latina/o arts purportedly produced in, by, and for Latino communities, the

Visiones documentary's dance vignettes failed to celebrate the important artists and organizations in Latino working-class communities that encourage and sustain dance as a quintessential and living element of Chicana/o-Latina/o culture.

The Latino-produced television program evidences the way Chicana/o and Latina/o concert dance and the expressive brown body is marginalized and overlooked by mainstream concert dance and by our own Chicana/o and Latina/o arts and cultural workers. This dissertation responds to these omissions, absences, and erasures by offering voice and visibility to the brown body in dance and to Latina/o dance that has its own sources and heritage and plays its own constitutive role in Latino/Chicano arts, and American dance more broadly.

DE AQUÍ Y DE ALLÁ: CHOREOGRAPHING CHICANA/O DANCE: PROJECT DESCRIPTION AND SIGNIFICANCE

My dissertation examines the unexplored work of barrio-based dancemakers, who, like myself, rehearse and choreograph the diverse political, cultural, and emotional contours of Chicana/o life and thought. As creative concert dance practices that literally and figuratively per/form at the margins – or borders, if you will – I argue that Chicana/o choreographies construct complex counter-narratives which enable community self-definition, empowerment, and the formation of identities, specifically what I will call a borderlands, or *fontera*, worldview. These productions challenge traditional American and Mexican dance forms by fusing multiple vocabularies and movement architectures into creative works that narrate a sense of Chicana/o history, place, and imagination. I will argue that grassroots dancemakers and companies, with long service histories in

Chicana/o barrios, or working-class neighborhoods, work from those contexts to create choreographies that center Chicana/o experience and aesthetic values as counter-discourse to contemporary American theatrical concert dance, while opening up physical and conceptual spaces for the brown body in traditionally white domains of artistic practice.

To demonstrate the ways in which Chicana/o choreographers represent Chicana/o experiences, I explore a set of specific works by four dance companies from different parts of the country. The dances I examine are: *Alma Llanera: Spirit of the Plains* (2009, 2014) by Danza Floricanto/USA of Los Angeles, a work that is based on Mexican-American writer Rodolfo Anaya's novel *Bless Me Ultima*; *Coyolxauhqui ReMembers* (2006, 2009) by the national dance collective Latina Dance Project, which reenacts Aztec myth to address the crisis of disappeared women in Ciudad Juarez, Mexico; *Historias y Recuerdos* (2011) by the Guadalupe Dance Company of San Antonio, a work based on personal interviews with barrio residents; and *Loteria Landia* (2013), by Austin's Aztlan Dance Company (my own company), which reinterprets the century-old Mexican lotería card game. I am interested in how these works are conceptualized and constructed by their dancemakers and what they perform, for whom, and why. Each company performs unique choreographic forms and dance aesthetics that interweave barrio history and culture with modern concert dance, producing provocative performances that reflect contemporary Chicano culture and worldviews. I query how each company and its choreographers think about their art form, physical practice, and artistic community, and how these elements interrelate with larger conversations about Chicana/o identity and

cultural production. Drawing from dance theory, performance studies, and Mexican-American/Chicana/o borderlands studies, I examine the complex negotiations and crossings that choreographers and dancers engage by placing their bodies at the forefront of community cultural representations, and how theatrical dance performance offers innovative ways of expressing the contemporary moment.

I look closely at how Chicana/o dancemakers, as *bricoleurs* of community desires and imaginations, assemble multiple ideas, traditions, and dance techniques in modern theatrical interpretations of their barrio environments, histories, and lived experiences. As choreographic works that link to important socio-political and cultural phenomenon, I explore what they represent within the context of American dance performance and thought. At the same time, I also consider how dancemakers imagine and articulate Chicana/o countercultural narratives within larger American and Mexican dance histories. Questions that guide my inquiry include: How do these choreographies articulate a borderlands identity that claims agency for the Chicana/o subject through the performance? How do Chicana/o dance artists move, breathe, and sweat epistemologies of resistance and liberation? How does Chicana/o dance emerge as community-based cultural repertoire?

Conceptualizing Chicana/o dance as a site of expressive cultural production is as much about the formal art of dance and choreography as it is about the larger discourses of community cultural meaning-making, messaging, and identity production its practices generate. As works that center the brown body and experience, Chicana/o dance claims agency to choreograph the stories about where these bodies have been and the spaces

they have traversed.³ I argue that the specific choreographies I examine in this project, in shared endeavor with others across the country, are overlooked and undervalued because they represent a “living art” from the grassroots, disrupting conventional classification systems and categories through their hybrid and ever-evolving construction. These constructions veer from traditional scripts in dance on the one hand, and on the other, they engage a counter-cultural activism that resists the assimilation and commodification all too common in today’s modern dance world.⁴ In this regard, these works dynamically choreograph the cultural realities of the modern moment and offer critical insight into how communities interpret and respond to them. I will show how the works discussed offer recurring narrative tropes such as immigration, border violence, cultural erasure, the ambivalence of citizenship, and family struggle, among others. These shared themes bind these works as dance with a specific point of view, opening space for artists and communities to interpret marginal positions within the larger society and to participate in a shared sense of collective belonging.

I take as my point of departure the 1960s-1970s Chicano Arts Movement and explore how the following multiculturalism of the 1990s has influenced today’s Mexican-

³ I use the term brown as a disruption to the white/black binary of racial categorization that has historically defined American culture. Brown, as I use here, makes visible the prevailing dominant cultural view that all Latinos are “other” and also serves as a term for alliance among these various distinct populations (i.e. puertorriqueño, salvadoreño, etc.).

⁴ Noting the challenge in American Bharata Natyam dance practices to incorporate “modernity” and “traditionality,” dance scholar Chandralekha argues the role of the artist is not to see them as oppositions, but rather to “modernize the tradition through the creative process” Chandralekha, “Reflections on New Directions in Dance,” in *Routledge Dance Studies Reader*, ed. Alexandra Carter (New York: Taylor and Francis, 2010). Like Chandralekha, I agree that commercialism and commodification of form that removes its deep critical cultural mores proves the greatest threat to practice, and that tradition provides recourse and recovery from modernity’s alienations and dislocations.

American dance practices in grassroots barrio communities, the incontrovertible place and space where Chicanas/os dance. My treatment of Chicana/o dance explores how dance, dancer(s), and dance audiences co-construct expressive practices that reaffirm individual and collective community identities and help define what it means to be of Mexican origin in today's American contemporary moment.⁵ These choreographic projects nourish the soul and spirit of the communities where they are presented. Historically supported by working-class barrios which we call home, our work within theatrical concert dance contexts focuses extensively on embodying the diverse stories of what it is to be both American and Mexican – not fully constituted as one, but an amalgam of the two, referred to in Chicana/o scholarship as a critical *mestizaje*. These choreographic practices blend and fuse languages, histories, ideas, dance techniques and vocabularies into reconstructive hybrid projects that offer agency to invert the oppressive feelings of being “*ni de aquí, y ni de allá*” (neither from here, nor there) that Chicanas/os experience living as marginalized subjects in American dominant society. Rather, these works invoke the proactive and progressive assertion that “*somos de aquí, y de allá*” (we are from here, and from there), nurturing an empowered sense of space, place, and belonging. The complex transnational situated-ness of living in the ambiguous borderlands spaces between nations, cultures, and knowledge(s) requires Chicana/o dancemakers, in addition to creating dance forms, to understand the nuanced, adaptive

⁵ Dance scholar Randy Martin asserts that the conceiver, dancer, and viewer join in shared endeavor for the development of the imagined social body. For more see: Randy Martin. *Performance as Political Act: The Embodied Self* (New York: Bergin and Garvey, 1990).

code-switching endemic to Chicana/o culture as meta-choreographies always active and in play. By engaging message with form, they empower both dancers and viewers to move with, through, and around borders in order to perform their truest identities and subjectivities. Their expressive work reflects and represents the Chicana/o borderlands, what I often cite in my own artistic dancemaking as “a place somewhere here, and there, and nowhere, but indelibly in the present.”

My dissertation project offers original contributions to the fields of Mexican-American/Chicana/o studies, dance studies, and Latina/o borderlands performance. It intentionally pivots from the prevailing dominant attitude in American dance that to be recognized, one must conform to Euro-Western-derived aesthetic constructions and values, a prevailing hierarchal view that dismisses cultural specificity and ethnicity attributes to guarantee safe mainstream audience appeal. Rather, my research guides me to the spaces and places where Chicanas/os dance – the working-class barrio grassroots – to locate how alternative dance practices are produced and explore how they perform in expressive registers that resonate with and are relevant to the communities they engage.

DANCE AND THE CHICANO ARTS MOVEMENT: HISTORICAL FOUNDATIONS

I use the term Chicana/o throughout this document to acknowledge the long intellectual, political and artistic history derived from the 1960s-1970s Chicano Movement – or “El Movimiento Chicano” – and tracing it to its most recent 21st-century usage, honoring the positive and generative social and cultural identity practices of politicized Mexican-Americans in the U.S. As a term that directs attention to the

historical imbalance of U.S.-Mexican power relations that has fragmented communities since the 1848 Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo was signed, its use references political activism, awareness for self-determination, and community empowerment.⁶ The identity construct is not without critics. On both sides of the U.S.-Mexico border, Chicanas/os have historically found themselves cast aside as political provocateurs, cultural nonconformists, and social activists who continuously challenge nationalist systems and sociocultural norms that insist on assimilation and conformity. Through this legacy, however, Chicanas/os have developed and evolved both practical and intellectual modes for challenging the status quo.

During El Movimiento, “Chicana/o” served as a unifying cultural and political ideology for Mexican-American communities against the backdrop of the larger U.S. Civil Rights Movement, a period of radical social change. Artists and intellectuals deployed the term to foster solidarity and a shared collective voice for justice, equality, and representation. Within this newly constructed Chicano nationalist framework, a major emphasis was made on acknowledging pre-Columbian, Spanish, Mexican, and American roots as shared U.S. Chicana/o cultural heritage.⁷ While originally scripted

⁶ For an overview of Chicana/o cultural history and formation, see: Rodolfo F. Acuña. *Occupied America: A History of Chicanos* (New York: Pearson Longman, 2006). The first National Chicano Youth Liberation Conference held in December of 1969 produced El Plan Espiritual de Aztlán that set into place Chicana nationalism and expressive definition of the term Chicano, for more see: Liberation, Manifesto - National Chicano Youth. "El Plan Espiritual De Aztlán." (March 1969 ed1969); Alicia Arrizón, *Latina Performance: Traversing the Stage* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press). 5-6.

⁷ For more on the early Chicano nationalism in expressive culture, see: Zamudio-Taylor, Virginia Fields, Victor (2001). *The Road to Aztlán: art from a mythic homeland : [publ. ... with the exhibition "The road to Aztlán", Los Angeles County Museum of Art, May 13 - August 26, 2001 ...]* (1. ed.). Los Angeles: Los Angeles County Museum of Art. p. 348.; Zamudio-Taylor, Virginia Fields, Victor (2001). *The road to Aztlán : art from a mythic homeland : [publ. ... with the exhibition "The road to Aztlán", Los Angeles*

with masculinist overtones, through successive decades of critique and revision, the term has made room for more expansive feminist, cross-class, and ethnic perspectives and frameworks. Writings by eminent Chicana/o scholars such as Gloria Anzaldúa, Cherrie Moraga, Américo Paredes, Rafael Perez-Torres, and José David Saldívar, among countless others, have given dynamic dimensions to a term that today retains its political utility by citing a “dialectics of difference” at its core, and its intersectional, multi-positional, and interrelational capacities for cultural analysis and application in today’s moment of post-structuralism, globalism, and transnationalism .⁸

The Chicano Art Movement emerged directly from El Movimiento when Mexican-Americans artists and intellectuals defined and established a unique artistic identity and cultural legacy. Influenced by the successful 1930s-1940s post-revolution Mexican nationalist ideology that reinvented the modern mestizo Mexican national identity, Chicano artists drew from those concepts and developed a distinctive version of expressive practices that centered an oppositional stance to challenge U.S. dominant cultural norms, and countered negative stereotypes, and offered bold identities linked to an indigenous Américas’ history.⁹ Fusing pre-Columbian art with Mexican modern art,

County Museum of Art, May 13 - August 26, 2001 ...] (1. ed.). Los Angeles: Los Angeles County Museum of Art. p. 348.; Mesa-Bains, Amalia (1993). *Ceremony of Spirit: Nature and Memory in Contemporary Latino Art*. San Francisco, California: The Mexican Museum. pp. 9–17.; Jackson, Carlos Francisco (2009). *Chicana and Chicano art : ProtestArte* ([Nachdr.] ed.). Tucson: University of Arizona Press. p. 106

⁸ José David Saldívar, *Border Matters: Remapping American Cultural Studies* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997). 3.

⁹ Jon D. Rossini, *Contemporary Latina/o Theater, Wrighting Ethnicity* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 2008). 13.

they also added an expressive dimension that marked Chicano artistic production as uniquely American.¹⁰

The civil rights period also introduced new funding mechanisms to support the diversity of arts at the national and local levels. Agencies such as the National Endowment for the Arts (founded in 1965) as well as state arts agencies, foundations, and local arts programs encouraged the formalization of nonprofit arts organizations and created competition for arts funding. This period of development of the arts sector correlates with the expansion and formalization of arts practices in Chicana/o grassroots communities.¹¹ With a defined cultural ideology, the development of expressive aesthetics, and more funding available for the arts, the Chicana/o arts renaissance of the 1960-70s infused communities with new opportunities and creative outlets. It empowered communities to reimagine and recast themselves within new ideas of a progressive American society. This moment of increased cultural and artistic activity gave rise to many dance companies within grassroots Mexican-American barrio communities throughout the U.S. Southwest.

As the Chicano arts renaissance was emerging, influences from the south worked their way into the Chicano artistic practices. Mexican government-sponsored dance

¹⁰ For a comprehensive overview of Chicana/o cultural production by leading Chicana/o and Latina/o scholars see: Angie Chabram-Dernersesian, *The Chicana/o Cultural Studies Reader* (New York: Routledge Press, 2006).

¹¹ For more on 1960-70s arts developments see: Devoss Institute of Arts Management. *Diversity in the Arts: The Past, Present, and Future of African American and Latino Museums, Dance Companies, and Theater Companies* (University of Maryland, Sept 2015); and March Bauerlein and Ellen Grantham, *National Endowment for the Arts: A History 1965-2008* (Washington DC: National Endowment for the Arts, 2009), 174.

companies had begun touring in the U.S. since the late 1950 to promote Mexican culture and tourism. As a representation of the Mexican nation and her people and to encourage commerce and tourism to Mexico, companies like Ballet Folklórico de Mexico (founded in 1952), the Ballet Folklórico Nacional (founded in 1960), and the Compañía Nacional de Danza Folklórica (founded in 1975) were presented in large theaters in major cities like Chicago, Los Angeles, New York, San Antonio, and San Francisco, putting forth idealized versions and images of Mexican culture from the late 1950s forward.¹² The mid-century Mexican theatrical dance model provided a framework for imagining the Mexican-American body in dance on American stages and for structuring performance that linked heritage across the southern U.S. border. Dance scholar Anthony Shay writes that the response of the Mexican-American community to ballet folklórico “was electrifying and politically transforming of its self-image, spawning dozens of folklórico companies and the formation of school programs from grade school to university to teach Mexican folk dance throughout the Southwest and California.”¹³

My lifetime work with the Aztlan Dance Company that started in the East Austin-based Chicano Arts Movement echoes this dance history. Spinning off from the League of United Chicano Artists nonprofit umbrella in 1974, Aztlan Dance Company formalized its nonprofit status and resourced funding to support programming. Engaging

¹² For example, Sydney Hutchinson notes that Ballet Folklórico de Mexico became the Mexican Department of Tourism’s official representative of Mexican folk life and launched a North American tour in 1958. For more see: Sydney Hutchinson, "The Ballet Folklórico de Mexico and the Construction of the Mexican Nation through Dance," in *Dancing Across Borders: Danzas y Bailes Mexicanos*, ed. Olga Najera-Ramirez, Norma E. Cantu, and Brenda M. Romero (Urbana and Chicago: Uni of Illinois Press, 2009): 215.

¹³ Anthony Shay, *Choreographing Identities: Folk Dance, Ethnicity and Festival* (Jefferson, N.C.: McFarland and Co., 2006). 34.

in bi-national programs to support cultural exchange between U.S. and Mexico, instructors were brought to Austin to conduct artist residencies and members of the company, myself included, travelled to Mexico City to study dance in summer intensives. As a barrio arts group that was, and remains, engaged in Chicano activism, the formative years focused on traditional forms of dance, such as danza Concheros under the mesa of Xinachtli en Aztlan, and bailes folklóricos mexicanos. Today the company has evolved its dance repertory to emerge as a Chicana/o story-telling dance company that uses multiple dance forms, languages, and influences to construct contemporary choreographies, such as *Sexto Sol: A Cumbia Cruiser's Guide to the Galaxy* (2012), *SwitchBlade: An Eastside Story* (2012), and *Xicano Dreams: Earth, Life, and Labors of Love* (2014). Our historical roots in the Chicano Art Movement, our commitment to community since inception, and our focus on Chicano culture through four decades of performance provides the company solid footing to (re)imagine and (re)construct dance that resonates in the 21st century.

My use of the term “Chicana/o” and “Chicana/o dance” in this project thus purposefully acknowledges this rich community history of struggle and experience within artistic concert dance practices to illustrate how those social, historical and political antecedents continue to influence today’s creative departures in dance. I situate Chicana/o dance practices as part of the broader field of U.S. Latina/o performance. Latina/o is a term that defines pan-ethnic identification among U.S. Latin American based cultural communities. Both the terms Chicana/o and Latina/o render space for self-produced community identities to emerge both against and in relation to dominant

American-Anglo-Saxon culture, representing the diversity, polyvocality, and alternate histories and cultures from the Américas more broadly.

THE EXPRESSIVE BROWN BODY IN DANCE: FOUNDATIONS IN DANCE STUDIES, CHICANA/O AND LATINA/O STUDIES, AND PERFORMANCE STUDIES

My dissertation project draws from and makes contributions to the fields of Chicana/o and Latina/o studies, dance studies, and performance studies, and especially the spaces where these three areas of scholarship intersect, a Latina/o borderlands performance in dance. Indeed, I find my home in the nucleus at the intersection of Chicana/o studies and borderlands performance studies – with a specific personal interest in the role of the dancing body in forging identity. My own analysis focuses on Chicana/o dance and its relationship to grassroots Mexican-American communities because this provides rich internal and external optics for assessing what I will define as the expressive brown body in dance.

In dance studies, the field’s “cultural turn” in the mid 1980’s led scholars to examine dance as a meaning-making practice producing and produced through a complex interplay of individual, social, cultural, and political identities.¹⁴ Prior to this time, dance scholarship tended to focus on narratives and biographies of well-known choreographers and dancers, and considered that dance directly reflected the societies and cultural contexts in which it was situated, a “representation,” or what dance scholar Juliet

¹⁴ In her book *The Impact of Cultural Studies on the Field of Dance* (2013) author Kasia Monique Chichón surveys dance texts to explore how cultural studies has influenced textual representation of dance.

McMains describes as a “one-to-one mimetic relationship.”¹⁵ The assumption was that dance reflected the cultural values of its participants and the social relationships that support them, eliding the constituting power formations that enable them. Advocating the examination of dance through a cultural studies optic and the contributions of embodiment that dance offers the field of cultural studies, cultural anthropologist Jane Desmond, in her essay “Embodying Difference: Issues in Dance and Cultural Studies,” synthesized arguments to link together ideas of materiality and embodiment along with representation for dance studies that informs today’s scholarship.¹⁶

Considered a momentous game-changer in the way dance studies views practice, anthropologist Joann Wheeler Kealiinohomoku’s 1970’s article, “An Anthropologist Looks at Ballet As a Form of Ethnic Dance,” outlined ways for scholars to not take dance at face value, but interrogate its role in society.¹⁷ Newer dance scholarship influenced by cultural studies argues that culture is, in fact, rooted in dance and the dancing body itself – that culture is embodied, meaning that it is “embedded in the experiences of the body and how the body is implicated in our notions of identity.”¹⁸ Dance scholar Cynthia Novak notes that the body is the “primary means of understanding, knowing, making sense of the world...through shared conception of our bodies and selves and through

¹⁵ Juliet E. McMains, “Glamour Lessons: Race, Class, and Gender in the American Dancesport Industry” (Dissertation, University of California, 2003), 6.

¹⁶ In her anthology *Bodies in Motion*, Desmond brings together diverse scholars from across the field to share in scholarship that situates a dance studies approach. For more see: Jane C. Desmond, *Meaning in Motion: New Cultural Studies in Dance* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 1997).

¹⁷ Kealiinohomoku’s article is published in: Ann Dils and Ann Cooper Albright’s dance anthology, *Moving History / Dancing Cultures: A Dance History Reader*. Eds. Dils, Ann and Ann Cooper Albright. (Middletown, Conn.: Wesleyan University Press, 2001).

¹⁸ Susan Leigh Foster, *Choreographing Difference* (Hanover, NH: Wesleyan University Press, 1997). 5.

movement experiences society offers us.”¹⁹ In short, these scholars suggested that dance articulates agency for the production of identities based on our inhabited relationship to the body and the diverse social and cultural networks in which it exists and moves. This approach in dance studies builds egalitarian claims to the role, value, and importance of dance practices in the communities in which they happen.

Scholars from different disciplines have extensively examined and theorized the body as a traversed discursive terrain – a contested site continuously subjected to external influences, discipline, and surveillance. Recent dance scholarship has revised its field’s history to incorporate the body of color. Dance scholars Jayna Brown, Ann Cooper Albright, Brenda Dixon-Gottschild, Susan Leigh Foster, Marta Savigliano and Barbara Browning, among others, have theorized the “body of color” by situating it as an active and multi-signifying site.²⁰ Their assertions situate the body in direct relationship with the historical contexts and formations that produced it and that it moves in, and in direct communication with other bodies surrounding it. In this light, racialized bodies through dance are given agency against hermetic claims to them, liberating the body of color from stereotype. Prolific contributions by African American dance scholars have theorized the black body and developed critical approaches and dynamic methodologies for examining

¹⁹ Cynthia J. Novak, *Sharing the Dance* (Madison: University of Wisconsin, 1990). 8.

²⁰ Jayna Brown, *Babylon girls: Black Women Performers and the Shaping of the Modern* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2008).; Ann Cooper Albright, *Choreographing Difference: The Body and Identity in Contemporary Dance* (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan Press, 1997).; Brenda Dixon-Gottschild, *The Black Dancing Body: A Geography from Coon to Cool* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003).; Foster, *Choreographing Difference.*; Marta E. Savigliano, *Tango and the Political Economy of Passion* (Boulder: Westview Press, 1995).

African-American influences in American dance and dance history.²¹ Similarly, dance scholar Yutian Wong in *Choreographing Asian America* explores how Asian-American identity is produced through dance and positions her analysis as an inquiry of inclusion and exclusion in both dance studies and Asian-American studies.²² And, in *The People Have Never Stopped Dancing: Native American Dance Histories*, Jacqueline Shea Murphy examines the interrelationship between indigenous cultures and American modern dance practices and situates modern concert dance as a tool for “spiritual and cultural resilience and self-determination.”²³

In Latina/o studies, scholarship in the area of Latina/o identity in dance is nascent and emerging. The most prolific area of Latina/o dance scholarship centers on social dance as identity-producing practice. As Latina/o performance scholars Celeste Fraser Delgado and José Esteban Muñoz argue in *Everynight Life: Culture and Dance in Latin/o America*, “dance sets a politics in motion, bringing people together in rhythmic affinity where identification takes the form of histories written on the body through gesture.”²⁴ Delgado and Muñoz’ anthology unites a host of contributing authors from various fields with diverse perspectives and offers a foundation for reading the Latina/o body in

²¹ Dixon-Gottschild, *The Black Dancing Body: A Geography from Coon to Cool.*; Thomas F. DeFrantz, *Dancing Many Drums: Excavations in African American Dance* (Madison: University of Wisconsin, 2002).; VéVé Clark and Sara E. Johnson, *Kaiso! Writings by and about Katherine Dunham* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2005).

²² Yutian Wong, *Choreographing Asian American* (Middletown, Conn: Wesleyan University Press, 2010).. Ibid..

²³ Jacqueline Shea Murphy, *The People Have Never Stopped Dancing: Native American Modern Dance Histories* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2007). 24.

²⁴ Celeste Fraser and José Esteban Muñoz Delgado, *Everynight Life: Culture and Dance in Latin/o America* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1997). 9.

dance.²⁵ The book explores the political, cultural, and popular dimensions of Latina/o subject formation and enables readings of Latina/o dance as practices of resistance. While rich in frameworks for analyzing the Latina/o body as a product of histories and environments, the anthology overlooks opportunities for nuanced engagement with the body proper, which I seek to do in this dissertation.

Latina/o interdisciplinary dance scholarship has also produced diverse readings of dance as embodiment of identity practices that center a transnational and cross-cultural focus. In books such as Marta Savigliano's *Tango and the Political Economy of Passion* (1995); and Barbara Browning's *Samba: Resistance in Motion* (1995), each author ethnographically examines how Latina/o American dance culture has been integrated into larger economies of American social dance culture, and how they are altered by local communities to create familiar spaces for enacting performance and corporeal belongings.²⁶ They provide in-depth critical assessment of dance practices as interlink between communities of origin and the remaking of practices for communities they form in the U.S. More recent works have also explored issues of social difference and power. For example, in *Salsa Crossings: Dancing Latinidad in Los Angeles*, dance theorist and performance ethnographer Cindy Garcia explores pan-Latina corporealities and hierarchical social constructions of Latinidad in Los Angeles club settings.²⁷ Her work

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ Savigliano, *Tango and the Political Economy of Passion*.; Barbara Browning, *Samba: Resistance in Motion* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1995).; McMains, "Glamour Lessons: Race, Class, and Gender in the American Dancesport Industry."

²⁷ Cindy García, *Salsa Crossings: Dancing Latinidad in Los Angeles* (Durham London: Duke University Press, 2013).

examines systems of power associated with immigration, globalization, race, and gender. Her theoretical lens gleans important insights into how the dance body engages and performs notions of class, whether real or imagined. Priscilla Renta's essay, *Salsa Dance: Latino/a History in Motion* (2004), situates New York salsa dancing as transcultural Afro-Latino identity practice rooted in colonial histories of power, and whose contemporary practice negotiates the body as a site to resist assimilation and marginalization.²⁸ Her work highlights her experience with the Eddie Torres Latin dance company and how New York fashion dance between the spaces of "tradition" and "modernity."²⁹ Patricia Seed's anthology *José Limón and La Malinche* brings together critical essays by various authors exploring the role and contributions of Mexican/Mexican-American dancer/choreographer to the 1950-60s field of American modern dance. Examining Mexican-American youth culture in the U.S. Southwest, ethnomusicologist Sydney Hutchinson, in *From Quebradita to Duranguense* (2007), explores dance as transnational youth practice that negotiates ethnicity, class, and individual identities across U.S.-Mexico borders.³⁰ Focusing on the construction and preservation of public space for nurturing Latinidad and queerness, Ramon Rivera-Servera in his book *Performing Queer Latinidad* (2012) discusses how dance mobilizes a politics of activism and survival. Exploring multiple practice sites, Rivera-Servera centers performance as communicative sites for community building. Highlighting

²⁸ Priscilla Renta, "Salsa Dance: Latino/a History in Motion," *Centro Journal* XVI, no. 2 (2004).

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 142.

³⁰ Sydney Hutchinson, *From Quebradita to Duranguense: Dance in Mexican-American Youth Culture* (Tucson: University of Arizona, 2007). 9.

silver-screen construction of Latina identity, cinema scholar Priscilla Ovalle in her book, *Dance and the Hollywood Latina: Race, Sex, and Stardom* (2011), interrogates how Latina stars claim agency and empowerment in an arena that seeks to control her as commercial commodity.³¹

Within Chicana/o Studies specifically, scholars have expanded upon foundational Chicana theory of critical mestizaje and borderlands subjectivity and fluently argued that Chicana/o culture and identity is intersectional, multi-positional, and inter-relational, dynamically interacting within larger discourses to both reflect and critique the contemporary historical moment. However, despite almost five decades of excellent scholarly work in the sister fields of Chicana/o literature, theater, visual arts, music, and film, Mexican-American studies scholars have yet to fully explore the significant role that concert dance plays specifically, and the contributions it makes as an embodied medium that mirrors, models, and sustains communities. Without such examination, we are left without a fuller analysis and record of the expressions, practices, and legacies that Mexican-American communities have engaged through choreography and how dance foregrounds the community “social” body, real or imagined, through embodied cultural representations . There are a few exceptions. In the anthology *Dancing Borders: Danzas y Bailes Mexicanos*, ethnographer Olga Nájera-Ramírez and literary scholar Norma Cantu assemble a comprehensive collection of essays that explore grassroots dance

³¹ Priscilla Peña Ovalle, *Dance and the Hollywood Latina: Race, Sex and Stardom* (New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Press, 2011)..Ibid.

practices which have helped to construct Mexican-American and Chicana/o identity.³² Exploring indigenous forms, such as ceremonial danza matachines and concheros dances, to concert dance forms such as Mexican folklórico and modern dance, the authors examine the role of dance in the context of Greater Mexico, honing in on how identities are performed and contested, and how dance practices that cross national boundaries are reinvented through that cultural exchange. This point proves vital in my own intervention and attempt to understand Chicana/o dance as a modern concert practice based in alternative dance histories and aesthetics. My research thus looks at Chicana/o dance to explore how these choreographies interpret Mexican-American culture as distinct from Mexican and American dance cultures and what they say about the communities in which they are rehearsed, the barrio.

This dissertation also draws from theories and methods in performance studies, which situates the body as subject and understands performance as an analytic lens from which to study human behavior.³³ A central consideration in performance studies is the concept of embodiment, which locates the body as a product of and contributor to the world in which we live. As an inter- and multidisciplinary field that “starts where most limited-domain disciplines end,” performance studies centers the idea that performances

³² Olga Nájera-Ramírez, Norma E. Cantú, and Brenda M. Romero, eds., *Dancing Across Borders: Danzas y Bailes Mexicanos* (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2009).; *ibid.*

³³ Richard Schechner, *Performance Studies: An Introduction*, 2nd ed. (New York: Taylor and Francis, 2006). 2-3.

function as epistemologies, or systems of knowledge, from which we can examine and understand our role in the world and the contexts that produce agency and identities.³⁴

Within this view, dance exceeds the limits of visual representation and requires that we consider more analytical tools and frames to fully appreciate the work it performs and accomplishes at its various levels. For example, what does it mean for a Chicana/o dancer, like me, in a contemporary performance context, to perform zapateado footwork to Los Lobos' popular huapango remake of the song "Kiko and the Lavender Moon," known as "Elmo and the Lavender Moon" on the PBS series *Sesame Street*? The visual representation is not sufficient to grasp the many critical crossings the body is making, including claims of nation(s) on the body, spatiality, bending dance forms and subverting genres, resisting conventions through performative difference (excess), and inventively contributing to the hybridization of cultures. Contemporary performance scholarship explores and examines performance's multiple intersections and interstitialities as culture-producing. Like the dancing body, dance itself is never a fully complete project, but rather continues to produce meanings and generate identities long before and after the actual performance act.³⁵

The emerging inter-discipline of Latina/o performance studies reflects these ideas by centering how the physical body embodies multiple spaces through representation.

³⁴ Ibid., 2.

³⁵ Shannon Jackson, *Professing Performance: Theater in the Academy from Philology to Performativity* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2004).; Randy Martin, *Performance as Political Act: The Embodied Self* (New York: Bergin and Garvey, 1990). ; Peggy Phelan, *Unmarked: The Politics of Performance* (New York: Routledge, 1993).; Janelle G. Reinelt and Joseph Roach, *Critical Theory and Performance* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2007).

Indeed, the broad and diverse Chicana/o artistic cultural production of the last few decades – a period Chicana feminist scholar Alicia Gaspar de Alba calls “the great de-colonial era of the twentieth century” – affords a rich opportunity to integrate the fields of performance studies and Chicana/o and Latina/o studies into shared language(s) and scholarship in order to understand and register the deeply creative and expressive work produced in communities that are typically not afforded venue.³⁶ Women’s studies scholar Alicia Arrizón goes further, arguing provocatively that “the essential unity” between Chicana/o and Latina/o artistic/cultural production “is not one of languages and origin, but one of problematics.”³⁷ These problematics reflect the heterogeneity of subaltern experience and the struggle for liberation and freedom from oppressive dominant orders, thus making expressive practices particularly rich sites for analysis.

Within Mexican-American studies the dynamic concept of borderlands has become key in exploring and understanding Chicana/o critical thought and worldviews. Recent Chicana/o studies scholarship on expressive practices links borderlands theory with performance studies to describe how performance participates in de-colonizing and recuperative rehearsals of culture. Borderlands performance studies, as conceptualized by Chicana/o authors Arturo L. Aldama, Chela Sandoval, and Peter J. García, in their anthology, *Performing the US Latina and Latino Borderlands*, links cultural production from across disciplines into a coherent and salient framework for exploring how Latina/o performance generates “a pause in the activity of coloniality,” and by doing so structures

³⁶ Alicia Gaspar de Alba, "Foreward," in *Performing the US Latina and Latino Borderlands*, ed. Arturo J. Aldama, Chela Sandoval, and Peter J. Garcia (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2012), xv.

³⁷ Arrizón, *Latina Performance: Traversing the Stage*: 3.

reconstructive methods for greater critical awareness and intervention.³⁸ The anthology sets the stage for an inclusive “border epistemology” that integrates Anzaldúan borderlands theory with feminist and performance studies. The interventionist agenda that “border-born, bred, and trained” cultural agents engage in producing acts of “alter-Native cultural engineering” or “decolonizing performatics” calls for both practitioners and scholars to underscore the role of difference and alterity in contesting prevailing dominant cultural tropes.³⁹ Performance in this light underscores the real, tangible, and effective methods by which its practitioners participate in common ideas of “individual and collective liberation” from western imperial histories that have subjugated and oppressed the knowledge and histories of borderlands subjects.⁴⁰

It is at this conceptually critical juncture of dance studies, performance studies, and Chicana/o and Latina/o borderlands studies where I situate my project, with a special emphasis on the body. This dissertation examines the construction and performance of identity in Mexican-American/Chicana/o concert dance and how race, class, ethnicity, and resistance are negotiated and (re)configured. In contrast to the few scholarly works on Mexican-American dance that approach analysis from strictly historical or anthropological perspectives, I address dance from the frames of Chicana/o critical and strategic performance, as an interiority of artistic form whose theatrical elements make powerful visual and movement-based cultural claims about the contemporary realities and struggles of Mexican Americans and how they negotiate these

³⁸ Aldama, Sandoval, and García, *Performing the US Latina and Latino Borderlands*: 3.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 1.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 3.

in everyday (body, studio, barrio, stage) practice. My supporting goals are to illuminate how, what I term, “the Chicano brown body” is configured through dance performance both on and off the stage; to attend to the creative and artistic labor passed from body to body through ongoing community rehearsal and performance; and to reflect on how dance reveals communities in transition. I now turn to articulate the concept of the Chicano brown dance body and discuss a second key theoretical concept on which my dissertation rests – the concept of *barriology*, a critical orientation of urban Chicana/o experience and knowledge.

BARRIOS AND BODIES: THEORETICAL INTERVENTIONS

While scholars in dance studies have theorized the body, the brown body in concert dance has been theoretically underdeveloped, limiting analysis to the area of Latina/o social dance identity models. When I use the term – the Chicana/o “brown” body⁴¹ in dance – I aim to situate dancers, dancemakers, and dance viewers within ongoing public rehearsals of Mexican-American cultural forms that, when viewed in the aggregate, reflect individuals in a shared network of Chicana/o experience producing and produced by a shared body of knowledge – a way of knowing oneself in place and time and in relation to others. I draw from performance studies scholar Diana Taylor’s concept of “the repertoire” that acknowledges the important role of embodied practices in

⁴¹ My citational use of brown, as in “brown bodies in dance,” situates Chicana/o difference within the U.S. white/black racial hierarchies. As the Mexican body is a contentious site in today’s political climate (i.e. immigration, border walls, etc.) my interest is to elucidate the brown body not as “matter out of place” (Marez 109), but rather to situate the brown body in dance as a site for transnational and transcultural interaction, cultural exchange, and cultural production.

knowledge formation and transmission. She states that live presence is necessary for “acts of transfer” that convey “social knowledge, memory, and a sense of identity” between groups and generations.⁴² Centering embodied and performance acts as “a way of knowing,” she notes, enables these activities to “generate, record, and transmit knowledge.”⁴³ The repertoire, she says, offers alternative knowledge and perspectives to the enduring “archive” (i.e. buildings, monuments, texts, etc.), which are especially relevant in reconsidering historical processes of transnational contact, such as in the context of the Américas.⁴⁴ Together, “the archive” and “the repertoire” allow participants to make political claims, transmit memories and knowledge, and forge new ideas of cultural identity. In this framework, identities are continually remaking themselves in the spaces that performance opens. The experience of dancers negotiating what is learned outside the body, what is felt inside the body, and what is remembered insists that we explore the affective and embodied nature of dance.

Dance is integral and central in Mexican-origin culture, where it embodies (literally gives body) to individual and collective community identity, and through which, as Taylor argues, culture is stored and transmitted. From abuelos (grandfathers) dancing with their granddaughters at quinceañeras, to ceremonial indigenous dancers such as concheros or matachines performing at the footsteps of local churches on sacred days of obligation (e.g. the Holy Day of Our Lady of Guadalupe) from Mexican folkloric dance

⁴² Diana Taylor, *The Archive and the Repertoire: Performing Cultural Memory in the Americas* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2003). 2.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, 21.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 19.

performances for commemorative events, to gatherings where conjunto accordion music gives life to a vibrant social scene; from birth to death, dance is etched into the bodies and blood memories of its communities. Mexican culture even includes beliefs about the role of dance in the afterlife, as reflected in traditions such as Dia de los Muertos, where on Nov. 2 of each year, the dearly departed have an opportunity to once again dance to life with us. In this light, dance within the grassroots assumes a very important and valuable role in mobilizing and materializing the deep and heartfelt cultural connection between people and communities, where, through embodied repertoires, it informs how we see ourselves and what we believe in as shared truths. Through dance performance, and the elaboration of “our” stories, we come to know ourselves and our place in the world.

This thought was echoed in one of the interviews I conducted for this project with Jeannette Chavez, co-director of the Guadalupe Dance Company in San Antonio, who reflected on the effect of the company’s work on identity and belonging, and “how beautiful it is that it’s not just the story of Mexico, but our story... that it began making us think about how do we tell our story... specifically Mexican-American. And while we are not exactly Mexican-born and yet, we kind of don’t completely fit into ballet and modern dance.” After explaining this state of in-betweenness to me, Chavez paused before noting candidly that the work is “creatively crazy.”⁴⁵ Based on my own experiences with Aztlan Dance Company, I understood what she was saying clearly and

⁴⁵ Belinda Menchaca and Jeannette Chavez, "Guadalupe Dance Company Interview," (San Antonio, Texas 2015).

completely. She alludes to the fact that despite the contradiction and tensions within the liminal borderlands space(s), there is a beauty from which we artists draw from for inspiration.

Through this cultural foundation of our shared traditions and ancestors – of the past and of another place – and our commitment to honor and engage it through the body and on the stage, new, modern Chicana/o ideas and subjectivities are made possible. Those roots provide the Chicana/o body the cultural information it needs to arrive to the public with ideas about identities based in difference, and how to negotiate them through dance. Through the work of artists engaging, creating, and performing, the opportunity emerges for Chicana/o communities to assert claims to American cultural production, while also opening space for non-Chicana/o to experience the fluid dynamics of movements, languages, desires, imaginations, and cultural worldviews of a people who live between spaces. From my own dance practice, I have come to know that Chicana/o dance engages in choreographies of alterity, hyper-accentuating the hyphenated space(s) in the term “Mexican-American,” which reverberates as a site of internal cultural conflict within the Chicana/o consciousness. This alterity continually questions whether my body or my dance is American enough, Mexican enough, or hybrid-Chicano enough. It is critical mestizaje in practice. Its feeling never rests, always at work: luring me deeper into borderlands spaces, the *nepantla* (in-betweenness) that Anzaldúa describes in her theorization of the *frontera*.⁴⁶ I’ve become proficient in this *redoblado* (two-step) dance,

⁴⁶ Gloria Anzaldúa, *Borderlands: La Frontera/The New Mestiza*, 3rd ed. (San Francisco: Aunt Lute Books, 1987, 2007).

which offers me a conceptual home for my thoughts and choreography. Each choreographer featured in this dissertation knows the dance well, as each takes turn in the lead-and-follow into the critical steps and sequences of the Chicana/o borderlands.

Discussing the transitional and translational site of Chicana/o identity, Chicano studies scholar Rafael Pérez-Torres notes that Chicana/o culture and subjectivity is “itself based on a complex and double-dance of acceptance and rejection; of displacement and relocation; of loss and reclamation,” and that much of Chicano expressive culture is about indexing a “sense of meaning and place” in our times.⁴⁷ The body for Chicana/o dance practitioners – the Chicano brown body I reference above – thus serves us as the most local site where these tensions and conflicts manifest, providing a creative reserve for new ideas in choreography. I argue that, as moving texts, Chicana/o dance and the brown body are products of the moments they emerge from, where they access rich dance histories and related traditions for re-invention in the present – a “repetition with revision”⁴⁸ – while also nurturing new formations of cultural identity that offer its participants hope, a sense of collectivity, and ideas of progress.

The second theoretical intervention I make that is foundational to this dissertation focuses on where dance happens, more specifically where it is rehearsed and performed. To cite/sight/site⁴⁹ Chicana/o concert dance inherently means entering the space(s) and

⁴⁷ Rafael Pérez-Torres, *Mestizaje: Critical Uses of Race in Chicano Culture* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2006). 216.

⁴⁸ Deborah Paredez, *Selenidad: Selena, Latinos, and the Performance of Memory* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2009). 206.

⁴⁹ Chicano film scholar Chon Noriega, in his essay, “The Orphans of Modernism,” argues the importance and need for Chicana/o artists and academics to “site/cite/sight” their work as “coordinates” from which to document and map Chicana/o intellectual and creative work while placing them within “the very artistic

places where Chicanas/os rehearse and perform dance, namely Mexican-American, working-class barrio communities, and engaging in thoughtful understanding of how and why these practices have served and continue to serve an important cultural role (or, “why these practices have done and continue to do such important cultural work”) in their communities. Mexican-American barrios, like African-American ghettos, are historical products of U.S. racist municipal segregationist practices. Early 1900s urban planning and land-use regulations yielded the first uses of zoning ordinances to regulate municipal development.⁵⁰ While originally designed as tools for land development planning between residential and industrial sectors, across the nation, these new zoning ordinances were adopted wholesale by municipalities and produced what human geographer Jonathan Silver calls a “remarkable socio-legislative phenomenon” – the official use of restrictive covenant policies permitting the racial segregation of communities. Minority-dominant communities, or communities with large numbers of blacks or Latinos, were geographically cordoned off through the use of highways and natural land features, further estranging these communities from the possibility of active economic and social municipal participation. As sociologists Rima Wilkes and John Iceland note, U.S. Census data reveals that the division established through these early 21st-century land-

genealogy from which they have been excluded.” Chon A. Noriega, “The Orphans of Modernism,” in *Phantom Sightings: Art After the Chicano Movement*, ed. Rita Gonzalez, Howard N. Fox, and Chon A. Noriega (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2008). 30. *Ibid.*, 30.

⁵⁰ Christopher Silver, “The Racial Origins of Zoning in American Cities,” in *Urban Planning and the African Community: In the Shadows*, ed. Thomas Manning and Marsha Ritzdorf (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications, 1997), 1.

use policies continues to resonate today as “hyper-segregation” within many large U.S. metropolitan communities.⁵¹

Despite this historical socio-spatial control and repression, referred to by Chicana/o scholars as “barrioization,” Mexican-American communities continued to evolve unique cultural survival strategies and resistance practices – what Chicano scholar Raul Villa terms a “barriology.” In his “barriologics” theory, he argues that marginalized communities develop “internal geographic identities” by way of psychologies, material practices, and experiential knowledge(s) that support “positive articulations of community consciousness,” and which “contribute to psychological and material sense of ‘home’ location.”⁵² Barriological practices define the local culture from within for its residents, while also structuring worldviews in “critical orientation towards dominant spatial practices,” in order to defend against and protect from externally imposed barrioization and the feelings of dislocation, alienation, and disorientation it produces.⁵³ His analysis of urban space as “community enabling place”⁵⁴ is relevant in understanding how, similarly, grassroots dance practices situate and draw from the local community for creative inspiration and performance. Through a barriological viewpoint, Chicana/o dance choreographs what a community wants to say about itself – as Jeanette Chavez of the Guadalupe Dance Company suggested – within the expressiveness of

⁵¹ Rima Wilkes and John Iceland, "Hypersegregation in the Twenty-First Century," *Demography* 41, no. 1 (Feb 2004): 1.

⁵² Raúl Homero Villa, *Barrio-Logos: Space and Place in Urban Chicano Literature and Culture* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2000). 5.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, 15.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 6.

theatrical settings and artistic movement vocabularies, with the dance body serving as the moving text for the materiality of culture that happens both in and outside the performance space.

Whether dance projects or their technologies draw from the familiar spaces of the folk imaginary, or whether they are provocative new works that challenge traditional and/or nationalist scripts, invariably, their thematics in Chicana/o dance are tied to the spaces and places where Mexican-Americans reside. From more traditional forms of dance – such as indigenous *danzas*, Mexican *folklórico*, and Spanish flamenco – to the choreographic departures that remake these traditions into contemporary works about the modern moment, each work tells a story of the diverse weave of communities from which it is spun and the resiliency of those communities in maintaining cultural cohesion amid the double pressures of marginalization and assimilation. These dance practices are intertwined in the emotional and cultural spirit of the communities from which they emanate, producing a “feeling brown” affective sensation described by performance studies scholar José Esteban Muñoz as working against or in contrast to “a world painted white, organized by cultural mandates to ‘feel white.’”⁵⁵ The choreographies of four companies I discuss in this dissertation - the Guadalupe, Floricanto, Latina Dance Project and Aztlán - inspire multiple significations through space and time, where, both during and after their performances, audiences are engaged in expressive dialogues and cultural exchanges that are directly relevant to their communities and constituencies.

⁵⁵ José Esteban Muñoz, "Feeling Brown: Ethnicity and Affect in Ricardo Brocho's *The Sweetest Hangover* (and Other STDs)," *Theater Journal* 52, no. 1 (Mar 2000): 68.

In summary, barrios and bodies are important concepts independently and especially, in relation to each other, and they form the two-part – or two-step, if you will – theoretical frame for this dissertation. As African-American dance scholar Jayna Brown notes in reference to black dance practices in marginalized communities, these practices “emerge as constitutive of cultural meaning rather than as their simple transfer or extension.”⁵⁶ In this regard, the opportunity exists to examine how barrios, as the home of Chicana/o dance practices, entwine with the multiple bodies in everyday motion within these communities to expand our reading and analysis of Chicanas/os in dance. Although I aim to illustrate commonalities between these groups, I also attempt to avoid essentializing barrio practices and the brown body – instead seeking to open up the spaces of body, studio, and stage to illustrate the choreographic diversity that makes the companies and communities of my study so dynamic.

DANCING CHICANA/O, WRITING DANCE: PERFORMANCE, ETHNOGRAPHY, BODY

My research draws from my lifetime experience in barrio based dance practices that inform my bodily knowledges and worldviews. This project, as such, is derived from multiple moments in my career where as a Chicano artist I found great clarity and purpose in knowing that I dance in the borderlands, they are: the Austin 1970s Chicano Arts Movement that launched me into the spaces of community arts activism; the early 90s *U.S. Quincentenary* celebrations and the *Splendors: Thirty Centuries of Mexican Arts*, where the former claims to have discovered me and the later denies me home; and more recently within my academic endeavors where I have come to realize that my body,

⁵⁶ Brown, *Babylon girls: Black Women Performers and the Shaping of the Modern*: 13.

dance, and dance communities remain virtually absent both within dance studies and Chicana/o studies. Like the choreographies that I create with the Aztlan Dance Company, this dissertation brings into its fold the memories, experiences, knowledges, and politics that I have gleaned through more than four decades in my work as a barrio artist. In the multiple arenas I navigate I invest time in translating. I find that in the practice of translating (language, body, cultural codes, and barrio perspectives) my articulations become clearer and those I address more fully understand the diversity and dimension that marginalized and overlooked communities face in today's moment. These translations take place in a variety of arenas, from arts policy, community initiatives, to educational settings, I find greatest pleasures in conversations about dance and the role of the arts, the nuances of barrio culture and community, and the ideas that nurture more cross-cultural interaction. My practice informs this project, and in fact, engages translations once more.

This dissertation participates with the handful of Latina/o/Chicana/o artist-scholars who find in concert dance the space to articulate their identities, cultures, and communities. My project thus purposefully pivots from prevailing dominant views in American dance that insists the dance body must conform to Euro Western informed dance constructions and prevailing dominant aesthetics that dismisses cultural specificity and ethnicity for mainstream mass audience appeal. Rather, my research guides me to the spaces and places where Chicanas/os dance, the working-class barrio grass roots, in order to locate how dance practices are produced and practiced, and to explore how they

perform in alternative expressive registers that are resonant and relevant for the communities engage.

This dissertation explores Chicana/o barrio-based concert dance practices and examines how the expressive brown body in dance participates in archiving, (re)interpreting, and per/forming Xicano culture, history, and experience. I specifically look at four choreographies, Danza Floricanto/USA's *Alma Llanera: Spirit of the Plains*; Guadalupe Dance Company's *Historias y Recuerdos*; Latina Dance Project's *Coyolxauhqui ReMembers* to explore the cultural and aesthetic choices each dance company structures for Chicana/o/Latina/o dance. My methodology brings together archival research (articles, reviews, and performance ephemera), borderlands performance analysis, and ethnographic approaches to address how race, class, ethnicity, (gender) are negotiated, contested, articulated, and constituted through Chicana/o dance performance.

My analysis proceeds from the premise that contemporary Chicana/o concert dance emerges from barrio-based practices rooted during the Chicano Arts Movement and, like sister Chicana/o art forms that have evolved over time, reflects a shift in the way barrio communities imagine themselves in today's modern moment, challenging traditional categories in dance and disrupting prevailing narratives of conformity. My analysis explores both the rehearsal process and the product of its practice, performance. Like performance scholar Judith Hamera, I believe that dance and its processes are "laboratories" for community making, "sites where participants actively confront and

engage tradition, authority, corporeality, and irreducible difference.”⁵⁷ As practices that build upon historical grassroots dance formations and imagine new creative spaces for the Chicana/o body to move in, I study Chicanas/os dance as a repertoire that draws from and builds upon embodied knowledges that inform it. Arguing the necessary contributions of embodiment and performance in scholarship, Diana Taylor encourages scholars to expand inquiry beyond “the archive” (enduring materials, i.e. texts) and to consider the important role of “the repertoire” (embodied practices/knowledge) as complementary systems of knowledge and meaning making practices as discernable supplement to academic textual traditions.⁵⁸ Dance, as practices in motion and tied to the body are, perhaps more than other disciplines, a germane site for exploring and considering the repertoires of communities and cultures.

As archetype border-crossers, Chicana/o scholars, like dance scholars, are sentient of the border spaces we move in, through, and about, making intellectual and textual maps of the terrains we cross and those with whom we come into contact during our journeys. As such this project maps textual, historical, cultural, and embodied analyses for reading the Chicana/o body in dance. My dissertation relies on close readings of choreography, part documentation and part analysis, to investigate how dance performs individual and collective identity through grassroots barrio-based practice and to explore how dance companies choreograph and construct a borderlands cultural repertoire that opens space for dance to render the brown body and community visible. I use

⁵⁷ Judith Hamera, *Dancing Communities: Performance, Difference, and Connection in the Global City* (New York: Plagrave Macmillan, 2007). 2.

⁵⁸ Taylor, *The Archive and the Repertoire: Performing Cultural Memory in the Americas*: 19.

performance analysis' critical methods of embodiment that interrogates actions, gestures, utterances, sound, movement and theatricality, and dance studies' focus on the body as analytical tools to explore Chicana/o subjectivity in dance and how they intersect within larger social and political frameworks.⁵⁹

My dissertation draws from elements of performance ethnography where I structure “dialogic performance” space for examining and understanding the Chicana/o body in dance, and where I resist finite conclusions by offering ideas on how each body and choreography contributes to evolving individual and collective identities and subjectivities in the communities from which they emerge.⁶⁰ By looking at how dance as culture imagines itself in the world, I participate in the “seventh moment of inquiry” that asserts the voice of the subaltern is imperative in “exposing the ruptures in the ideological seams in these dominant cultural mythologies, both through political action and through their subject matter.⁶¹ As an artist engaged in long-term practice, my research aims to co-perform with the other artists in this dissertation and interpret the cultures we collectively inhabit. I take cues from Joni L. Jones' theories that performance ethnography is “about how the body does culture.”⁶² She notes in *Theatrical Jazz* (2015) that through memory, reading, and translations, or “autocritography,” she is able to “intertwine my own

⁵⁹Schechner, *Performance Studies: An Introduction*: 1-4.

⁶⁰ Dwight Conquergood, "Performing as a Moral Act: Ethical Dimensions of the Ethnography of Performance," *Literature in Performance* 5, no. 2 (1985): 9.

⁶¹ Norman K. Denzin, *Performance Ethnography: Critical Pedagogy and the Politics of Culture* (Thousand Oaks: Sage Publications, 2003). 111.

⁶² Joni L. Jones, "The Self As Other: Creating the Role of Joni, The Ethnographer for Broken Circles," *Text and Performance Quarterly* 16(1996): 132.

personal exploration of this work with critical analysis, using production and rehearsal experiences as data for discussion of the jazz aesthetic,” concluding that her investigation of African-American subjectivity and expressivity is then “as much my own story as it is a discussion of methods and strategies...”⁶³ Knowing the choreographers of each of the company here through the years and having shared conversations about the challenges we face as a community of dancers, this project brings into its fold both macro and micro considerations we encounter as dancers, as Latina/o/Chicanas/os, and as cultural workers.

The field of dance has developed specific approaches towards dance ethnography that centers the body and experience in dialogue with frameworks of identity and representation. As the primary mechanism for knowing, for sensing the world, the body itself becomes a site for knowledge production. Ann Cooper Albright notes, “put simply, dancing bodies are simultaneously produced and are produced by their own body.”⁶⁴ This dialectic between materiality and representation provides a forum for examining how the dance body continuously moves through social and cultural spaces. In addition to locating the places, spaces and ways the body moves through the world, dance scholarship has incorporated embodied ethnography as an important component of analysis. Notes dance scholar Rebecca Rossen, “embodied scholarship can also mean using one’s performance training to fill in the gaps in the archive and give flesh to dancing bodies of the past, or drawing upon one’s experiences in the studio and onstage

⁶³ Omi Osun Joni L. Jones, *Theatrical Jazz: Performance, Áse, and the Power of the Present Moment* (Columbus: The Ohio State University Press, 2015). 5.

⁶⁴ Albright, *Choreographing Difference: The Body and Identity in Contemporary Dance*: 3.

to expand our understanding of choreography, history, meaning.”⁶⁵ I am in full agreement with Rossen that the body can never be fully written, and for this reason the body must participate in its own ongoing writing project. My research thus also works to locate barrio dance practices within a embodied cultural history, where through detailed performance description and analysis I work to convey the visceral textures and underlying body formations that produce the dance and the dancers. As an artist that is part of the community I write about, I collaborate, co-perform, advocate, and structure an ethics of care and shared responsibility in this work (Denzin 113).⁶⁶

My dissertation thus proceeds with interest to illuminate these practices as an exciting arena of dance making, but, in the nature of full disclosure in the research and writing process, I am also weary that calling attention to these expressive arts may inadvertently foster a gentrification, both intellectually and physically. As is the trend across minority communities across the nation (i.e. San Francisco Mission District, East Austin, East Los Angeles, etc.) bringing to light the beauty, diversity, and expressive elements that make these communities so charming, caring, and resourceful also positions them for exploitation. I feel strongly however that these artists and their works are due visibility for the remarkable contributions they make for a greater humanity and civic society and write with heartfelt interest to share their in valuable role and contribution to the rich tapestry of American arts. Ultimately my case study selection process is based on companies with an organizational histories informed by the Chicano

⁶⁵ Rebecca Rossen, *Dancing Jewish: Jewish Identity in American Modern and Postmodern Dance* (Oxford University Press, 2014). 13.

⁶⁶ Denzin, *Performance Ethnography: Critical Pedagogy and the Politics of Culture*: 113.

Arts Movement, are deep rooted in working-class barrio communities, maintain a consistent trajectory of artistic production over time, are capable of maintaining a repertory in dance that archives community history through choreography, reflect multi-lingual dance vocabularies in practice, preserve traditional dance techniques, and take risks to create new choreographic departures that builds from traditional dance for more generative work-space(s) that reflects and critiques our modern contemporary moment.

THE FUTURE OF BORDERLANDS DANCE: CHAPTER OUTLINE AND CONCLUSION

My dissertation is arranged thematically. Each of the following chapters allows me to explore specific ways in which dance artists engage choreography for identity production. The three major themes that frame my chapters are, in order, critical mestizaje, cultural memory, and barrio aesthetics. Reading these themes across several dance works underscores the similarity of interests/paradigms and concerns/motifs that guide how Chicanas/os collectively imagine their place in the world, while also emphasizing the diversity and multiplicity of ways by which Chicanas/os express themselves and engage their communities through performance. This approach also allows me to conduct close readings of particular moments in the choreographies that open up these concerns with different yet echoing inflections.

The choreographies I examine throughout this dissertation are the Latina Dance Project's *Coyolxauhqui ReMembers* (2009), the Guadalupe Dance Company's *Historias y Recuerdos* (2011), Danza Floricanto/USA's *Alma Llanera: Spirit of the Plains* (2009, 2014), and my own work with the Aztlan Dance Company, *Loterialandia* (2013). Some of the dances will be examined across chapters in order to illustrate how thematic

resonate across works, demonstrating the complexity and depth that they all share.

Centering working-class barrios as a generative site for creativity while maintaining deep relationships with their constituents and commitment to high ideals of creating great art, each of these companies functions as an important agent in interpreting and representing community cultural customs, traditions, and values.⁶⁷ I place myself in the writing by opening each chapter with a personal or ethnographic anecdote that serves to unfold my arguments. I then turn to a brief overview of the chapter's thematic topic and the dance company and choreographers in question, followed by in-depth, close readings of the choreography, its themes, and its effects.

In Chapter Two, "Performing La Frontera: Borderlands Mestizaje in Chicana/o Concert Dance," I explore how the Chicana/o borderlands concept of critical mestizaje informs choreographies of the experiences and worldviews of barrio artists and their communities and the cultural negotiations in which they engage. I explore and compare the Latina Dance Project's "New Moon Over Juarez" vignette from *Coyolxauhqui ReMembers* and the Guadalupe Dance Company's "Frontera" vignette from their full-evening work *Historias y Recuerdos* to understand how notions of borders/fronteras, both literal and imagined, are configured as part of the Chicana/o dance and community repertoire. While each work puts forth a social commentary critiquing the historical effects of the U.S.-Mexico border on Mexican-origin peoples, the brown dance body provides a living, breathing, sweating, discursive site for illuminating, interpreting, and

⁶⁷ Jan Cohen-Cruz, "Introduction: The Ecology of Theater-in-Community," in *Performing Communities: Grassroots Ensemble Theaters Deeply Rooted in Eight U.S. Communities*, ed. Linda Frye Burnham (Oakland: New Village Press, 2006), 4.

calling attention to the ways that La Frontera endures as a site of personal, social, and cultural conflict in Chicana/o thought and worldviews. La Frontera in this chapter, I argue, embodies a borderlands mestizaje on the move.

The Latina Dance Project's *Coyolxauhqui ReMembers* was presented at The University of Texas at Austin's October 2009 "Danzas: Modern Movimientos," symposium, and highlights the fractured reality of immigrants crossing the U.S.-Mexico border in search of progress and following dreams of prosperity. By re-narrating the Aztec myth of Coyolxauhqui, the moon goddess, within a modern and feminist context, the Latina Dance Project claims a critical mestizaje for Chicana subjectivity. As a national dance project that harnesses the collective talents and experience of choreographers Juanita Suarez (New York), Alicia Peréa (California), Luz Santos (North Carolina), and Eva Tessler (Arizona), the group creates dance that addresses transnational and trans-local issues and ideas relevant to Latina/o communities. In addition to their work in the Latina Dance Project, each choreographer also maintains a practice in her respective community. Meanwhile, the Guadalupe Dance Company's *Historias y Recuerdos* performance, which I also explore in this chapter, is based on oral histories of longtime West San Antonio barrio residents. For a period of five years, company co-directors Belinda Menchaca and Jeanette Chavez evolved this project in partnership with community members from the Buena Vista barrio, and developed a rotating assemblage of vignettes that give voice to the lives of these barrio's residents through dance. Through video interviews that segue into formal choreography, *Historias y Recuerdos* chronicles grassroots Chicana/o subjectivities and experiences, saliently expressing the social and

cultural challenges and successes they face. Presented in the historic Guadalupe Theater in November 2011, this choreography reflects the company's deep commitment to nurturing thick, intimate and mutually responsive relationships between communities and the arts.

In Chapter Three, "Choreographies of Memory: Rehearsing Culture and Performing Community," I explore how Chicana/o dance draws from cultural memories to reimagine and remake them for our contemporary moment. I begin with Danza Floricanto/USA's *Alma Llanera: Spirit of the Plains* performance, which was originally commissioned in 2009 as a full-evening work by San Francisco's CounterPulse Performing Diaspora arts program. As choreography based on New Mexican Chicano author Rodolfo Anaya's seminal novel, *Bless Me Ultima* (1972), I examine how dance and text come together to structure Chicana/o narrative and collective memory. Granted an artist-in-residence fellowship with CounterPulse, Floricanto/USA artistic director Gema Sandoval was given the creative time and opportunity to, in her words, "listen to my artistic voice, clarify my choices, and choose the proper mix of past and present to create the hybrid that I am looking for."⁶⁸ In choreographing *Alma Llanera*, Sandoval was able to "establish new context with Mexican folk dance vocabulary," placing traditional motifs in relation to American popular culture in order to articulate a contemporary Chicana/o performance aesthetic. With the resource, space, and gains from the CounterPulse artist-in-residence program and with company project funding secured, Sandoval restaged *Alma Llanera* at the company's studio-theater home, the Floricanto

⁶⁸ Gema Sandoval, "Danza Floricanto/USA Interview," (Los Angeles, California 2015).

Performing Arts Center, in the City Terrace neighborhood in East Los Angeles in May 2014.

In Chapter Four, “Barrio Moves and Chicano Grooves: Barrio Aesthetics in Chicana/o Dance,” situates Mexican-American working-class barrios as generative sites for dancemaking. By drawing upon the barrio as a creative resource, Chicanas/o dancemakers are able to create choreography that reflects alternative “barrio” viewpoints and generate an aesthetic that embodies barrio values and experiences. Stereotyped in mainstream media and the public consciousness as blighted and mired municipal sectors, I show how barrio geo-locations in fact house the rich embodied repertoires of people’s life stories at the margins, enabling inventive ways of staging borderlands negotiations in and through dance. This chapter focuses on the process of creating Aztlán Dance Company’s *Loterialandia*. As the choreographer of this work and the director of the company, I describe my choreographic process to illuminate how barrio aesthetics inform dance designs that reflect the spaces and places that are familiar to community artists and audiences. By blending American and Mexican dance cultures and resourcing local community sights and sounds, Aztlán interprets Chicana/o culture against the grain of mainstream aesthetics, producing new creative possibilities that inflect the barrio within dance.

Finally, in Chapter Five, “Conclusion,” I close the dissertation by exploring how borderlands cultural production creates inviting spaces for cultural crossings and empowers its sojourners to delight in the beauty of difference and in-between identities. I offer as example my experience attending an October 2015 performance of Los Master

Plus – a performance that highlights audiotopic borderlands crossings and how barrio popular culture offers passport to cultural (re)imaginings. I also offer concluding thoughts and ideas for further research, suggesting deeper explorations of how Chicana/o dance participates in third-space practice, how the form provides rich optics for analysis for gender and sexuality, and how it promotes cross-racial alliance building.

Theory follows bodies. “Choreographing Borderlands” follows the bodies of dance artists who cross borders and perform at the margins, in the spaces between here and there – somewhere and nowhere, but determinedly in the present. Through grassroots, barrio-based dance informed by rich Américas dance histories that predate 15th-century cultural contact and concurrently work to integrate 21st-century artistic and expressive culture, these dancers bend space, time, and geographies into choreographies that narrate the multiple dimensions and spaces of Chicana/o critical thought and movement. As border scholar Gloria Anzaldúa asserts in *Borderlands/La Frontera*, regarding the complex and daunting task that Chicanas/os face in trying to tell our stories both to ourselves and to others:

*“The struggle is inner: Chicano, indio, American Indian, mojado, mexicano, immigrant Latino, Anglo in power, working class Anglo, Black, Asian – our psyches resemble the bordertowns and are populated by the same people. The struggle has always been inner, and is played out in outer terrains. Awareness of our situation must come before inner changes, which in turn come before changes in society. Nothing happens in the “real” world unless it first happens in the images in our heads.”*⁶⁹

⁶⁹ Anzaldúa, *Borderlands: La Frontera/The New Mestiza*: 87.

My dissertation, in this spirit, participates in the rich Chicana/o artistic, intellectual, and cultural legacies of cultivating the ways and forms through which we might be able to imagine ourselves, narrate them to others, and join in shared futures of hope and prosperity. My project maps the spaces and places where my body, and the body of others like me, desire to dance – in the beautiful borderlands, where “cultures” continue their long tradition of “contact” and constantly remake themselves into dynamic new formations and frameworks that cut across languages, bodies, societies, traditions. A major premise throughout is my assertion that Chicana/o dance practice, through this borderlands paradigm of reinvention(s), engenders more inclusive models for dance and for community.

The presence of a vibrant and diverse dance community, coupled with the fast-growing U.S. Latino demographic that makes up the audiences of tomorrow, ensures that this community of dance artists and audiences will continue contributing to new directions in dance well into the future.

Chapter 2: Performing La Frontera: Borderlands Mestizaje in Chicana/o Concert Dance

Nosotros los Chicano straddle the Borderlands. On one side of us, we are constantly exposed to the Spanish of the Mexicans, on the other side we hear the Anglo's incessant clamoring so that we forget our language.... Chicanos and other people of color suffer economically for not acculturating. This voluntary (yet forced) alienation makes for psychological conflict, a kind of dual identity - we don't identify with the Anglo cultural values and we don't totally identify with the Mexican cultural values. We are a synergy of two cultures with various degrees of Mexicanness and Angloness."

~ Gloria Anzaldúa

AT THE STROKE OF MIDNIGHT: MESTIZAJE IN MEXICAN-AMERICAN/CHICANA/O DANCE

On the hot and humid eve of September 16th, 1982, I performed as one of sixteen dancers who were dressed as early nineteenth-century working-class Mexican campesinos, or provincials, recreating a scene of an old Mexican village plaza replete with vintage cuadrilla choreography.⁷⁰ Men were dressed in white cotton pants and shirts tied at the waist with a sash, thick woven sarapes strewn over the shoulders, and women in multicolored, earth-tone, full-circle dresses with aprons, white blouses, and rebozos, or cotton shawls. In square dance format, the eight couples performed a traditional Mexican dance cuadro, or suite, titled *La Revolución*, choreographed for the Aztlan Dance Company by the late Marcelo Torreblanca during a 1979 cultural exchange with Mexico's Academia de la Danza Nacional (ACADEDA). The performance was part of the annual Grito de Dolores celebration at the Austin AquaFestival on Auditorium Shores

⁷⁰ Mexican 19th century cuadrillas, or bailes de salon (social dance), are traditional dances developed through the cultural influences of the European governing elite and viceroalties in Mexico. For more on cuadrillas, see: Jack Loeffler, *La Musica de Los Viejos: Hispano Folk Music of the Rio Grande del Norte* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1999).

which was produced by the Mexican-American Chamber of Commerce and the Mexican Consulate General. *La Revolución* work was informed by European dance influences that included mazurkas, chotis, polkas, and redobas and set the scene of Mexican country life on the eve of the Mexican Revolution. On the large, elevated stage, the full ensemble moved through broad geometric spatial patterns and took turns intersecting the center of the dance floor, acknowledging one another in the crossings. Throughout the vignette, couples took turns highlighting fancy zapateado footwork flurries that added dynamic dimension to the group work. Seamlessly timed, the final dance piece ended as the loud sound of recorded church bells rang seconds before the midnight hour.

At the final stroke of the midnight bells, Monsignor Lonnie Reyes, of the Austin Catholic Diocese, entered the stage portraying Mexican revolutionary hero Padre Miguel Hidalgo y Costilla. Wearing a black Catholic order vestment, a white waist sash, and a large crucifix centered across his chest, Monsignor moved to the center of the floor as the dancers broke from formation to gather around him. Addressing the audience, he shouted: “Mi pueblo querido, Mexicanos, Mexicano-Americanos y Chicanos, hoy nos juntamos para declarar nuestra Independencia en contra la injusticia...” (My beloved people, Mexicans, Mexican-Americans, Chicanos, today we gather to declare our independence from injustices...).⁷¹ Monsignor delivered the traditional midnight Grito de Dolores proclamation, the call for arms that marked the beginning of the Mexican

⁷¹ The traditional Grito proclamation text does not reference Mexican-Americans or Chicanos. Activist Chicano cleric Monsignor Reyes incorporated this reference to reflect the audience’s composition.

revolution of 1810 against French colonial rule and the Spanish governing elite in Mexico.⁷²

The final portion of Aztlan's *La Revolution*, which featured Monsignor Reyes's Grito proclamation recreated the traditional and symbolic call-and-response that unites performers and audience members in the shared performance of Mexican history. After he acknowledged each name of important heroes who laid the groundwork for the revolution, the audience responded with, "¡Qué Viva!" In the climatic finale of the patriotic, three-time repetition of "Viva Mexico!" – followed each time by "¡Qué Viva!" – a lone immigrant Mexican paisano (fellow countryman) who was standing atop the concrete base of a tall light pole in the center of the crowd of approximately 9,500 attendees, seized the moment to publicly dissent. He shouted aloud: "¡Que pinche bola de pendejos! ¿Quienes son ustedes? Están chingados. ¡Ni los quieren allá en Mexico!" (What group of goddamn fools! Who do you think you are? You're all fucked! Mexico does not even want you!). His critique was direct, honest, cutting.

In this live moment of dissent, the paisano made public a very private internal conflict and personal tension that Chicanas/os negotiate in our everyday lives: the liminality of not being neither American enough nor Mexican enough. As one of the dancers in this Chicano Movement-inspired performance, I was proud to be presenting my Mexican dance heritage in a downtown Austin mainstream venue, which considering the period, was itself an accomplishment. Yet, this lone voice in the audience made me

⁷² Mexican presidents from Adolfo Lopez Mateos to Felipe Calderon Hinojosa performing the annual Grito de Dolores at the Mexican national palace can be viewed at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hde6eaojzHs>.

feel like an imposter, a fake, for assuming claims to a country that is not mine, performing it for the whole of Austin. On stage at the youthful age of sixteen, the awkwardness of this evening set in as I questioned the costume I wore, the folk character that I represented, and the event that was resolutely a Mexican national and patriotic celebration.

As he was quickly tugged down from the light post and his voice summarily dismissed, I also found space to empathize with the paisano's views. He had every right to question this performance's appropriation of his birth nation and homeland experience. I imagined that from his perspective, he viewed us, Mexican-Americans and Chicanas/os, as cultural outsiders performing his person, his family, and his materially lived reality. The performance – a spectacle of Mexican nationalism – romanticized a people's struggle from the past, but failed to offer any significant commentary, critique, or recourse for the difficult and real conditions that continue to plague our neighboring country, then as now.

While the re-enactment may have endeavored to stage a "safe" cultural-affirming past, the paisano reminded us all that our claims to this Mexican nationalist past do not entitle us to the privileges of modern Mexican citizenship or the right to appropriate Mexican homeland culture. For Chicanas/os, this quandary of belonging and not belonging to two different and distinct nations with materially linked histories situates our identities in a culturally ambiguous state, where we continually negotiate our

interpretations of space, place, and loyalties, what scholars have termed a Chicana/o critical mestizaje.⁷³

Although Mexico as a nation-state is removed from my practical lived realities, the paisano and I do, in fact, share a rich culture. During my youth in Austin, I engaged readings on Chicana/o culture and listened attentively to Chicana/o elder-activists to make sense of my Chicano reality. With information and introspection, I found resolve knowing that the historical moment we performed that day at Auditorium Shores was directly linked to my own history and heritage. I rationalized that the 1848 U.S.-Mexican Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo fractured any sense of my claims to full homeland identities, placing each of my feet in the politics and culture of each nation – not fully valued culturally, politically, and socially in either. I came to fully understand El Movimiento's adage, "I didn't cross the border, the border crossed me," as it profoundly resonates in my person, then as it does now. This moment in dance and the socio-political disorientations/dislocations that it produced rematerialized me within the

⁷³ Mestizaje, or racial and cultural mixture, is a major theoretical concept in Chicana/o borderlands critical discourses that highlights third-space subjectivities and practices. For more on mestizaje see: Gloria Anzaldúa, *Borderlands: La Frontera/the New Mestiza* (San Francisco: Aunt Lute Books, 1987); Alicia Arrizón, *Queering Mestizaje: Transculturation and Performance*. (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2006); Cristina Beltran, "Patrolling Borders: Hybrids, Hierarchies, and the Challenge of Mestizaje." *Political Research Quarterly* 57.4 (December 2004); Karen Mary Davalos, *Exhibiting Mestizaje: Mexican (American) Museums in the Diaspora*. (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 2001); John L. Escobedo, "Dangerous Crossroads: Mestizaje in the U.S. Latino/a Imaginary" (Rice University, 2008); AnaLouise Keating, "From Borderlands and New Mestizas to Nepantlas and Nepantleras: Anzaldúan Theories for Social Change." *Human Architecture: Journal of Sociology of Self-Knowledge* IV. Special Issue (September 2006): 5-16; Pérez-Torres, Rafael. *Mestizaje: Critical Uses of Race in Chicano Culture* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2006).

Chicana/o borderlands, a meta-frontier for understanding the in-between-ness of who I am, has influenced and informed my path in art.

This performance, along with many others that would follow, made me hypersentient of the multiple and fluid identities I inhabit as a Chicano artist. Eventually, I would come to learn about the great diversity that exists within Mexican-origin culture in America, where I matured to resource my own experiences and views as inspiration for choreography. As dance situates the physical body in movement-based representational practices and my body finds home in the U.S.-Mexico borderlands, I, like the other choreographers I address in this dissertation, claim ownership and agency to search for truths in the lived realities of my contemporary Chicano experiences and to daringly choreograph them.

MESTIZAJE - LA FRONTERA AND CHICANA/O CONCERT DANCE AS THIRD-SPACE PRACTICE

In this chapter, I examine how notions of racial and cultural mestizaje inform the aesthetics and production practices of Mexican-American/Chicana/o concert dance. As choreographies that both perform history and map the complex psychological and embodied relationship between U.S. and Mexico identities, I argue that Chicana/o concert dance operates as a distinctive American third-space borderlands contemporary practice, empowering Chicana/o and allied dance bodies to rehearse and perform critical assertions of cultural identity in relation to both local community formation and the transnational

space of a "Greater Mexico."⁷⁴ Choreographing the social, political, and cultural divides inherent in Chicana/o identity, Chicana/o dancemakers, as I assert, construct important translocal, transcultural movement-based stories that center mestizaje as a decolonial strategy and aesthetic system that narrates the ambivalences and realities of living between space(s). In so doing, these stories and dance practices reinvent tradition for our modern moment, marking identity as continually in flux (the space of alterity) while participating in a larger conversation that locates the brown body in dance as part of American cultural production.

To support these arguments, I identify La Frontera, the U.S.-Mexico border, as an important recurring trope configured within Chicana/o concert dance repertoire. Borders define and establish structures from which to separate, contain, control, and patrol human movement, in the process ordering difference as a construct between 'us' and 'them,' and thereby demonizing transgressions.⁷⁵ Chicana/o choreographers have the potential to situate dancers and their bodies within binary frameworks of Mexican or American, English or Spanish, folkloric or modern, past or present, and create choreography that directly expresses migrant experiences with national border crossings. Thus, Chicana/o dance work is able to tell stories about a people on the move as they quest for a fuller

⁷⁴ The term Greater Mexico, coined in 1958 by Américo Paredes in his book *With a Pistol in His Hand* and further elaborated upon by Jose E. Limón, established early frameworks for conceptualizing Chicana/o culture and identity as transcendent of legal and official borders. The term would begin to serve as an analytic to examine the writings of authors such as Rodolfo Anaya, Tomás Rivera, Oscar Zeta Acosta, Cherríe Moraga, Rolando Hinojosa Smith, and Sandra Cisneros, among others. For more see: Héctor Calderón, *Narratives of Greater Mexico: Essays on Chicano Literary History, Genre, and Borders*. Austin: University of Texas Press. 2004. Print.

⁷⁵ Ramon H. Rivera-Servera and Harvey Young, eds., *Performance in the Borderlands* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011), 2.

future filled with opportunity, hope, and promise, crossing boundaries of identity, place, and time.⁷⁶ Border performances, in this light, expressively narrate the space(s) between departure and arrival, highlighting the complex and difficult negotiations of losses and gains associated with crossings. The continuous state of instability experienced in and around the edges of the border(lands) creates new knowledge formations and affective responses that, as performance studies scholars Rivera-Servera and Young note, blurs “the here and now... constantly reorganizing spatial relations and negotiating the consequences of their crossings.”⁷⁷ As a historical and geo-political site of conflict within Chicana/o and Mexican-American experience La Frontera and its crossings reflects the fragmented realities of Chicana/o identity.

The artistic trope of La Frontera has the potential to represent shared legacies of hardship produced through colonial histories of power, capital, and the control of human flows. Whether addressing current political debates that demonize the border, or imperial U.S.-based imperial histories that have created them, the border and its production of borderlands feelings, experiences, and thought is materially etched into the cultural psyche and everyday practices of Chicanas/os. The frontera trope in dancemaking thus

⁷⁶ I draw from Homi Bhabha’s poststructuralist notion of culture in the “realm of beyond,” an interventionists space of the “here and now” that is “part of a revisionary time, a return to the present to redescribe our cultural contemporaneity; to reinscribe our human, historical commonality; *to touch the future on its hither side*” (7). He adds that through the experience of beyond, “the present can no longer be simply envisaged as a break or a bonding with the past and the future, no longer a synchronic presence: our proximate self-presence, our public image, comes to be revealed for its discontinuities, its inequities, its minorities” (4). In this light, Chicana/o art, as “insurgent acts of cultural translation,” make legible an interiority of how borders and divides “renews the past, refiguring it as a contingent ‘in-between’ space, that innovates and interrupts the performance of the present” (7). For more see: Homi K. Bhabha. *The Location of Culture* (London: Routledge, 1991).

⁷⁷ Rivera-Servera and Young, *Performance in the Borderlands*, 7.

offers embodied insights into how choreography narrates mestizaje as a “doubling process,” what Karen Mary Davalos defines as “both an expression of affirmation and self-determination and a result of domination. It is the combination of these expressions and results that give rise to the hybrid forms in representation.”⁷⁸ Chicano scholar Rafael Perez-Torres, expanding on Stuart Hall’s notion of identity through difference, adds that the mestizo self is “one living in doubleness,” noting that mestizo subjectivity is embodied and “located in multiple positions of marginality and subordination.”⁷⁹ The effects of this mixing of social and cultural identities structure Chicana/o critical expressive stances towards dominant culture and resistive practices that maintain pluralist and individual identities in the face of assimilation and cultural erasure. As choreographies that negotiate mestizaje and the doubling “hybrid” processes involved in the “constant and dynamic construction of the new,” Chicana/o dance both honors and troubles the expressive formations of vernacular folk dance forms based in Mexican culture while also negotiating representation constitutive as American dance practice.⁸⁰

In this chapter, I analyze two productions that center the trope of La Frontera (the U.S.-Mexico Border) as a site for historical and cultural reflection. For Chicana/o communities, La Frontera literally and figurative reminds communities of individual, family, and shared experiences associated with the historical violence and marginalization produced through a century and a half of U.S. border policy. As such,

⁷⁸ Karen Mary Davalos, *Exhibiting Mestizaje: Mexican (American) Museums in the Diaspora* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 2001). 27.

⁷⁹ Pérez-Torres, *Mestizaje: Critical Uses of Race in Chicano Culture*: 35.

⁸⁰ *Ibid.*, 34.

performances of La Frontera bring to the forefront complex histories and memories of suffering associated with migration and journeys towards progress. Border performances offer audiences and artists moments to reflect on the proximity and distance of crossings as shared cultural experience. Whether recent or linked to past family experience, the border both materially and metaphorically creates space within Chicana/o cultural consciousness for empathy, enabling a mestizaje to reconcile the conflict and dislocations between a Mexican homeland, real or imagined, and integration into American culture.

I begin my analysis by examining a segment titled “New Moon Over Juarez” from the Latina Dance Project’s (LDP) full-evening production of *Coyolxauhqui ReMembers* (2009), a contemporary work that focuses on the disappeared women of Juarez at the U.S.-Mexico border. Incorporating Aztec myth within a modern day story of hope, this work invokes the indigenous Américas to assert a Chicana/o mestizaje that recovers losses associated with moves to modernity. I next consider “Frontera,” a scene from Guadalupe Dance Company’s *Historias y Recuerdos* (2010), an oral history project that chronicles and interprets several family stories about the shared experiences of crossing the border. This work highlights how San Antonio barrio residents have negotiated their contemporary lives through the ambivalences experienced by leaving Mexican homeland culture and adopting uncertain and ambivalent cultural spaces within American culture.

Together, the two choreographies demonstrate how Chicana/o dance practice and production continually negotiates the liminal spaces between Mexican culture and American lived reality. Both of these dancemakers creatively join message with form to

give voice to Chicana/o mestizo identity, effectively offering “a strategy by which counterhegemonic identities can be articulated and enacted.”⁸¹ As each choreographer and company gives body to voice, and voice to body, new spaces in dance emerge to articulate the moving Chicana/o body that dances the in-between spaces of the borders.

As projects that structure a “pause in the activity of coloniality” – what Aldama, Sandoval, and García define as a “de-colonizing performativity” – each of these dance works exhibits contemporary Chicana/o aesthetics and alternative approaches in dance that give storytelling potent relevancy and resonance in the communities where they perform.⁸² As they mediate Chicana/o cultural identity for Chicana/o and non-Chicana/o audiences alike, they provide embodied insights to (re)interpret Chicana/o experience and history while reimagining space for the brown body in dance. These new Chicana/o-themed choreographies disrupt the racialized (read: white) parameters of traditional American concert dance while moving beyond the easily constructed folkloric conceptions of the brown dance. In doing so, artists create and perform liberating practices of progressive resistance that draw upon and build from diverse cultural practices in order to reimagine a Chicana/o subjectivity. As borderlands hybrid choreographies that focus on the blending and fusing of cultures, or *mestizaje*, the works themselves become public dialogues about how we see ourselves in relation to the communities where we live, work, and dance.

⁸¹ — — —, “Ethnicity, Ethics, and Latino Aesthetics,” *American Literary History* (2000): 156.

⁸² Arturo J. Aldama, Chela Sandoval, and Peter J. Garcia, “Toward a De-Colonial Performativity of the U.S. Latina and Latino Borderlands,” in *Performing the U.S. Latina and Latino Borderlands*, ed. Arturo Aldama (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2012), 19.

CONTEXTUALIZING BORDERLANDS MESTIZAJE FOR DANCE

The term mestizaje stems from the root word mestizo, or mixed race. Spanish colonial authority introduced the concept of mestizaje in the 16th century throughout Latin America in order to classify descendants of New and Old World populations. In this hierarchical system of racial classification, blood quantum and skin color operated as essential markers of social class and identity. European stock and lineage was privileged as mestizos were afforded limited rights and privileges. In Mexico, this racial system endured up to the 1810 Revolution, when Mexico engaged armed conflict to gain independence from Spanish colonial authority. Throughout this colonial and postcolonial period, dance in Mexico chronicled the cultural and social interactions of a changing country, undergoing “transformations consistent with the socio-aesthetic preferences of the local populations.”⁸³ The emerging global economies and increased social interaction introduced new dances forms that blended outside cultural influences with character of local communities, as reflected in salon dances such as waltz, contradanza, chotis, as well as the dances of the Spanish zarzuelas. In the reconstruction period that immediately followed the 1910-20 Mexican Revolution, Mexican intelligentsia reinvented national culture by constructing new cultural ideologies and policies that were based on a revised and more positive assertions of mestizaje.⁸⁴ These new ideological frames strived to bring Mexico into the age of industrial modernity by linking mestizo and indigenous cultures into a unified Mexican national identity. These newly reconfigured mestizaje identity

⁸³ Nájera-Ramírez, Cantú, and Romero, *Dancing Across Borders: Danzas y Bailes Mexicanos*, xiv.

⁸⁴ Rick A. López, *Crafting Mexico: Intellectuals, Artisans, and the State after the Revolution* (Durham London: Duke University Press, 2010). 146-47.

formations aimed to delimit internal class difference and unite people based on a common national experience. As efforts aimed to close the gap between rural indigenous populations and the developing concept of modern urban citizenship, this new idea of mestizaje revised arcane models of colonial authority and incorporated emerging ideas of cultural and social acculturation. While romantically seeking to unify populations and resist the new hegemony from the North, this theoretical paradigm left unresolved the real and pressing issues of class, race, and subaltern representation. Indeed, the most salient critiques of postcolonial mestizaje in Mexico underscores how modernity's progress came at the expense of limiting indigenous representation.⁸⁵ This is reflected in mid-century traditional Mexican dance practices that draws heavily from indigenous culture in theatrical concert performance, yet does not offer reciprocity to the communities it borrows from.⁸⁶

In the United States, the shift toward multiculturalism brought on by the Civil Rights Movement and the academy's turn to postmodernism in the late 20th century aimed to incorporate the voice of marginalized communities of color, build diversity, and decenter the dominant social order. In coupling these ideas with other emerging global theories and concepts such as hybridity, transculturation, contact zones, and transnationalism, Mexican-American and Chicana/o scholars reintroduced elements of

⁸⁵ For more on Indigeneity and the critical issues of inclusion and erasure see: Analisa Taylor, *Indigeneity in the Mexican Cultural Imagination: Thresholds of Belonging* (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 2009).; Michelle Harris, Martin Nakata, and Bronwyn Carlson, *The Politics of Identity: Emerging Indigeneity* (Broadway, Australia: UTSePress, 2013).

⁸⁶ For more on folklórico and indigenous dance construction see: Nájera-Ramírez, Cantú, and Romero, *Dancing Across Borders: Danzas y Bailes Mexicanos*.

Latin American mestizaje as a foundational framework for U.S. Chicano thought.⁸⁷ Chicana/o theory today situates mestizaje as a critical discourse that brings colonialism and marginalization into productive dialogue with contemporary cultural studies that considers larger dominant frameworks of power and control. Central to these conceptualizations of mestizaje is the reclaiming of “lo indigeno,” the indigenous, as an integral and critical component of Chicana/o hybrid subject formation, reinforcing claims of an “endless alterity (otherness)” for the Chicano subject.⁸⁸ While early Chicano nationalism was essentialist and masculinist in its construction, it did provide a strategic political and theoretical foundation for successive waves of Chicano/a scholars to critique those grounds and open more avenues for inclusivity with regards to gender, sexuality, class, and ethnicity.

My analysis is inspired by Chicana feminist Gloria Anzaldúa’s theorization of a borderlands mestizaje that re-visions Chicana/o culture and identity as multiple, fluid, and contradictory.⁸⁹ Centering liminality and interstitiality as processes for internal critical self-awareness, or *conocimiento*, Anzaldúa situates the Chicana/o body as an important site for the production of agency, activism, and community-building.⁹⁰ I also draw from Mexican-American Studies scholar Rafael Perez-Torres’ notion of a strategic

⁸⁷ John L. Escobedo, "Dangerous Crossroads: Mestizaje in the U.S. Latino/a Imaginary" (Rice University, 2008), 21-22.

⁸⁸ Alicia Arrizón, *Queering Mestizaje: Transculturation and Performance* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2006).

⁸⁹ Anzaldúa, *Borderlands: La Frontera/The New Mestiza*: 77-98.

⁹⁰ AnaLouise Keating, "From Borderlands and New Mestizas to Nepantlas and Nepantleras: Anzaldúan Theories for Social Change," *Human Architecture: Journal of Sociology of Self-Knowledge* IV, no. Special Issue (September 2006): 10.

mestizaje that highlights the “complex and double dance of acceptance and rejection; of displacement and relocation; of loss and reclamation” that informs Chicana/o culture.⁹¹ Both authors articulate the important idea that the Chicana/o self is a continually conflicted site that is ever engaged in negotiating subjectivity. As Anzaldúa and Perez-Torres suggest, there must be an internal self-acknowledgement of difference, a critique of social power constructions, and an awareness of self-actualization in order to navigate paths forward and structure agency and activism.

Mestizaje thus maps multiple strategies and avenues for constructing new identities that are inter-relational, translocal, and inter-subjective. And, as the opening anecdote in this chapter suggests, the brown concert body in dance is a rich and under-theorized site for exploring how identities are constructed and performed. Chicana/o dancemakers, like the Latina Dance Project and Guadalupe Dance Company choreographers that I discuss here, stage this “complex and double dance,” giving body to the experiences of border crossing and mestizaje. The two dance pieces that I look at demonstrate how the historical and physical site of La Frontera is materialized as a centrally important cultural site in Chicana/o history, but also reveal how dancing bodies can replace toxic and harmful border image(s) with representations that better reflect a history of crossing and struggle.

⁹¹ Pérez-Torres, *Mestizaje: Critical Uses of Race in Chicano Culture*: 218.

CHOREOGRAPHING MESTIZAJE THROUGH/ONTO THE BROWN DANCE BODY: LATINA DANCE PROJECT'S NEW MOON OVER JUAREZ AND DISMEMBERED MOON

The Latina Dance Project's *Coyolxauhqui ReMembers* is a full evening choreography which officially premiered at the National Hispanic Cultural Center in Albuquerque (NM), January 20-21, 2006. The work is part of the company's touring repertoire that has since been presented in numerous cities across the country to critical acclaim. The work combines the diverse perspectives and creative talents of Latina co-directors/choreographers Juanita Suarez (New York), Eluza Santos (North Carolina), Eva Tessler (Arizona), and Licia Perea (California), who each have artistic and academic careers in the communities where they live and work. As a national collective of choreographers who share a vision to produce significant dance works that comment on the U.S. Latina/Mestiza experience, their combined creative repertory draws from modern dance, folk, and Latina/o social forms, allowing them to blend and synthesize diverse dance architectures that represent the brown body maneuvering and convey thematic stories based on the Latina/Chicana experience.

The Latina Dance Project emerged from Juanita Suarez' scholarly explorations to locate and identify Mexican-American dancemakers and to analyze the elements and aesthetics that make them culturally ground the work in Mexican-American experience. Her doctoral research at Texas Women's University was guided by three criteria: participants had to be "Mexican-American, female, and currently involved within the

discipline of contemporary dance.”⁹² Her research led her to Licia Perea, (MA, University of New Mexico), director of Los Angeles-based dance company, Danzantes; and Eva Tessler (MFA, University of Arizona), artistic associate at Borderlands Theater in Tucson. The network that Suarez established during her studies evolved into a shared creative friendship that, along with Eluza Santos (PhD, Texas Woman’s University) founded the Latina Dance Project in 2000.⁹³ Each choreographer maintains respective practice in their hometowns and travels to collaborate for the development and performance of Latina Dance Project works.

The Latina Dance Project’s *Coyolxauhqui ReMembers* (2006) is a choreography based on the Aztec myth of the moon goddess Coyolxauhqui, daughter of earth goddess Coatlicue. Highly suspect of her mother’s pregnancy, Coyolxauhqui attempts to avert her brother’s birth by arranging to kill her mother. Her brother, Huitzilopchtli, however, was born in full warrior vestment and captured Coyolxauhqui, hurling her body parts into the heavens where she became the phases of the moon. The four vignettes that comprise the full work are “New Moon Over Juarez” (Tessler), “Invocada” (Santos), “Sacrifice”(Suarez), and “Dismembered Moon” (Perea). Each vignette voices a story of violence and oppression against women in our modern society, specifically Latina women. In this chapter, I look at the first and last segments, “New Moon Over Juarez”

⁹² Juanita Suarez, "Spectres in the Dark: The Dance-Making Manifesto of Latina/Chicana Choreographies," in *Fields in Motion: Ethnography in the Worlds of Dance*, ed. Dena Davida (Waterloo, Ontario: Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 2011), 404.

⁹³ *Ibid.*, 423.

and “Dismembered Moon,” which bookend the larger work.⁹⁴ I argue that Tessler’s and Perea’s sections preset a danced, critical mestizaje, recognizable through their movement vocabularies, the reworking of myth, as well as the incorporation of subaltern Latina voice not typically afforded venue in stage practices.

The opening dance, “New Moon Over Juarez,” begins in an extended blackout as the audience hears the recorded sounds of seashells, drums, flutes, rain sticks, and other Native American instruments, invoking imagined mythic pasts in the performance present. As the indigenous musical introduction crescendos, a pre-Columbian image is slowly projected onto the upstage screen. The image depicts the carved stone relief of Coyolxauhqui, the Aztec moon goddess, frozen in time for more than five centuries. While the image is splendid in design and detail, it is also horrific – depicting a dismembered, fragmented female body.

With skulls and serpents affixed to her waist and the remains of torn limbs and head lying by her torso, this female body explicitly renders the violence and oppression against women structured within Aztec mythology. Through this brutal and masculinist story of female deception, Coyolxauhqui was mythologized as an epic traitor because of her plot to kill her brother and assume the Aztec mythic kingdom. From this ancient Aztec account, the deceptive and magical characteristics of Coyolxauhqui relegated her to the unworldly realm in the distant night sky and memorialized her only through death. Superimposed text scrolled across the image states, “... *Coyolxauhqui ReMembers* is [a

⁹⁴ I base my analysis of this work from their live performance at the University of Texas Modern Movimientos Symposium performance held in October of 2009 at the Iden Payne Theater, and advance video provided for the symposium, courtesy of the artists.

project] retold through four women's stories of the themes of objectification/dismemberment, victimization, and feminization/self-empowerment which represent different aspects of the moon goddess..." The image and text sets the stage for Latina Dance Project to interrogate how myths narrate and reinforce dominant tropes while revealing notions of *mestizaje* that link the indigenous to our modern Chicana/o sensibilities.

As blue light slowly illuminates the stage, a female dancer can be seen suspended mid-air, draped in a golden circular hoop in a position that echoes the dismembered moon goddess, with arms and legs bent sharply at the knees and elbows in broken radial lines. She is dressed in a contemporary mid-length red skirt with ribbon wrapped around the bottom and a form-fitting, white blouse and scarf under a small, white button sweater. While she twirls slowly in the vast, open space of the theater, the pre-Columbian music crossfades to a slow, solemn piano composition that serves as background for a female voice-over. She slides down from the hoop to the stage floor, where she falls to a crouched kneeling position.

After taking a pause, the dancer slowly rolls away from the center of the stage and stops to sit on her feet. She reaches right and caresses the floor with a gradual sweeping arm gesture that moves across her chest to the left, finishing in an angular line with her arm pointed to the sky. The recorded narration shares: "My name is Aurora. I came from Durango, Mexico, three months ago. I wanted to go across the border to be with my sister Angela. She lives in Iowa, *pero no sé pudo* (but it was not possible)." As Aurora, played by Licia Perea, moves from sitting on her feet to kneeling, she points her

finger in the direction of the audience, inviting us into the space of her story. She then quickly raises her hands above her head, slowly stands to her feet, and walks to the center of the stage, where she picks up an apron off the floor. The narration continues, “So, right now I’m working at a maquila (factory) here in Juarez.” The recording shares her story and experiences of being caught between the reality of being here – the setting of Ciudad Juarez, Mexico – and there, the United States, where she longs to be with her family.

The *Coyolxauhqui ReMembers* choreography bends and superimposes space, time, and history to bring attention to the important human crisis of the disappeared women of Ciudad Juarez, Mexico, and the epidemic of continued violence and murder waged against women across the border region. This crisis against women is a direct result of large-scale narco-trafficking and gang violence associated with America’s appetite for illegal drug consumption.⁹⁵ “New Moon” details the tragic story of a young female Mexican factory worker who, like more than 370 others women in the period between 1993-2003, and more since, meets her ultimate fate in Juarez, Mexico.⁹⁶ The choreographic design establishes strong links between ancient Américas myths of the

⁹⁵ Reuters reporters Rama and Diaz report that the number of women killed in Mexico from 2007 to 2012 as a result of the drug wars and gang violence has risen 500 percent, to 2,764 women, and has turned into a Mexican national pandemic. For more read: Anahi Rama and Lizbeth Diaz, “Violence Against Women ‘Pandemic’ in Mexico,” Reuters 7 Mar 2014 <<http://www.reuters.com/article/2014/03/07/us-mexico-violence-women-idUSBREA2608F20140307>> or <<http://newspapertree.com/articles/2014/03/12/my-life-in-juarez-women-speak-out>>.

⁹⁶ Daily Beast reporter McGahan notes that the Mexican news magazine *Proceso* reports a disturbing statistic of 727 disappeared women between the period of 2010-2015. For more, see: Jason McGahan , “Juarez’s Missing Girls Were Sex Slaves – And Everyone Knew It.” *The Daily Beast*. Femicide. 2 Jul 2015. <<http://www.thedailybeast.com/articles/2015/07/02/did-mexican-cops-help-kill-the-girls-of-juarez.html>>.

female body and the contemporary experience of struggle that poor women on the border face. By transposing the Coyolxauhqui myth into modern contexts, the Latina Dance Project brings to light how national borders as much as Aztec mythical kingdoms construct patriarchal regimes that produce oppression for women, subjugating the female body and their contributions in making societies.

As a form of memoir of Aurora's life, "New Moon Over Juarez" introduces us to the difficulty and complexity she will face in the in-between (nepantla)⁹⁷ space of the U.S.-Mexico borderlands, what Anzaldúa describes as "una herida abierta (an open wound) where the Third World grates against the first and bleeds."⁹⁸ Her gesture of pointing to the public early in the piece disrupts the conventional distance between performer and audience and can be interpreted as inviting us to the shared experiences associated with border-crossing, asking us to empathize with her difficult plight. From the beginning of her story, Aurora's individual identity is suspended, bound to the larger historic, systemic, and nationalist forces that keep her at La Frontera. The border for Mexican-American communities serves as a constant reminder of the violent

⁹⁷ In Nahuatl the word nepantla means "in the middle of" or "middle." Chicana feminist Gloria Anzaldúa's visionary theorization of nepantla articulates in-between spaces as charged sites of both "great confusion, anxiety, and loss of control" and "radical dis-identification and transformation" (Keating 8-9). States Anzaldúa, "Living between cultures results in 'seeing' double, first from the perspective of one culture, then from the perspective of another. Seeing from two or more perspectives simultaneously renders those cultures transparent. Removed from that culture's center you glimpse the sea in which you've been immersed but to which you were oblivious, no longer seeing the world the way you were enculturated to see it. From the in-between place of nepantla you see through the fiction of the monoculture, the myth of the superiority of the white races. And eventually you begin seeing through your ethnic culture's myth of the inferiority of mujeres. As you struggle to form a new identity a demythologization of race occurs. You begin to see race as an experience of reality from a particular perspective and a specific time and place (history), not as a fixed feature of personality or identity. (Gloria E. Anzaldúa, "now let us shift") (Keating 8-9).

⁹⁸ Anzaldúa, *Borderlands: La Frontera/The New Mestiza*: 3.

and difficult history between Mexico and the U.S. that dates back to the land loss produced by the U.S.-Mexican War of 1846-48. A century and a half since, the impact of the border continues to fracture families and fragment the culture of Mexican-origin peoples. While the 1848 Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo legally guaranteed citizenship to Mexicanos living in the occupied land, the colonial history of racism and marginalization that followed in the U.S. rooted oppression and marginalization of Mexican-American communities as commonplace, then as now. The lack of political and media attention to the disappeared Juarez women reinforces Chicana/o perceptions of the overt disregard of human life that the history of La Frontera continues to produce, and how it feeds general dominant societal assumptions that U.S. Mexican-origin peoples are not fully American.⁹⁹

Through fluid expressive dance, intermittent spoken word, and recorded voice-over, the work continues, developing Aurora's character as an innocent victim caught haplessly in the tragedy of what will become her short life journey. The dancer who plays her now moves center stage and sits on a bench, where she performs fast-paced, repetitive movements. The actions imitate the routines of factory workers assembling goods for the American marketplace. She moves faster and faster until she jolts her head and places her hand on her face, as though she has been struck. This action evokes reminders of the human abuse that takes place in these U.S.-owned factories located in Mexico. This emotional moment dramatically moves Aurora's story forward

⁹⁹ At the time of this writing, republican presidential candidate Donald Trump exposes the long held dominant conservative views and mindset that demonizing immigrants and Latino populations for the ailments of the country is appropriate for civic discourse.

to reveal the dangers and lack of recourse in La Frontera as her circumstance now places her life in jeopardy.

In the final movement of “New Moon,” exhausted and anguished, she imagines she is talking to her sister, played by Eva Tessler. Dressed in a white cotton blouse and pants, Tessler can sense her sister. The two begin a metaphysical conversation where spoken work and movement collapses time and distance between them. Through mirrored expressive movements that incorporate tense arm reaches away from the torso and smooth body arcs, for a moment they converge and share an imagined space of premonition. When their movements diverge from each other, they become evermore so spiritually aware and hyper-acute of each other’s presence, producing slippages in time and space and piercing supernatural realms and the parallel worlds they each occupy, working to communicate with each other. They end in a final embrace clutching each other across this nepantla space, transcendently expressing the love they have for each other both in life and, now, in death’s memory. The sister asks, “What can I do for you?” and Aurora responds, “you can gather my remains,” signaling for the audience the tragic reality that has taken her innocent life. Bent forward and carrying Aurora back-to-back, the sister transports her to her final resting place – the hanging golden hoop suspended in the center of the stage. Aurora’s last words as she is carried are: “wrap me in a shroud and tell our brothers what happened to me. ‘NO MORE DEATH.’” With a red shroud draping from her chest that symbolizes the blood from her heart, Aurora hoists herself back onto the suspended hoop, repositioning her body once again in an echo of Coyolxauhqui’s dismembered remains – arms and legs

asymmetrically angled – as gravity gently unravels the shroud from her body it drapes into her sister’s arms.

Coyolxauhqui ReMembers’ “New Moon” illustrates how the Latina Dance Project takes creative risks to defy traditional theatrical dance conventions by inventively opening space(s) in contemporary concert dance for the inclusion of Chicana/o history, body politics, and national discourses. By producing choreography that at once inserts the brown dancing body into the spaces of Aztec myth and border conflict, Latina Dance Project stages a modern performative embodiment of Chicana/o subjectivity, offering audiences insight into the “mutlisensorial” experience of navigating it.¹⁰⁰ In other words, the company choreographs that experience and history directly onto the dance body, which performs iterations of how it feels to be a marginal borderlands subject. As an epic narrative that interprets historical and contemporary issues that are relevant to Chicana/o audiences, the work engages a cadre of languages, vocabularies, and tropes to construct hybrid formations of expressive practices that offer liberation through their telling.¹⁰¹ As I argued in the introduction, mainstream American dance traditionally favors the production of “safe” work that delimits cultural specificity and ethnic particularity, thereby reinforcing the dance body as unmarked, and reifying the dominant cultural aesthetic valuing of individual, abstract, and universal narratives. By harnessing modern dance vocabularies with trace elements of folkloric Mexican culture, *Coyolxauhqui*

¹⁰⁰ Rivera-Servera and Young, *Performance in the Borderlands*, 3.

¹⁰¹ Ann Cooper Albright, "Embodying History: Epic Narrative and Cultural identity in African-American Dance," in *Moving History/Dancing Cultures: A Dance History Reader*, ed. Ann Dils and Ann Cooper Albright (Middletown: Wesleyan Press, 2001), 439.

ReMembers negotiates the representation of the Chicana/Latina body as a site for the unification of two cultural domains, American and Mexican, which are so often fragmented and separated within Chicana/o subject formation.

Through body and choreography, expressive space is opened for stories to be told that narrate futures of hope, survival, and liberation. As a critical mestizaje in practice that fuses and blends multiple historical, cultural, and mythic interpretations, *Coyolxauhqui ReMembers* resists a choreography that renders the brown body and experience static. The work draws its viewers into the emotional registers of passion, empathy, and understanding, performing beyond conventional limits that value the mere visual representation. What I mean by this is that the work performs as a “weapon and a formula” that cultivates progressive resistance while maintaining and affirming Chicana/o culture, and, more importantly, is structured to serve “not as a retreat into a ‘pure’ origin or alternative, but as a way to deconstruct the notion of dominant culture.”¹⁰² The Latina Dance Project’s choreographers demand that the viewers engage directly in the recovery and recuperation of the brown body (here, specifically the brown female body) and its nepantla experience, interlacing the translational relationship to colonial legacies as well as to contemporary identity politics and current events.

Reinterpreting Aztec myth to comment on the recent border crisis of disappeared women who live along la frontera, *Coyolxauhqui ReMembers* structures a Chicana/o critical mestizaje that aims to fight violence against women, while also expanding space

¹⁰² Chon Noriega, "Between a Weapon and a Formula: Chicano Cinema and its Contexts," in *Chicanos and Film: Representations and Resistance*, ed. Chon Noriega (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1992), 149-50.

for Chicana inclusion in American modern dance more broadly. *Coyolxauhqui ReMembers* opens space for the brown dance body to participate directly in politics that face borderlands communities, providing intervention by bringing to light the failures of government on both sides of the border to resolve the human crisis.

In *Coyolxauhqui ReMembers*, body, choreography, and narrative collaborate in charging the performance space with political, emotional, and embodied meaning for its audiences. As performance that highlights Chicana/o struggle, female violence, and dance that transgress norms of whiteness, which Márez has described as “calm, control, rationality, and order,” *Coyolxauhqui ReMembers* challenges ethnically unmarked aesthetic spaces in dance by inserting Chicana/o politics, body, and emotion that asserts voice and agency.¹⁰³ Thus, these artists re-conceptualize form and message in dance away from spectatorship towards social justice and activism. This positioning of message, what José Esteban Muñoz argues is a major part of the Latina/o “identity-in-difference” performance repertoire, renders unmarked, unracialized spaces as “minimalist to the point of emotional impoverishment.”¹⁰⁴ He also notes that from the opposing view, the Latina/o is viewed as excessive; here in this work, the stereotype is read as overly political. He offers his ideas of disidentification, “neither an identification nor a counter-identification,” but rather a working “on, with, and against... at a simultaneous

¹⁰³ Curtis Márez, "The Politics of Working-Class Chicano Style," *Social Text* 48(1996): 119.

¹⁰⁴ Uno

José Esteban Muñoz, *Disidentifications: Queers of Color and the Performance of Politics* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1999). 68-70.

moment,”¹⁰⁵ that provide affective potential, the capacity for engagement and for structuring a mode of “feeling brown” against “official” national codes of conformity and compliance.¹⁰⁶ In this manner, *Coyolxauhqui ReMembers* stands as a threat to nationalist narratives, both American and Mexican, while also undermining the same national codes in dance that situate simplicity, subtlety, and elegance as its aesthetic markers.¹⁰⁷ As *Coyolxauhqui ReMembers* asserts a strategic mestizaje, the brown body in dance is granted agency to voice third-space practice for the production of activism to address the concerns of borderlands individuals and communities.

From Aztec myth to contemporary music, and from elements of modern dance to indigenous flutes and factory-worker attire, LDP presents hybrid Chicana/o mestizaje that “dramatizes its otherness and brings [viewers] into electrifying contact with social forms wholly different from Anglo-centric ones.”¹⁰⁸ The Latina Dance Project dancemakers resource the rich cultural information that Chicana/o experience is based in to situate work within critical framework of Chicana/Latina identity. As third space artistic practice, Latina Dance Project incorporates and supplements the traditional spaces in today’s dance. They make explicitly visible what is absent in both Mexican and American dance.

In the final segment of *Coyolxauhqui ReMembers*, choreographed by Eva Tessler and titled, “Dismembered Moon,” powerful rhythmic indigenous music, live operatic

¹⁰⁵ Ibid., 70.

¹⁰⁶ Ibid., 68.

¹⁰⁷ Márez, “The Politics of Working-Class Chicano Style,” 123.

¹⁰⁸ Saldivar, *Border Matters: Remapping American Cultural Studies*: 58.

song, contemporized indigenous dance form, and aerial dance elements fuse to stage the epic confrontation between Coyolxauhqui, her mother Coatlicue, and the warrior-son Huitzilopochtli – the latter two performed by Juanita Suarez and Eva Tessler. Unable to avert the warrior-son’s birth, Coyolxauhqui is confronted by her brother Huitzilopochtli. With angular arm movements that evoke the images of ancient obsidian-tipped *macahuitl* battle swords, Huitzilopochtli engages Coyolxauhqui, resigning her to dismemberment and sacrificing her to the heavens. The oracle star, played by Eluza Santos, is overseer and witness of the Aztec myth. Through choreographed sequences that move fluidly between modern form, corporal expression, to traditional indigenous danza footsteps, the dancers stage Coyolxauhqui’s final earthly conflict where she dons a blue scarf, symbolizing the realm of the night-sky.

Coyolxauhqui, now helpless to resist her fate, succumbs to myth. She situates center stage and finds sanctuary by withdrawing back to the golden hanging hoop, where she figuratively represents, along with all her spiritual sisters in Aztec myth, subjugation by the power of myth and man. In a sharp operatic vocal tone, her mother, Coatlicue, sings her final words: “He took the pieces of her bloody body and formed her into the night sky. They call her a traitor.” As the oracle grabs the blue scarf and slowly turns Coyolxauhqui, Coatlicue suspends the last musical word “traitor” and intones it in falsetto, making it feel airy and mystical. The projected visual graphic of Coyolxauhqui reappears on the cyclorama, spiraling with flames behind it, as the stage fades to a single center-center light upon the dangling body of the dancer. Coatlicue immediately begins weeping aloud as the last image viewers see are two victimized women, the stone carved

Coyolxauhqui of a mythic past and the dangling dancer who is surrogate for the experiences of Chicanas/Mexicanas. This ending underscores the agonizing trials that both Coyolxauhqui and Aurora, and by extension Chicana/Mexicana women, endured in life. Notes Gloria Anzaldúa, “As broken and shattered people we are driven to re-gather our spirits and energies, to reorganizes ourselves. To have Indian ancestry is to envision a moon that is always rising...”¹⁰⁹ The work *Coyolxauhqui ReMembers* saturates the stage with Mexican-American narrative that re-examines the role of women in both ancient myth and contemporary society, and vice versa.

Expressing the importance of work like Coyolxauhqui ReMembers, *L.A. Times* dance critic Lewis Segal notes that Latina Dance Project “offers evidence that a generation of choreographers is at last emerging to make this art more politically aware.”¹¹⁰ Recognizing this work in conversation with Ptero Dance Theater and Contratiempo Urban Latin Dance Theater, Segal recognizes that within the field of L.A. dance new creative dance is infusing the local community. Segal brings attention to the fact that dance is reflecting diverse voices and experiences, noting that Latina Dance Project performance is a “deeply persuasive” project with a political message linked to the concert stage.¹¹¹ I come to understand that what Segal notes is that passion for story telling fuels the work, perhaps directing a critique to the large amount of dance on the west coast that is driven by spectacle. LDP’s work also challenges its root cultural sources. Margaret Regan in the *Tucson Weekly* notes in her review that post performance

¹⁰⁹ AnaLouise Keating, ed. *The Gloria Anzaldúa Reader* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2009), 283.

¹¹⁰ Lewis Segal, "A Politically Aware 'Coyolxahqui'," *Los Angeles Times*, Sept. 8 2007.

¹¹¹ Ibid.

email from two male audience members challenged the “women’s right to re-interpret the old myth” of Coyolxauhqui. Regan notes that email exchanges by two male audience members criticized LDP for their “mixed Latina heritage.” She quoted the email exchange stating the male members insist on fixing, I would add essentializing, the LDP female artists identity, stating ‘you are indigenous women.’”¹¹² Regan quotes Latina Dance Project Tessler’s response, “but we are of mixed race...that’s our culture,” demonstrating the Mexican nationalist, sexist, and essentialist discourses that Chicana/o/Latina/o dance works against from one side of the divide. On the other is the challenge for voice, visibility, and claims to U.S. citizenship that has historically been denied. The Latina Dance Project performs the borderlands, challenging audiences, artists, and critics to reimagine the brown body in dance. LDP has toured their work across the nation to performance venues, educational campuses, and community settings, offering expanded ideas in dance and the Chicana dance body.

GUADALUPE DANCE COMPANY’S “FRONTERA”: BORDERLANDS VOICE AND IDENTITY

The historic Guadalupe Theater in San Antonio, Texas on November 13, 2010 is filled to capacity, radiating with preshow anticipation. The approximately 350 members in attendance, young and old, reflected the diversity of San Antonio’s Mexican-American communities. Seated across the rows of the renovated vintage vaudevillian theater were mostly conservatively dressed Mexican-American patrons: men with button-down shirts

¹¹² Margaret Regan, "I Dismember Mama," *Tucson Weekly* 2006, 1.

tucked into nice slacks and women in skirts that draped below the knees. Interspersed throughout the theater are small enclaves of cholos/os wearing cuffed tapered pants with silk-like guayamisa shirts and short-brimmed hats that covered their brillantina-slicked hair. The women that accompany them dress expressively in fashion reminiscent of iconic telenovela-meets-low-rider excess, with sequenced blouses, showy belts, and high heels. Also present are edgy rockeros, or Mexican punk rockers, wearing low waisted, tight-leg-fitting faded jeans with various-hued, checkered flannel shirts and dark eye makeup, tattoos, and body piercings. Collectively, these patrons, waiting for Guadalupe Dance Company's *Historias y Recuerdos* (2006) to begin, mark the auditorium space as a West San Antonio, working-class Mexican-American community and established the theater as a meaningful public space for the performance of Mexican-American inner diversity and difference as part of a collective grassroots community identity.

I too was seated in the audience. As recorded Tejano accordion, preshow music filled the auditorium, several thoughts ran through my mind about how this dance project was already performing important grassroots cultural work by geographically situating itself in the West San Antonio barrio community and engaging the range of Mexican-American constituencies in culturally specific creative programming.¹¹³ Guadalupe Dance Company's *Historias y Recuerdos* was promoted in the media as a dance project

¹¹³ West San Antonio is a historically poor and working-class, predominately Mexican-American and Mexican immigrant neighborhood. Originally a Spanish outpost, the US-Mexico War of 1846-48 and successive waves of Anglo relocation to San Antonio deterritorialized Mexican-origin residents from central San Antonio municipal areas to specific outlying sectors. Subsequent racialized zoning practices further rooted segregation of the West San Antonio's Mexican-origin community. For more on the barriozation of the West San Antonio community and its barriological response, see: Raquel R. Márquez, Louis Mendoza, and Steve Blanchard, "Neighborhood Formation on The West Side of San Antonio, Texas," *Latino Studies* 5(2007). Cohen-Cruz, "Introduction: The Ecology of Theater-in-Community," 6.

that stages the oral histories of West San Antonio community residents. As I waited for the show to begin, I sensed that this performance, like much of the repertoire of the Guadalupe Dance Company's work, acutely relies on its own communities for resource, inspiration, and viability.

The Guadalupe Dance Company is a program division of the Guadalupe Cultural Arts Center, a leading Tejano arts organization. Founded by local artists in 1980, the center is housed in the historic Guadalupe Theater and adjacent buildings in West San Antonio, a working-class Mexican American barrio community. The dance company is co-directed by Belinda Menchaca and Jeannette Chavez, both of whom have strong backgrounds in Spanish flamenco and Mexican folklórico dance forms.

Notably, since the company's founding, the Guadalupe Dance Company has maintained dual repertoires of dance practices: traditional folklórico and flamenco forms that resonate with the cultural history of the city, as well as contemporary theatrical forms tied to the evolving modern character of its Mexican-American community. The folkloric forms reflect the heritage and dance traditions that San Antonio inherited and celebrates as one of the original Spanish mission outposts in New Spain, meant to facilitate colonization. And yet, dance is a key way in which the Mexican-American community – despite a long history of social, political, and economic disempowerment after Texas seceded from Mexico – has maintained a significant presence throughout the city's history. Through dance as a performative space for practice, Guadalupe has been able to develop a consistent program of dance that is responsive to its local community.

The Mexican-origin community of San Antonio has relied on folkloric dance to maintain and nurture ties to homeland culture and identity within ever-shifting regional geopolitics, and to assert strategic efforts to actively participate in self-representation within the city's identity. As noted in the introduction, the 1960s-1970s Chicano Arts Movement gave rise to practices that reaffirmed Chicano culture, ideology, and self-representation, and fluidly incorporated folklórico dance forms as a shared community-based expression. Anthropologist and folklórico dance scholar Olga Nájera-Ramírez notes that where there exist large Chicana/o communities, "grupos folklórico stand in as a symbol for Mexican culture."¹¹⁴ In San Antonio, as funding for the arts became available in the 1960s, folkloric dance as performance was formalized and institutionalized through the development of nonprofit dance organizations. The city developed a thriving tourism industry based on Mexican cultural heritage and historical sites that chronicle that presence, with folkloric dance evolving as a fundamental in the performance menu of municipal cultural programming. Like many other local dance companies, the Guadalupe Dance Company participates in this industry and these important cultural practices as root-community cultural heritage, but also relies on them as the foundation for more experimental departures in Chicana/o Tejano dance storytelling, as in their work 2006 production of *Historias y Recuerdos*.

In the dance company's "Frontera" vignette, one of seven that comprises the full-evening choreography of *Historias y Recuerdos*, the gentle sound of a single harp strums

¹¹⁴ Olga Nájera-Ramírez, "Social and Political Dimensions of Folklorico Dance: The Binational Dialectic of Residual and Emergent Culture," *Western Folklore* 48, no. 1 (1989): 15.

a traditional folk melody reminiscent of indigenous Tzotzil music from Chiapas. As the music fades, the first image audiences view is a video projection on the upstage screen of an elderly woman, approximately 75 years old, sitting in front of some gallery artwork, where she conveys her recollections about crossing la frontera, the U.S.-Mexico border, with her family many decades ago. During her short video interview, several still images flash on screen featuring Mexican migrants who are climbing rail boxcars and close-ups of mothers who hold children close as they stare off into the distance. The woman's smooth, gentle voice is interspersed with hesitancy and pause as she shares her very real personal experiences of crossing the border as a child with her family. Indicating that she was too young to understand what was happening, the woman explains that it was only when she was a bit older that her mother shared that the family had fled Mexico because of social, economic, and political struggles.¹¹⁵ Her family's history was part of the larger history of Mexican-origin people who fled to Texas in the period following the 1910-1920 Mexican Revolution.

As the video concludes, her image freezes on the screen as multidirectional beams of light from the back of the auditorium shower the walls, stage, and back of the heads of audience members with light. Twisting in their seats to see where the lights emanate

¹¹⁵ For more on the history of Mexican-American integration and incorporation into the U.S., see: George J. Sanchez, *Becoming Mexican American: Ethnicity, Culture and Identity in Chicano Los Angeles, 1900-1945* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993).; Emilio Zamora, *Claiming Rights and Righting Wrongs in Texas: Mexican Workers and Job Politics during World War II (Rio Grande/Río Bravo: Borderlands Culture and Traditions)* (College Station: Texas A&M University, 2009).; F. Arturo Rosales, *Chicano! The History of the Mexican American Civil Rights Movement* (Houston: Arte Público Press, 1996)..

from, viewers turn to see dancers playing U.S. Border Patrol agents entering the room from the back of the theater. The agents quickly spread across the auditorium and scan for undocumented workers (or illegal aliens) among the patrons. The sound of moving railroad boxcars envelopes the theater and a lead agent shouts from onstage: “There, I see them!” He gestures and calls to his fellow agents in the audience to follow him as he exits stage-right. Agents following him with their flashlights pointed in pursuit.

One by one, in the open aisles of the dark auditorium, more flashlights turn on. Unlike those of the border agents, however, these flashlights are pointed underneath the chin of performers so that viewers can see the stark faces of dancers portraying immigrants, or migrants, on their northward border-crossing journey in search of work and a better life. The audience chuckles as they realize, like Speedy Gonzalez, the irony of the cat-and-mouse game that is part and parcel of the long history of the U.S.-Mexico border relations.¹¹⁶ For Chicanas/os and immigrants alike, defying the border and challenging authority have become a cultural metaphor for everyday survival and progress. As one of the final flashlights click on, the immigrants whisper aloud in unison: “Is that you?”

“The Frontera” scene described above, choreographed by Guadalupe co-director Jeanette Chavez, visually remaps the memory and experience of border crossings and

¹¹⁶ I purposefully invoke the beloved character of Speedy Gonzales from the Looney Tunes Sylvester cartoon. While the cartoon is critiqued for incorporating elements of stereotype, Speedy is valued for the courage and tenacity to defy authority, cross borders (the cheese factory), and successfully return home. The League of United Latin American Citizens (LULAC) was successful in restoring its airing on national television in 2002. Speedy remains a quintessential icon of border transgression. For more see: USC Annenberg School of Communication and Journalism Latino/a Children and Media Comedy & Satire Race & Ethnicity, [http://www.criticalmediaproject.org/cml/media/speedy-gonzales-mexical-shmoes/..](http://www.criticalmediaproject.org/cml/media/speedy-gonzales-mexical-shmoes/)

reminds audiences that, through border trauma that is part of a century and a half of Chicana/o community history, collective memory congeals to also map their struggles and successes and assess how far they have come in society. Incorporating oral history into choreography, notes San Antonio arts writer Pablo Miguel Martinez about *Historias y Recuerdos*, “more than grist for the creative mill, the oral histories are cultural x-ray, as well as historical DNA, of the choreography.”¹¹⁷ Like Latina Dance Project’s *Coyolxauhqui ReMembers*, *Historias y Recuerdos* opens the space of the performance stage to empower audiences not to forget the crossings as part of heritage, but to take ownership in forgotten and alternative histories and to invert fear and shame associated with the border and its crossings into stories of human pride of spirit, courageous acts to find prosperity and succeed in it.

Slowly slinking forward, the immigrants cautiously make their way to the stage, the symbolic place of arrival. As they gather in the center, they place their small bags on the floor and sit in a cluster. They look dramatically to different directions, simulating fear, as if looking out for Border Patrol agents. The audience hears the recorded sound of a passing train, then the music crossfades into somber tune of a corrido, a border ballad that narrates the experience of borderlands struggle. With cool blue light filling the stage and engulfing the dancers, the dark midnight feeling suggests this journey is lonely, cold, and filled with trepidation. They slowly stand in unison one by one, each immigrant bids farewell to another as they each move to separate corners of the floor, where they begin

¹¹⁷ Pablo Miguel Martinez, "Dancing In their Footseps," *San Antonio Current* Aug. 16, 2006, 1.

to sway to the rhythm of the corrido's bajo sexto guitar. The voice of the corrido's singer is melancholic, amplifying the somber mood of the scene.

A repeating musical chorus – “Yo ya me voy” (I am leaving now) – reminds audiences that this travel has no defined return date. Nine dancers now transition from simple swaying side-to-side steps to full arching body movements, reaching their arms to the sides away from their torso with full turns, followed by arms and bodies making a full sweeping circle from the floor and around. With three-count steps, referred to in folklórico vernacular as *paso borrachos*, dancers whirl, their personal belongings lift into the air with the momentum as they turn and make visible that their travel bags, all they have for survival on this border journey. As each breaks from the ensemble sequence, he or she travels around the full perimeter of the stage while still dancing, swaying in the *paso borrachos* before exiting. Only two immigrants, a man and a woman remain onstage.

As borderlands performance, Guadalupe's “Frontera” offers a humanistic and compassionate ground-level view of the effects and affects of U.S.-Mexican immigration, labor, and border policy that has impacted Mexican-origin communities for more than a century. National borders are by existence conflicted sites that operate to restrict, contain, and control the flow of human subjects for nationalistic and ideological reasons, in the process dividing, separating, and ‘othering’ populations. As performance scholar Ramon Rivera-Servera notes, “a border transforms space into a place... It can be most effectively conceived as a site of tension between an impulse for stasis and a desire for a controlled movement that polices the flow of the bodies and commodities that

continuously push against it.”¹¹⁸ Within U.S. Mexican-American history, the human displacements produced by inequities between Mexico and the US, from the 1848 US-Mexico War to twentieth-century US importation of cheap Mexican labor for industry, have created a contentious relationship marked by both opportunity and distrust. As with *Frontera* and *Coyolxauhqui ReMembers*, borderlands performance in this light brings into focus how history, economics, movement across borders, and spatial geographies factor as life-changing forces in the Mexican-American and Chicana/o cultural imaginary and offers a window into how Chicanas/os view themselves socially, culturally, and politically within contemporary American and Mexican identity frameworks.¹¹⁹

A close reading of “Frontera” makes visible how the Guadalupe Dance Company’s dancers, in performing the inmigrante body and the Chicana/o dance body, collaborate in a doubling of representation. The brown/Chicana/o body, as a symbol but also agent/actor in these performances, is the dance body, what emerges through dance, whereas the inmigrante body operates as an important representation that is often referred to in borderlands tropes. Alliance and identities are forged between the two that reinforce the other, the dancer and the inmigrante are of the same blood. They seek the same opportunity of hope and prosperity and in the performance of crossings (stage or national divides) give each other links to shared community experience.

In “Frontera,” the brown dancing body and the inmigrante body engage in the double dance of risk, loss, danger, and opportunity associated with border crossings. As

¹¹⁸ Ramón Rivera-Servera, *Performing Queer Latinidad: Dance, Sexuality, Politics* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2012). 2.

¹¹⁹ Ibid.

with the maquila worker's body in Latina Dance Project's *Coyolxauhqui ReMembers*, in "Frontera," the inmigrante body and the Chicano dance body engage in metaphors and aesthetics that bring visibility to each other. Having left the safe and familiar place and space of a homeland for a new life and country, the inmigrantes in "Frontera" will now assume new hybrid identities that are now a synthesis of experiences that produce Chicana/o identity. In other words, inmigrante identity will synthesize new experience(s) with memories of homeland and be reconfigured into a mestizo hybrid identity.¹²⁰ This borderlands identity will continually negotiate the ongoing process of identity (re)formation based on new lived realities and the modern circumstances that produce

Like the inmigrante body, the brown dancing body in Guadalupe's "Frontera" also shares in crossing borders by deconstructing ethnically marked and unmarked spaces in dance, creating the opportunity to produce a different approach that fuses the folkloric with the contemporary – a critical mestizaje in dance and choreography. This mestizaje technique can be deployed with clarity, as both a "weapon and a formula," a dialectic to clearly define our cultural production from within so that it can be employed in service to Chicana/o communities within broader arenas.¹²¹ As such, "Frontera" traverses from folkloric form into a new form that synthesizes the journey of both the dance and the dancer from the space of homeland and tradition into a hybrid third space that structures a repertoire for Chicanidad as American concert dance practice.

¹²⁰ Rafael Perez-Torres, "Alternate Geographies and the Melancholy of Mestizaje," in *Minor Transnationalisms*, ed. Frantoise Lionnet and Shu-mei Shi (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 2005), 336.

¹²¹ Noriega, "Between a Weapon and a Formula: Chicano Cinema and its Contexts," 149.

Back on the stage, in the final movement sequence of “Frontera,” the male and female inmigrantes who are left dance facing each other in the center of the stage. Their soft, sweeping three-count step concludes as they reach for each other in a final embrace, holding on to each other for dear life. As the music and lights begin to slowly fade, the couple hold on even tighter. The last image the audience sees are these two dancers, inmigrantes, cradling one another as they look into each other’s eyes. That look is broken as they slowly look back over their shoulders with obvious fear and trepidation. While they might have found each other, the reality is that a future for them is uncertain. As with most border-crossing experiences, audiences are left wondering if they will make it to the destination of safety and happiness - prosperity.

The company’s close relationship and engagement with community is reflected throughout Guadalupe’s *Historias y Recuerdos* performance; from oral histories told by community elders, costumes, music, movement design, shared choreography, and scenery, to the audiences present, the performance sensibilities are deeply rooted in San Antonio’s diverse barrio culture and community. Specifically addressing the performance, San Antonio *Current* arts writer, Pablo Martinez, notes, “the quiet splendor of *Historias y Recuerdos* is its raíz (roots), which stretches deep and wide,” continuing that, “The company, which marks its quinceañera this year, has always boasted a strong corps of female dancers; *Historias y Recuerdos* certainly casts their versatility in sharp relief. Three of its dancers, Jeannette Chávez, Denise Guerra, and Dava Hernández, who also take on choreographer duties in the production, are a stunning revelation. I have always admired their prodigious strengths - their work here only confirms what loyal

audience members have long known: They are a precious cultural treasure that is too often overlooked in the city's miniscule community of professional dancers.” He finishes his review incorporating his investment stating, “luckily, we will also have our dance, our music, our soul, and our pride, as *Historias y Recuerdos* so marvelously reminds us.”¹²² In a city like San Antonio with a majority Latina/o/Mexican-American population, I look forward to more arts writers exploring, chronicling, and contributing to the rich and unheard stories of the incredible work that the arts performs in barrio communities and creating citations for Chicana/o dance that is too often elided by mainstream critics.

CONCLUSION

In both the Latina Dance Project’s *Coyolxauhqui ReMembers’s* “New Moon Over Juarez” and *Historias y Recuerdos’* “Frontera,” the recurring trope of the U.S.-Mexico border(lands) and the effects of its crossings is seized upon and (re)directed as dynamic metaphor, resource, and technique for Chicana/o expressive dance repertoire. Their ability to produce Chicana/o sociopolitical commentary within a broad array of body languages, vocabularies, and movement architectures places these works in a hybrid aesthetic space that resists categorization – Chicana/o culture as a critical mestizaje on the move. The dancemakers explicitly mark the performance space, both body and stage, as an active environment for public dialogue about what it means to be of Mexican-origin in the U.S., what cultural traditions harmonize with the present, and how we ultimately imagine ourselves. These choreographies based on ideas of mestizaje establish an artistic

¹²² Martinez, "Dancing In their Footseps."

strategy for identity production where, in Pérez-Torres' words, "audiences are gathered, fluid subjectivities enacted, political alliances forged, and ethnic identities affirmed."¹²³ "Mestizaje," he writes, "allows for strategic movements among distinct racial or ethnic groups and strategic reconfigurations of cultural repertoires. These all form registers that resonate within contemporary Chicanismo."¹²⁴ As I have argued throughout, mestizaje in Chicana/o dance moves in, with, and beyond traditional spaces in concert dance, subverting American and Mexican claims to the Chicana/o expressive body through works that perform "the future of their communities in relationship to the larger society."¹²⁵ As concert dance works that reflect and represent contemporary Chicana/o culture "on the move" in modernity, they open space for dancers to actively engage in both intellectual and embodied performance based dialogues about cultural representation, thereby giving the work value beyond the spectacular media driven enterprise of moving bodies in dance.

As dance deeply involved and critically engaged in fashioning its place within its own history and also within the history of the Americas more broadly – a "makingness" in the present" – Chicana/o choreographies of mestizaje draw from multiple histories and affiliations to create their own unique hybrid multi-vocal practices.¹²⁶ I quote Chicana/o art scholar George Vargas from his book, *Contemporary Chicana/o Art*, where he

¹²³ Rafael Pérez-Torres, "Chicano Ethnicity, Cultural Hybridity, and the Mestizo Voice," *American Literature* 70, no. 1 (1998): 155.

¹²⁴ Ibid.

¹²⁵ George Vargas, *Contemporary Chican@ Art* (Austin: UT Press, 2011). 4.

¹²⁶ Susan Leigh Foster, *Corporealities: Dancing Knowledge, culture and power*, ed. Susan Leigh Foster (New York London: Routledge, 1996). xiii.

observes that “Chicana/o art is multipurpose and multifaceted, social and psychological, American in character and universal in spirit.”¹²⁷ Through narrative, diverse dance techniques, and an aesthetics linked to community desires to integrate into our modern world, Chicana/o dance offers choreographies that are continually reshaping themselves, evolving to speak to contemporary audiences.

These dances give voice and agency for Chicanos/as to re-imagine themselves anew without limitation and without forgetting our roots. These choreographies thus set into motion a repertoire of collective community self-identification and self-expression that resists marginalization, asserts visibility, and claims its place within the larger American expressive imaginary.

¹²⁷ Vargas, *Contemporary Chicana/o Art*: 7.

Chapter 3: Choreographies of Memory: Rehearsing Culture and Performing Community

*When we use memory as a tool to reclaim lost and stolen histories, it is always
in the interest of our freedom and self-determination.*

~ bell hooks

BARRIO VISTAS

From the Los Angeles International Airport, I cross along the glass high-rise buildings of downtown Los Angeles towards my East Los Angeles studio-theater destination to visit with Danza Floricanto USA's artistic director, Gema Sandoval, and attend the May 31, 2014, performance of her latest Chicano-themed concert, titled *Alma Llanera: Spirit of the Plains*, which is having a three-day run. As this is my first visit to Los Angeles, I take the scenic route and drive my rental car through the winding side streets of the East L.A. barrio, making my way ever closer to the theater. I immediately notice the abundance of beautiful colored murals, each using different metaphors and symbols to communicate a community's history and experience – a collective cultural memory expressed through visual public art. The murals are painted on building walls, alley fences, and property lot partitions that would alternatively be muted or blank. They reflect the spirit of the neighborhood's people, and what I appreciate as the reflection of a community's desires to be seen in its splendid multiplicity. Whether El Mercado in Boyle Heights, La Plaza de la Raza in Lincoln Park, or buildings along City Terrace, the artworks speak voluminously about its residents. Recurring themes in the murals reveal

community values based in family, religion, and labor, represented through creative iconography that draws from folk images of lo indio, the mestizo, and the American-Mexicano, or Chicano. The aesthetic designs provide an optic for how Chicano communities imagine the future by drawing on the past in the present. The barrio murals visually remind Mexican-origin community members that despite the imbalance of power and daily feelings of marginalization in society, their culture and traditions continue to inspire their communities with ideas of a brighter tomorrow.

Nestled in a warehouse row between auto repair shops and metal yards in the northern area of the City Terrace barrio in East L.A., I arrive at the Floricanto dance studio to hear the sounds of zapateado footwork striking the floor to the popular music of Natasha Bedingfield's "Pocketful of Sunshine." The company is preparing for that evening's performance of *Alma Llanera* in their renovated furniture-manufacturing-shop-turned-studio-theater. As I am immersing myself in the sounds of American music accentuated with zapateado footwork, they are interrupted by a deep female voice, shouting aloud, "Stop! Let's take it from the beginning again." It is Gema Sandoval, the company's well-known artistic director, placing final polishes on the choreography with her dancers prior to the performance due in a few hours. In contrast to the static and iconic images on the murals I viewed on the way here, the images in this studio-theater are alive – breathing, sweating, moving – rehearsing contemporary dance renderings that mix traditions of old with the modern embodied expressions. The dancers reflect a culture on the move, drawing from the past while moving forward with the freedom to reinvent their place.

As I sit ready for the performance of Alma Llanera in the evening, I sit with a full house of approximately two-hundred dance patrons that reflect local East L.A. community residents. They are working-class Chicanas/os, who like myself, find beauty in our cultural stories told through dance. After a cordial welcome by director, founder, and choreographer Gema Sandoval, the audience offers her a generous applause. The warmth shared expresses the value they have for her as community artist, a woman, a leader, and a teacher. As she takes exit from the stage, Alma Llanera begins with narration introducing the novel's young protagonist, Antonio. In a series of colorful vignettes, body is given to text as characters come to life through embodied storytelling. The audience watches attentively as the story unfolds.

In a choreographed playground scene that marks the end of the summer break ten dancers perform the characters of school-aged Mexican-American children on their first day back to school. Five male dancers are dressed in a collage of knee length nylon shorts, cotton t-shirts with screened images on the front, and baseball caps worn in the various ways kids wear them - off centered, sideways, and facing the back. Five female dancers with hair pulled back and held in place with flower-adorned hairbands wear assorted colored knee-length floral print sundresses. Wearing zapatos de clavo (nail-burred shoes), characteristic of traditional folklórico dance forms, they enter stage from all directions delighted to see one another, exchanging greetings and congregating in the center of the playground. In the excitement of the re-encounter they begin freestyle zapateado (staccato foot rhythms) that marks to the tempo of Sophie B. Hawkins'

nostalgic musical score *As I Lay Me Down*. The song's English lyrics linked with free styled zapateado, modern-day dress wear, and breaking from group ensemble work situates the dance within a contemporary framework.

As one male dancer moves to the front and center of the stage he performs a solo alternating heel-flat pasodobles zapateado variation, adding a layer of accented percussive rhythms to the group's basic rhythm-keeping footwork. Not wanting to be outshined, a young female classmate rushes forward to push him out of the playground spotlight, if you will, where she proceeds to take over the center stage and gain attention by performing a redoblado zapateado step variation as her arms freely flow on each side, rising up from waist level to above her head and down in rhythmic freeform giving the step an lively quality. This interpretive and expressive movement places the individual dancer improvising within the frames of traditional folklórico technical form. As is regular routine in a children's playground, gender eventually separates the boys from the girls. The remaining female dancers move into a melodic choreographic pattern reminiscent of the kid's game of London bridges, as the male dancers meanwhile gather stage-right scheming zapateado verses in order to displace the center stage female soloist. Back and forth the soloists jovially take turns in the center of the stage to exhibit their footwork, staging the process of how youth fashion their identities amongst peers.

The realism of the Danza Floricanto/USA's "Jardín de Niños" (The Kid's Playground) scene described above, the fourth vignette from the full-evening length choreography of *Alma Llanera: Spirit of the Plains* recalls the delight and simplicity of

early friendships cultivated during grade school and explores the experiences of Chicanas/os integrating into the American educational system. At early grade school ages Chicana/o students are introduced to the challenging daily processes of learning to negotiate across familiar home-based language, culture, customs, and traditions with those of conforming to externally constructed dominant social codes that demands divestment of them. Wedged between two cultures, these crossings will become a major part of their formative identities. As Chicano teatrista Jorge Huerta notes, “to be Chicano means to be educated in the US,” suggesting that for Mexican-American children the American educational system begins the often difficult lifelong dance of acculturation and assimilation.¹²⁸ Through the educational system children learn to become critically aware and develop relationships to help navigate their way forward.

As the young girls take turns in choreography that moves from stylized jump-rope to playing patty-cakes hand game, they one by one take leave before the morning school bell rings. On this first day of school, the work’s young protagonist, Antonio, fits right in with his peers by joining in the melodic groove the boys perform swaying back and forth in geometric lines with hands clapping to mark their zapateado footwork. When the school bell rings the boys take exit and leave young Antonio on the dance floor where he remains reeling in the just-learned zapateado footwork. Realizing his classmates took leave, Antonio follows cue and makes a sprint to catch up to them, heading to his first classroom experience.

¹²⁸ Jorge Huerta, *Chicano Drama: Performance, Society and Myth* (NY: Cambridge Press, 2000). 17.

MEMORY, MODERNO, AND MODERN MOVIMIENTOS: CHICANA/O DANCE AS CULTURAL MEMORY

This chapter explores how Chicana/o concert dance stages and performs cultural memory, and how performance re-imagines prevailing histories within the U.S. dance world. As choreography that dynamically engages artist and audience in the sharing of information that has a prior cultural source and history, I illustrate how Chicana/o dance operates as an embodied site to house memory; serves as an important archive for Chicana/o history; structures space to interrogate culture from the past today; and in the process, asserts a new aesthetics (repertoire) for Chicana/o dance and American concert dance more broadly. In this light, dance performances are experience-generating practices that draw from the past (memory) to inform our contemporary logic and understandings.¹²⁹

I look at Danza Floricanto/USA's *Alma Llanera: Spirit of the Plains* (2009, 2014), a two-hour full-evening work that is comprised of fourteen vignettes. Choreographed by company founder Gema Sandoval, *Alma Llanera* adapts Rodolfo Anaya's seminal Chicano novel, *Bless Me Ultima*, a literary work written during El Movimiento that advanced inclusion of the Mexican-American voice in U.S. national narrative. The work, performed by fourteen dancers, explores the coming of age of the novel's young protagonist, Antonio, and his search for identity as a U.S. modern mestizo. I explore how dance functions as a site for cultural memory that structures and engages meaning-making practices and contributes to the construction of identities.

¹²⁹ Taylor, *The Archive and the Repertoire: Performing Cultural Memory in the Americas*.

I explore how dance rehearses community culture as space and place-based meaning-making practices and how performance provides a dynamic forum for cultural exchange. In the process of creating new experiences through performance that add to repertoires of cultural memory communities materially and representationally (re)imagines itself, thereby constructing individual and collective identity. Theater and performance enables participants – choreographer, dancer and viewer – to materially engage in embodied information-sharing and truth-telling that has a prior cultural source and history. I argue that Chicana/o dance operates as a site for reinventing tradition in order to liberate the Chicano body and history from determined narratives, thus creating a more expansive framework of identity production that gives body, voice, and agency to modern Chicana/o subjectivity. My inquiry further explores the relationship between cultural memory and temporality, and looks at how dance negotiates the embodied spaces between tradition and modernity, and how, through movement culture, it remembers and reinvents itself to express modern Chicana/o worldviews.

In my analysis of *Alma Llanera's* “*Hermanas Brujas*,” I examine how choreography functions as a material site to perform memory, and how it is linked to embodied repertoires that narrate Chicana/o experience and worldviews. Through a close reading, I analyze how company director Gema Sandoval draws from both history (archive) and embodied memory (repertoire) to find her Chicana voice in art, and how she engages choreography and performance as a generative site for individual and collective self-understanding and remaking.¹³⁰ Through Anaya’s linear text-narrative that resonates for Chicano audiences and dance form that reflects the dynamic repertoire of community-based movement practices, I contend that Sandoval situates *Alma Llanera* as

¹³⁰ Ibid.

Chicana/o dance form, and that the work supports important conversations about American-born Chicano and Mexican cultural practices. I further assert that by creating dance that is culturally nuanced and ethnically anchored to the communities it performs for, Sandoval expands space for staging the historical and political dimensions of race, class, geography, and Chicana/o transnational worldviews, while resisting essentialist Chicana/o stereotypes and assimilation. Her forty years of continued practice in the East Los Angeles community, where she has influenced generations of dancers and structured work that is relevant and resonant for her barrio community, situates her as both guardian and guide of culture, memory, and experience.

As a dance project embraced by the community, I ask: what are the key elements and characteristics that define the work. I assert that through movement structures, music, costume, and theatrical body representation, audiences visualize themselves and recognize their communities, and identify with dance practices and traditions that are linked to notions of a Mexican cultural homeland, yet articulate new ideas that reflect modern Chicano sensibilities. Thus the body in Floricanto's *Alma Llanera* is (re)configured as a moving text of and about Chicana/o views of a community social body that is continually worked upon and (re)presents itself anew through dance.

Alma Llanera: Spirit of the Plains narrates the intersection of three important moments in time that situate memory, history, and experience as Chicana/o cultural narrative. First, the text-novel *Bless Me Ultima*, on which the choreography is based, captures the cultural conflict in a post-WWII period, narrating the challenges Mexican-Americans faced in a society that failed to guarantee full citizenship upon return from defending the nation at war. The second moment involves author Rodolfo Anaya

producing the novel during the 1960s-1970s Chicano Movement, when authors such as Américo Paredes, Rodolfo Acuña, Jose E. Limón, among others, were cultivating space within the field of literature for Chicana/o voice and representation.¹³¹ His text became part of the literary cannon of Chicana/o studies. And finally, the third moment involves choreography that incorporates the moving dance body as part of this genealogy of Chicana/o memory and cultural narrative. This iteration converges text with body to offer another expressive interpretation for modern relevancy, thereby nurturing collective group-making, identity production, and unity.¹³²

Memory permeates all human endeavors and provides the frameworks for individuals and groups to read the cultural signs and symbols that circulate in our everyday environments. Indeed, memory provides the intellectual and cognitive prisms from which to discern, interpret, and decode the signs that structure life's meanings and understandings.¹³³ Building on Nietzsche and Hawlbwachs' theories of memory, Jan Assmann notes that beyond the immediate temporal horizon of oral history, or communicative memory, cultural formation roots to allow groups to collectively identify

¹³¹ Américo Paredes, *With a Pistol in His Hand: A Border Ballad and Its Hero* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1958).; Oscar Zeta Acosta, *The Autobiography of a Brown Buffalo* (San Francisco: Straght Arrow Books, 1972).; Rolando Hinojosa, *Estampas del Valle y Otras Obras* (Berkley, CA: Editorial Justa Publications, 1973).; Alurista, *Floriscanto en Aztlan* (Los Angeles: Chicano Cultural Centre, University of California, 1971).; Carmen Tafolla, *Curandera* (San Antonio, TX: M&A Editions, 1983)., among others.

¹³² Jan Assmann, *Cultural Memory and Early Civilization: Writing, Remembrance and Political Imagination* (New York: Cambridge, 2011). 132.

¹³³ In their book "Cultural Memory: Resistance, Faith and Identity," Rodriguez and Fortier elaborate that memory allows humans to be "symbol-bearing, symbol-creating beings" and that through these functions we are able to create narratives that support and nurture coherency in life (8).

around crystalized cultural practices.¹³⁴ He continues, “the concept of cultural memory comprises the body of reusable texts, images, and rituals specific to each society in each epoch, whose ‘cultivation’ serves to stabilize and convey that society’s self-image. Upon such collective knowledge, for the most part (but not exclusively) of the past, each group bases its awareness of unity and particularity.”¹³⁵ Memory, as noted, functions as a quintessential human characteristic for collective group-making and identity production, where it continually generates diverse worldviews within different and changing contexts, time, and geographies. In *Alma Llanera*, the link to memory via culture and experience provides community with a window to link the past in the present, placing the body in dance as the latest text from which to read the accretion of Chicana/o history.

Founded in 1975 as a barrio-based dance company to reflect the spirit of the 1960s-1970s Chicano Art Movement and to engage community in expressive movement arts, Sandoval and colleagues rooted folklórico dance as original form from which to rehearse culture and perform community. Through folklórico dance, as practices that link to Mexican tradition, Sandoval enabled East L.A. local residents to construct Mexican-American self-image through dance. The rehearsal provided a means for Chicana/o communities to articulate themselves within their respective geographies and to position a critical stance against assimilation. Notes Tamara M. Johnson in her insightful essay, “Some Dance to Remember: The Emotional Politics of Marginality, Reinvention, Embodied Memory, and All the (Cape) Jazz,” dance maps geographies of affect and

¹³⁴ Assmann, *Cultural Memory and Early Civilization: Writing, Remembrance and Political Imagination*: 129.

¹³⁵ *Ibid.*, 132.

movement and emotion as a politics for articulating collective memory within local dance communities, and from which to “defend memory from ‘outside’ forces” of hegemony, assimilation and categorization.¹³⁶ Gesturing to the important role of embodied knowledge in dance, Johnson builds upon Nigel Thrift’s non-representational theory (NRT), or *thought-in-action*, and Diana Taylor’s concept of repertoire, or embodied “ephemeral, non-reproducible knowledge,” to center the experiential body in space and time.¹³⁷ While Sandoval’s early work was established as a critical stand to define Chicana/o culture in the 1970s-1980s, today she and her company draw from these foundational practices to create new works that maintain a link to the memory, spirit, and ideology the company was founded upon. I look at how the dance body actively participates in society-making and cultural identity production by exploring how Sandoval’s recent work structures contemporary choreography as an accrual of embodied practices, cultural memory, and modernity.

Alma Llanera is Sandoval’s latest work that explores what it means to be Chicana/o in our modern moment. In this piece, she actively engages choreography to stage the critical crossings to remake traditions within her community. The work, like the East L.A. murals, dramatizes symbolic heritage for collective identity, while also reflecting diverse worldviews within changing contexts, times, and geographies. The theatrical stage provides an extra-ordinary platform from which to analyze how memory

¹³⁶ Tamara M. Johnson, "Some Dance to Remember: The Emotional Politics of Marginality, Reinvention, Embodied Memory, and All That (Cape) Jazz," in *Geographies of Dance: Body, Movement, and Corporeal Negotiations*, ed. Adam Pine and Olaf Kuhlke (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2014), 76.

¹³⁷ Taylor, *The Archive and the Repertoire: Performing Cultural Memory in the Americas*.

is resourced and acted upon that both reflects life's past(s) and inflects future ideas in the performative present.¹³⁸ Noting how theater functions as an important "repository of cultural memory," theater scholar Marvin Carlson states that the "present experience is always ghosted by previous experiences and associations," adding, "these ghosts are simultaneously shifted and modified by the process of recycling and recollection" .¹³⁹ As Sandoval engages dance that has both embodied and historical references, the new staging allows audiences a view for understanding how the present is informed by the past, a haunting, and how the past contributes to ideas of the future through choreography. Critically linking memory with performance as a dialogic, social scholar Paul Connerton asserts that forums that involve "recollection and bodies" are a principle means by which individuals and groups engage in material meaning-bearing practices, what he ultimately refers to as "tradition" .¹⁴⁰ In other words, theater and performance enables participants, both performer and audience, to materially engage in embodied information sharing and truth-telling that has a prior cultural source and history. In this light, performances are experience-generating practices that draw from the past (memory) to inform our contemporary logic and understandings. Through the shared space of performance, community gathers in meaning exchanges, creating new experiences that add to the collective memory repertoire. The theater distills cultural, historical and political information into performative assemblages that convey how we see ourselves to

¹³⁸ Joseph R. Roach, *Cities of the Dead: Circum-Atlantic Performance* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1996). 33.

¹³⁹ Marvin Carlson, *The Haunted Stage: The Theater as Memory Machine* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2001). 2.

¹⁴⁰ Paul Connerton, *How Societies Remember* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1989). 4.

ourselves, and to others. As I assert throughout this project, Chicano dance is continually evolving and remaking tradition for the contemporary moment, incorporating the perspectives and contributions of audience and artists in conversations that seek greater human interaction and understandings.

NOVEL DANCING: CHICANA VOICE AND RODOLFO ANAYA'S BLESS ME, ULTIMA

Gema Sandoval and Danza Floricanto/USA are direct products of the East Los Angeles Chicano Art Movement where she found life calling and purpose by engaging her community in dance. Forged in the political climate of the Southern California's 1960-70s Chicano Movement, Gema Sandoval and the founding members of Danza Floricanto/USA were clear in their early interests to establish dance, specifically bailes folklóricos mexicanos, as community cultural arts practice. Their efforts followed in the wake of the Los Angeles 1968 Educational Blowouts for academic reform, which established the *Plan de Santa Barbara: A Chicano Plan for Higher Education*, an eight-point plan for greater educational inclusion and representation, and call for the establishment of Chicano studies in higher education.¹⁴¹ Sandoval's introduction to dance as a career choice occurred while in attendance at the University of California, Los Angeles during the tumultuous period of California's 60-70s Chicano Movement. By happenstance she came across a university-sponsored class in folklórico mexicano offered in response to the policy mandates produced by the Los Angeles 1968 Educational

¹⁴¹ Manuel G. Gonzales, *A History of Mexican Americans in the US* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1999). 210-13.

Blowouts.¹⁴² With colleagues, whom would eventually become the founding members of Danza Floricanto/USA, they enrolled in the semester long workshop and came to know the power of dance to transform self and community. In the spirit of El Movimiento, Sandoval and other activist educators thus founded Danza Floricanto/USA in 1975 as an East Los Angles nonprofit dance company. The company today is the oldest existing professional Mexican folk dance troupe in Southern California.

In her career as an educator in the public school district, she along with activist educators were invested in preserving and promoting dance as an alternative approach for cultural enrichment and community empowerment. They engaged in numerous cultural exchanges and residencies with Mexican agencies and maestros de danza, rooting traditional folklórico Mexicano as the foundation for the company's initial performance repertory. Through folklórico Sandoval was able to identify an expressive vehicle and organizing structure from which to activate a politics of cultural activism through community participation and performance.

Two decades later, in the changing tides of the U.S. 1990s multiculturalisms, Sandoval embarked in new directions in dance, expanding her practice from traditional folklórico dance practices to that of re-visioning her work with individual Chicana voice.

¹⁴² Sandoval notes that the 1968 East L.A. walkouts, or the Chicano Brownouts for educational reform, led by Sal Castro and Moctesuma Esparza, introduced many new efforts and initiatives for diversity in education in California. Chicano scholars recognize this political event as pivotal in defining the urban Chicano Movement. Demands for educational reform included bilingual-bicultural education; more Latino teachers and administrators; smaller class sizes; better facilities; and the revision of text books to include Mexican American history. For more see conference proceedings from the 2008 University of California Santa Barbara event, "Blowout: The 40th Anniversary Conference on the 1968 East Los Angeles Chicano Student Walkouts."

This voice allowed her to create choreographies beyond the boundaries of traditional dance. Sandoval notes that it was “only after 25 years of doing the very beautiful, but very rote work that folklórico is – I got restless.”¹⁴³ Her quest for Chicana voice, she notes, was a “process that took years” for her to find. Capturing her restlessness in her journey for Chicana artistic reinvention, she notes, “the voice of folklórico is a collective voice, and it is also a voice that comes from another country. Things are very set.”¹⁴⁴ Engaging in dialogue and creative collaboration with numerous Los Angeles artists across disciplines, such as Quetzal Flores of musical group Los Cenzontles, modern dancer Loretta Livingston, among others, Sandoval began exploring the development of new work that speaks to her Chicana lived experience. As she constructed new dance ideas that centered Chicana/o themes from her East Los Angeles barrio community, she realized she was crossing many artistic, cultural, social and political borders. As she reinvented herself she continually considered how the Chicana/o community would receive her new artistic ideas. Her initial Chicana/o works, she states, were designed to start “testing the waters with my community to see if they ‘got it,’” and in a deep extended voice of relief continues, “and theeeeey did, they absolutely did.”¹⁴⁵ With the support of her community, she now had a platform for evolving work that speaks to her new directions in dance. Sandoval and company have since embarked on numerous experimental dance projects in the following years, such as *Si Se Puede*

¹⁴³ Sandoval, "Danza Floricanto/USA Interview."

¹⁴⁴ Ibid.

¹⁴⁵ Ibid.

(1998), *Día de los Muertos* (2001), *Fandango without Borders* (2004), *Un Zapateado Chicano* (2003), *Rhythmic Footprints* (2008), among others.

A pivotal moment that crystalized Sandoval's success as an innovative choreographer was her selection for the 2009 San Francisco CounterPulse Performing Diaspora residency program. The residency provided the opportunity for Sandoval to embarked on her most ambitious project yet, to choreograph Rodolfo Anaya's seminal Chicano literary novel, *Bless Me, Ultima* (1972). Through engagement with other residency artists, Sandoval teased out her new ideas in dance in a supportive and formal arts setting. Through idea workshop and Lerhman technique with other resident choreographers, Sandoval produced a pilot choreography of *Alma Llanera*. Returning to her East Los Angles studio, she developed the full concert choreography and premiered its performance in 2011 at the Downey Theater, followed by a restaging in 2014 in her Danza Floricanto/USA studio-theater.

In step with early 90s Chicano critical thought, numerous artists in Southern California, as well as across the US Southwest, explored new creative approaches in art making to reflect the emerging modern Chicana/o subject. This critical period produced a dynamic range of creative efforts that propelled Chicana/o culture as contributing to American national culture. In Chicano/Latino cinema, movies such as *La Bamba* (1987), *Blood In, Blood Out* (1993), *Desperado* (1995), matriculated Chicana/o expressive culture within the American national imaginary. Music groups like Los Lobos, Texas Tornados, and Selena were gaining traction in the broad national crossover music scene

by linking local flavor with broad Americana cultural idioms and icons. This period also coincided with the academic incorporation of second wave Chicano theory as represented by feminist third-space authors such as Gloria Anzaldúa, Sandra Cisneros, and Cherrie Moraga, among others, who redefined the field of Chicana/o literature for positive and generative readings of the Chicana archetype. During these changing times, grassroots dance practices, too, began experimenting with practices that imagined a Chicana/o point of view that looked beyond the traditional Mexican frameworks in dance that had guided communities.

Within this context, Sandoval shares that her dancers expressed that, while in love with traditional Mexican dance techniques, discipline, and form, they were very much interested in performing dance stories based in their contemporary lived realities. In 1998, in collaboration with dancemaker Loretta Livingston, Sandoval choreographed and produced *Si Se Puede*, a choreography based on César Chavez and the community's struggle for civil rights. Offering a dance review of a restaging of the work, LA Times dance critic Jennifer Fisher noted that this early choreographic departure from traditional folkloric dance form by Sandoval's Floricanto, "stretched the concept of folk steps, bending them away from their usual celebratory purpose to represent a new consciousness."¹⁴⁶ While this critique is overtly an ethnocentric commentary that reveals the critic's shorting to acknowledge a dance history in its own respective right, it does however provide insight that Sandoval is in fact creating change within form. What is

¹⁴⁶ Jennifer Fisher, "Danza Floricanto Takes Chance, Wins," *Los Angeles Times* June 4, 2001.

reflected in both the work and the dance review is that Sandoval's is on the move in new artistic and creative departures in choreography and narrative performance ideas.

Drawing inspiration from the multiple Chicana/o artistic influences circulating across film, music, and other disciplines, numerous dance companies experimented in new directions, but retained technical training in vernacular forms. Sandoval's views reflect a contemporary trend within traditional barrio-based dance practices to expand the frames of *lo Mexicano*, all things Mexican-inspired, in order to capture and incorporate the American experience within it, *a Chicinidad*. While traditional forms proved instrumental during the formative cultural period of the Chicano Arts Movement, Sandoval notes that today's audiences and artists expect work that speaks to our contemporary moment. Like the other choreographies in this project, Sandoval and Floricanto's work away from toxic stereotypes, such as the spicy Latina and male macho, in favor of work that reflects a true and real expressive representation of their lived realities within communities.

It was during this period of critical innovation in Chicana/o dance that Sandoval set her mind to choreographing Anaya's novel. As with much of the new work in dance taking place, emphasis focused on reaching back to root sources to engage community collective memory through performance. For Sandoval it was one of El Movimientos foundational texts/artistic projects that provided the platform for choreography. *Bless Me, Ultima*, is New Mexican author Rodolfo Anaya's first novel that is based on his own personal search for identity as a Chicano in the American Southwest. Six years in development, *Bless Me, Ultima* (1972) is the first of a trilogy, followed by *Heart of*

Aztlán (1976) and *Tortuga* (1979) that have situated him an American author, and “widely acclaimed as the founder of modern Chicano literature.”¹⁴⁷ Set in the New Mexican Post WWII period, the novel tells the story of the young protagonist, Antonio Márez, and his search for identity between two cultures, where he is guided by his elder mentor, protector, and curandera, Ultima. The novel is set in a rural setting of a 1940s New Mexico and provides a glimpse of traditional and indigenous life ways that are distinct from the period’s modern culture. Through the recycling of cultural motif, such as the healing arts (curanderismo), mythic characters like La Llorona, bilingual text, and nuanced description of folk ways, Anaya establishes a work based in remembering Chicano cultural roots. The novel resonates as foundational Chicana/o narrative that weaves US history and Mexican culture in order to illustrate the challenge and hardships of living in the liminal spaces of conflicting identities and times.

As prolific Chicano text-narrative, the novel has become a foundational reading for Chicano educators since its first publication. Classrooms, from grade school to higher education, have incorporated the literary work for its profound multicultural value. Artists and producers have adapted the work into a variety of mediums. Teatro Chicano regularly produces the work as part of the company repertoire, for example Teatro Visión, Teatro Bravo, El Centro Su Teatro Cultural and Performing Arts Center; among countless others have presented the work a spart of the season offerings. In 2013 the national film, *Bless Me, Ultima*, directed by Carl Franklin was presented in theaters

¹⁴⁷ Rudolfo Anaya, Writing Southwest, University of New Mexico, online. <<https://www.unm.edu/~wrtgsw/anaya.html>>.

across the nation. Sandoval's dance adaptation of the novel adds a new iteration of value for its circulation as Chicana/o cultural production. Through live performance, film, and text, audiences learn about and come to understand the critical and transformational process of acknowledging identity as ever-evolving, changing, and continually becoming, referred to in Chicana/o critical thought as *mestizaje*. Discussing today's postmodern Chicana/o subjectivity, Pérez-Torres notes, "unlike the typically binary notions of identity within a typical US racial paradigm, a focus on *mestizaje* allows for other forms of self-identification, other types of cultural creation, other means of struggle" (327).¹⁴⁸ In this way *Bless Me, Ultima*, in its various forms/representations, narrates the process of identity formation that Chicanas/os engage in order to better know themselves in American society and to further establish their personal identity as a composite framework of multiple identities that intersect and interact to make the individual person. *Bless Me, Ultima* provides community with a shared cultural memory of traditions and customs that inform our present, and the continued circulation of the work through the multiple mediums provides a collective identity through performance.

Sandoval and Danza Floricanto/USA originally produced *Alma Llanera: Spirit of the Plains* in 2009 in collaboration with San Francisco's CounterPulse Arts Incubator project, in collaboration with Performing Arts Diaspora initiative, followed by a restaging in 2014 in the East Los Angeles company studio-theater. The full choreography is follows the life story of Antonio, the novel's young protagonist, in his search of identity as he moves through time learning how the lessons of the past informs his present, and

¹⁴⁸ Pérez-Torres, "Alternate Geographies and the Melancholy of *Mestizaje*," 327.

how his future rests in his visions of a life that blends tradition and modernity as a modern mestizo subject. In her approach to the choreography, Sandoval notes that Anaya's novel revolves around the universal themes of "coming of age, the straddling of two cultures, and the power of good and evil" which in her words "supersede time and place" (2). She gives body to the text-novel, fluidly moving between the spaces of tradition and modernity in order to render, like the novel, contemporary ideas of Chicana/o identity and subjectivity.

**Chapter 4: Barrio Moves and Chicana/o Grooves:
EXPLORING BARRIO AESTHETICS IN CHICANA/O DANCE AND PERFORMANCE**

THREE SECONDS TO SHOWTIME

*The master of ceremonies finishes welcoming the audience
and exits stage left as the lights dim to black.*

Behind the offstage-right curtain, I stand alone in darkness from the blackout that begins the performance. In the next three seconds of pitch-black, my vision fails me as my other senses become hyper-acute. I am aware of the convergences that will take place. I am helpless to alter them. Dancers have learned their dances, audiences have come from across the city and have taken their seats, theater technicians are following their scripted theatrical cues – all is perfectly aligned for the Aztlan Dance Company’s performance of *Loterialandia* in the East Austin Santa Cruz studio-theater. In the suspended moment of pause that seems an eternity, thoughts about the past, present, and future race through my mind. The months of work leading up to this performance. My forty years as a choreographer and dancer. My desires to render Chicano dance visible. The assembly of new audiences about to experience tonight’s performance. During this momentary whirlwind of introspection and self-reflection, I simultaneously fast-forward and rewind time, wondering, will the culminating ideas I’ve forged about Chicano dance and identity converge in this performance? More fundamental, I muse, why people are

here? What moves artists and audiences to attend this performance of Chicano dance interpretations that center borderlands experience and barrio expression?

My backstage meta-ruminations are interrupted by a sensation of air moving as the dancers whizz by me, swiftly entering the dark stage. Guided by glow-tape, Marisa Limon, Holli Hulett, and Vanessa Alvarado, Miguel Aparicio, Holly Wissmann, and Cathy Gonzalez assemble across the dance floor. In the three-second blackout, my adrenaline-driven heartbeat pulses like a war drum. All self-doubts are calmed by the soothing recorded musical sounds of trickling seashells from *palo de lluvias* (rainsticks), followed by indigenous flutes flooding the aural space of the theater. As electric guitars musically echo soft eclectic celestial chords, upstage, blue theatrical light silhouettes the dancers on stage. With bare feet apart and arms at their sides they stand strong, firmly grounded, proud. They embody contemporary urban Xicano AmerIndios. In black fitted tops, faded blue jeans, ankle-wrapped leg nuts (or ayoyotls),¹⁴⁹ and blood-red bandanas around their foreheads, they visually evoke traditional Chicana/o iconography within a new context that articulates the contemporary moment: a Nuevo Movimiento.

As saturated red theatrical sidelights gently warm the dancers' skin, in unison they lower their torso and raise their arms with flexed palms breaking the line. With the iconic angular breaks of limbs, firm center, and strong chin, this opening piece draws from the influences of pre-Columbian *tecutli*-lord images found in Mesoamerican temples, pottery, and codex manuscripts. From this opening piece titled *AmerIndios*, the

¹⁴⁹ Ayoyotls are hard shells nuts from the ayoyote or chachayotl tree, native to Mexico and central America. For dance they are tied to leather ankle straps and are a idiophone percussion instrument. They are also made into rattles, and wrist amulets.

dancers move fluidly through a diverse collage of movement arcs and languages that narrate the company's two-hour imaginative tale based on the wonder and magic of the Mexican *lotería* (bingo) card game.

Comforted that the performance has started off right and is moving fluidly, I step around from backstage to find a seat at the back of the theater. I observe the dancers seamlessly weaving through distinctive dance spaces that place their bodies at the forefront of embodied Chicana/o expressive culture. The diverse audience of señoras with their canes by their side, high school students, eclectic Chicana/o hipsters, mothers with young children in their laps, and couples all shared space expressing appreciation of the art through intermittent bursts of applause and gritos (shout-outs) in a way Chicana/o-Mexicana/o culture knows well. Indeed, *raza* was in the house. From my seat, I could see that all were engaged in the diverse stories being told through contemporary expressive Xicano/Latino dance, a hybrid collage of dance forms that all align for deep storytelling. Then, as now, at the time of this writing, I think about what work this project performs in its actualization, and how, in unity with other dance communities, it shares in a collective project to choreograph the margins, the Chicana/o borderlands, the local spaces that people find home and cultural belonging.

FEELING BROWN: RASQUACHISMO AND BARRIO AESTHETICS

In this chapter, I examine how contemporary Chicana/o concert dance choreographs “barrio” experience as central performance aesthetics.¹⁵⁰ I argue that from

¹⁵⁰ Chicano/Mexican-origin barrios are historically produced racially segregated municipal areas that have precluded working-class Mexican-origin communities from full material integration into mainstream

within these overlooked and underrepresented municipal areas, community-based dance artists find home and material cultural (re)source for the development of artistic works based in barrio history, experience, and knowledge. As tightly woven communities with close-knit social relationships, common cultural inheritances, and shared experiences, barrio spaces are by their very nature dynamic performative and participatory sites for individual and collective identity formation.¹⁵¹ Thus, a barrio aesthetics highlights shared preferences based on the images, symbols, and icons that articulate and validate daily barrio lifeways.

I explore the Aztlán Dance Company's *Loterialandia* (2013), a full-evening contemporary work that (re)interprets the century-old Mexican lotería card game and contributes to Chicana/o history and narrative. I analyze how *Loterialandia* employs barrio dance aesthetics as a creative way to construct and narrate Chicana/o culture and identity. Throughout, I examine the creative processes I followed with the dancers as we together conceived and constructed the performance, which was presented in a run from June 13-23, 2013, at the company's East Austin barrio studio-theater, the Santa Cruz Center for Culture.¹⁵² I illuminate how barrio-based practices intersect within larger frameworks of Chicana/o working-class aesthetics and how they engage a tactical subjectivity for the reclamation of voice and agency from and against dominant

society, culture, and capital. For more detail on the development of Mexican-origin barrios as U.S. municipal racist segregation practices, see the introductory chapter's discussion on municipal zoning.

¹⁵¹ Gina M. Perez, Frank A. Guridy, and Jr. Adrian Burgos, eds., *Beyond el Barrio: Everyday Life in the Latina/o America* (New York: New York University Press, 2010), 5-6.

¹⁵² In the spirit of Chicano activism, the name Santa Cruz was given to the company's studio in 1982 to honor and reflect our ancestor's indigenous belief that we, as beings, stand at the crossroads of the four sacred directions where we find individual and collective center/energy for a greater humanity.

discourses for the construction of identity.¹⁵³ I also reflect on my own trajectory in Chicano/a dance, and argue that my leap to Chicana/o choreography, like that of other choreographers in this dissertation, required that I negotiate and, and more precisely figure out my way through, dance within the multiple and complex cultural codes I live in, navigating them to create hybrid dance practices based in Chicana/o sensibilities. By interrogating my own evolution from a barrio dancer fashioned in the spirit of Austin's Chicano Arts Movement to my work in contemporary Chicana/o concert works that now fuel the artistic vision of the Aztlan Dance Company, I illuminate how a barrio dance aesthetics expands space for greater inclusion across lines of race, class, gender and ethnicity and becomes part of Chicana/o borderlands repertoire.

Central to my discussion of barrio aesthetics is the concept of a rasquache aesthetics,¹⁵⁴ defined by Chicana/o scholars Tomas Ybarra Frausto and Amalia Mesa-Bains as a working-class Chicana/o aesthetics that makes "the most from the least," and that also functions as "a stance that is both defiant and inventive" . Rasquache, translated as poor and wretched, is a term that has been seized, recycled, and redeployed as a generative central concept and aesthetics within Chicana/o culture.¹⁵⁵ Developed as a

¹⁵³ Pérez-Torres, *Mestizaje: Critical Uses of Race in Chicano Culture*: 54.

¹⁵⁴ Rasquache, translated as poor and underclass, is a term that has been seized, recycled, and redeployed as a generative central concept and aesthetics within Chicana/o culture. Developed as a "make do" artistic paradigm during the 1960-70s Chicano Arts Movement, rasquachismo conveys a "cultural sensibility of the poor and excluded" and has evolved a formal history for Chicano cultural production. For more, see: Tomas Ybarra-Frausto, "Notes from Losaida: A Forward," in *Velvet Barrios: Popular Culture and Chicana/o Sexualities*, ed. Alicia Gaspar de Alba (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003).; Amalia Mesa-Bains, "'Domesticana': The Sensibility of Chicana Rasquache," *Aztlan* 24, no. 2 (1999).; Márez, "The Politics of Working-Class Chicano Style."

¹⁵⁵ Paredéz, *Selenidad: Selena, Latinos, and the Performance of Memory*: 161.

“make do” artistic paradigm during the 1960-70s Chicano Arts Movement, rasquachismo conveys a “cultural sensibility of the poor and excluded” and has evolved a formal history for Chicano cultural production.¹⁵⁶

In the early 70s, Chicano scholar Tomas Ybarra-Frausto coined the term rasquache to index the prolific arts being produced in the Chicana/o barrio communities across the nation. As work outside of institutional arts venues schools, galleries, and performance studios, these works drew from the meager and practical resources available to its artists. For Ybarra-Frausto, rasquachismo united and codified the diverse genres of art being produced, including theater, visual arts, and literature, along with at-home expressive practices, like altars. It is worth quoting him where he states, “Rasquachismo is a sort of voluntary post-modernism, a dynamic sensibility of amalgamation and transculturation that subverts the consumer ethic of mainline culture with strategies of appropriation, reversal, and invention.”¹⁵⁷ Rasquache artistic expression by its nature articulates the biculturalism that is Chicana/o cultural identity.

I make this analytic move towards rasquachismo and a barrio dance aesthetics in order to situate a geographic awareness in, around, and beyond the barrio, thus indexing barrio within the larger contexts of both American and Mexican socio-spatial cartographies and dance histories. Stated differently, as dance performance that reflects the experience and knowledge(s) of barrio residents, including Mexicanos, first-generation Mexican-Americans, and Chicanas/os, its performance in and out of the barrio

¹⁵⁶ Ybarra-Frausto, "Notes from Losaida: A Forward," xviii.

¹⁵⁷ Ibid.

guides audiences towards larger geo-social mappings, realities, and understandings that the barrio and its people are a vital and integral component of our larger U.S. society and cities. Through choreography that incorporates a barrio aesthetics, we perform our complex and often contradictory identities to ourselves, while also being transparent and true in performing ourselves to outside audiences, thus nurturing greater access and understandings across race, ethnicity, gender, identity, and geographies.

My tactical turn towards a barrio aesthetics for the study of Chicana/o dance is vital, as it empowers voice and agency for “brown” bodies to dance in, around, and beyond the bounded limitations of geographies, nation(s), black/white racial binaries, traditions, and stereotypes, empowering individuals to contribute to collective community identity-making and notions of belonging.¹⁵⁸ My interest is to elucidate the brown body not as “matter out of place,” but as a site for transnational and transcultural interaction, cultural exchange, and cultural production.¹⁵⁹ Thus, structuring a reading of Chicano choreography from this specific social and aesthetic space of the barrio, within and against larger geo-spatial mappings of U.S. and Mexican concert dance practices, allows Chicana/o dance, dancemakers, and dancers to move with, in resistance to, and beyond mainline conceptions and configurations of the brown body in the arts, “announcing the future of their communities in relationship to larger society.”¹⁶⁰ As code-switching, border-crossing operatives, we claim and navigate the spaces between, and find home

¹⁵⁸ Richard D. Pineda, "Will They See Me Coming? Do They Know I'm Running? Los Lobos and the Performance of Mestizaje Identity through Journey," *Text and Performance Quarterly* 29, no. 2 (2009): 188.

¹⁵⁹ Márez, "The Politics of Working-Class Chicano Style," 109.

¹⁶⁰ Vargas, *Contemporary Chican@ Art*: 4.

within rasquache aesthetics, while also remaining whole as artists within the larger American dance community. By constructing hybrid barrio aesthetic practices, Chicana/o dancers disrupt and transgress both Mexican and American nationalist claims to the body, and challenge prevailing conceptions of the dance body as a constructed object to be viewed and consumed. The result is that they give voice, body, and agency for the expression and liberation of the Chicana/o subject through dance.

This chapter also draws from Curtis Márez' insightful essay, titled "Brown: The Politics of Working-Class Chicano Style," where he examines the cross-cultural aesthetic contributions of legendary Tex-Mex musician Freddy Fender in American film culture.¹⁶¹ Márez frames Fender as a quintessential border-crossing Chicano cultural icon who challenges the domains and territories of whiteness, here imagined as the Western cowboy. Through low-brow(n) tastes, in contrast to high-brow, he structures a working-class "brown stylistics" based in the practicalities of "brown" contributions to artistic formations, and the specificity of Chicano culture and experience that names it. Identifying "the makeshift, the flamboyant, and the nostalgic" as recurring qualities and expressive attributes in much of Chicano expressive culture, Márez argues that brown stylistics fuels Chicanas/os as dynamic hybridizers.¹⁶² By emphasizing working-class necessity and ingenuity over privileged choice, Chicana/o art, Márez notes, "transgresses norms of certain whiteness," structuring minoritarian views as intrinsic in art forms.¹⁶³ Márez' ideas support the notion that Chicanas/os, like Fender, exist in a space of their

¹⁶¹ Márez, "The Politics of Working-Class Chicano Style."

¹⁶² *Ibid.*, 121.

¹⁶³ *Ibid.*, 119.

own making where they adapt, infuse, and corrupt/disrupt dominant cultural codes for self-presence, visibility and actualization.

Márez' brown stylistics provides a valuable method for reading Chicana/o choreography as hybrid resistant practices that similarly disrupt conventional constructions and aesthetics in dance performance. As performances of "identity-in-difference" that foreground Chicana/o identity, ethnicity, and culture as non-fixed, nuanced in the idiosyncrasies of its cultural communities, and producing affective "excess" beyond "normative whiteness," Chicana/o performance structures acts of "feeling brown" as orientations and strategy against mandates of consent and conformity.¹⁶⁴ Like Robert Rodriguez' DIY mariachi film aesthetic¹⁶⁵ that prioritizes creativity over resources and that values what you have locally available for the production of art, Chicana/o choreographies have developed strategic viewpoints and tactical approaches to develop Chicana/o narrative that differ radically from mainstream notions of what dance is and does.

In this chapter, I offer a close reading of *Loterialandia*, both the rehearsal process and the performance, to examine the creative processes involved in configuring aesthetics that are relevant and resonant for its East Austin barrio community. Also, I take a moment to reflect on my history and path in Chicana/o dance and how it has fashioned my artistic views and advocacy for Mexican-American/Chicana/o expressive community

¹⁶⁴ Muñoz, "Feeling Brown: Ethnicity and Affect in Ricardo Brocho's *The Sweetest Hangover* (and Other STDs)," 70.

¹⁶⁵ Film director Robert Rodriguez' DIY aesthetic, which he calls "mariachi style," is based on "creativity, not money," in order to produce work. Within scholarship, Rodriguez is regarded as a rebel of Chicano cinema. For more see: Aldama, Sandoval, and García, *Performing the US Latina and Latino Borderlands..*

culture. It is my hope that my close proximity to this work as its choreographer will offer insights into the processes involved in creating choreography that, like Fender, dances its own making. This chapter illustrates how Chicano dance operates as both agent and archive for the embodied repertoires of barrio-based community collective knowledge(s), in an aesthetics and style that inventively resources the material of culture into expressive movement stories that perform what it means to be Chicana/o in all its multiplicity.

DANCING EL MOVIMIENTO: CHICANA/O DANCE AND THE AZTLAN DANCE COMPANY

Historically disenfranchised from American dance, barrio enclaves throughout the United States developed as prolific sites for cultural arts innovation and production during the 1960s-1970s Chicano Arts Movement. The dance practices that first evolved in these communities resourced maestros from Mexico and collaborated with companies in Mexico through official and unofficial bi-national cultural exchanges, thus directly modeling practices from Mexico's well-established nationalist project of government-sponsored folklórico concert dance form.¹⁶⁶¹⁶⁷ In addition to adopting large-scale theatrical concert dance models, U.S. Chicanas/os also resourced indigenous danzas, such as danza Azteca, matachines and concheros, among others, that linked indigenous roots. In the decades that followed, the danzas and folklórico dance forms, as transnational practice, reinforced a Greater Mexico paradigm for Chicanas/os in dance, which

¹⁶⁶ For example, early 70s cultural exchanges with the Aztlan Dance Company were arranged between U.S. Congressman J. Jake Pickle's office and Arts International Cultural Exchange program with Mexican federal agencies Fondo Nacional de la Danza Mexicana (FONADAN) and the Academia de la Danza (ACADEDA), coordinated through the Mexican Consulate office in Austin, Texas.

¹⁶⁷ For more on Mexican folklórico dance practices and history, see: Nájera-Ramírez, Cantú, and Romero, *Dancing Across Borders: Danzas y Bailes Mexicanos*..

established them as a community-based dance vernacular.¹⁶⁸ Folklórico then as now remains a strong community dance as it offers clearly-codified techniques, staging methods and vocabularies for concert performance.

By the early 1990s, as Chicana/o culture was slowly integrating into American mainstream culture, the Chicana/o arts disciplines evolved in tandem with the changing times. In film, movies such as *Blood In, Blood Out* (1993), *My Family* (1993), *Selena* (1995), and *American Me* (1992) were rendering Chicana/o culture visible on the silver screen. Critiques of mainstream American culture were also evident in progressive Chicana/o works such as Guillermo Gomez-Peña's much recognized *Couples in a Cage* (1992), and debuts of Chicano musical groups such as Aztlan Underground's *Colonize* (1995) and Kid Frost's *East Side Story* (1992). Yet, within dance, the rigid parameters of the Mexican folklore and the field's surveillance of what qualified as "authentic" representation, both in the United States and Mexico, restricted the Chicana/o dance body from change and growth, raising challenges for Chicana/o dancemakers to wanted to take risks by innovating, expanding, and evolving dance into projects based in modern Chicana/o culture and subjectivity. Put simply, Chicana/o barrio culture and the brown dance body threatened formalist Mexican nationalist identity and forms. Similarly, it also threatened purist American notions of authenticity and assimilation by its insistence on dancing the stories of Chicana/o struggle, experience and resistance. American dance, in my view, still today remains one of the last strongholds for rendering Western

¹⁶⁸ Greater Mexico is defined in early Chicano literature as frameworks for conceptualizing Chicana/o culture and identity as transcendent of legal and official borders. For more see footnote 30.

Eurocentric whitespaces for unmarked, universal, and non-culturally specific bodies.¹⁶⁹

While this aspect of the field is extensively critiqued in scholarship, in practice, incorporation of diversity with regard to bodies, movement technologies, and critical dance formations is yet to be fully realized.

Chicanas/os in dance thus experience alienation from both sides of the meta-physical cultural borders – Mexican and American. The result, out of necessity, is that community-based Chicana/o dancemakers bifurcate practices into two clearly defined aesthetic repertoires: one that engages progressive Chicana/o worldviews informed by U.S. barrio histories and experiences, and another that aims to continue preserving traditional Mexican folk dance heritages. Like myself, Chicana/o dancemakers acknowledge the practical need to compartmentalize the two arenas as both blessing and burden; we draw from one to inform the other, while also recognizing the important role and work that each performs separately.

Here, however, I proceed to examine how Chicana/o hybrid choreographic practices revise and re-invent prevailing aesthetic paradigms as a response to this “ni de aquí, y ni de allá” (neither from here, nor from there) conundrum. Using the barrio as its generative resource and inspiration, paradigm is instead redirected in service of a liberation and empowerment that structures agency to claim instead: “Somos de aquí y de allá” (from here and there).

¹⁶⁹ Susan Leigh Foster, *Worlding Dance* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009). 4.

THE AZTLAN ROOTS

The Aztlan Dance Company was founded in 1974 during the time of the Austin Chicano Arts Movement. Created by my mother, Maria Salinas, when my parents relocated to Austin in 1966 from the Rio Grande for my father's relocation to Bergstrom Air Force Base, the early years was a moment for her to engage her children in cultural arts in a city that, at the time, was not as diverse as it is today. In her early thirties she began bringing neighborhood kids together to share in dance that she had learned from her summer schooling in Monterrey, Mexico, where folklórico dance is part of curriculum.¹⁷⁰ Soon she was asked to participate and perform in Austin civic events, leading her to join the Austin League of United Chicano Artists (LUChA) arts umbrella, where she was guided in formalizing practices to structure Aztlan as a nonprofit arts organization. The close work with community members, the association with LUChA, and the period of Austin's Chicano Movement placed her in the epicenter of Austin community activism. The company today benefits from this legacy and is a collective of creative artists that engage performance, classes, workshops, and residencies to share the diversity of dance that each bring into the collective and its performance.

On my family's arrival to Austin, I was born; hence I was born into the dance. After engaging in numerous term residencies throughout Texas in the late 80s and early 90s, I returned home in 1992 to assume directorship of the Aztlan Dance Company to

¹⁷⁰ As noted in the introduction, the period following the 1910-20 Mexican Revolution developed a national cultural policy for the reinvention of the modern Mexican mestizo identity. These efforts manifested into federal agencies and were pivotal in careers of Mexican national artists such as Diego Rivera, José Clemente Orozco, and others. Dance, too, benefited from these early ideological and philosophical mandates as it was incorporated into educational curriculum and developed official agencies and departments that provide direction. For more see: SEP, Secretaria de Educacion Publica Mexicana.

become the second-generation keeper, of which I remain. I place my work with the dance company in direct link with the evolution of Chicano art through the decades. I've spent more than forty years now engaged in work that directly speaks to the diversity of my experiences as a Chicano living in Austin, Texas, and my artistic practice in Chicana/o barrio-based dance. During that time, I have choreographed more than thirty dance projects. With each passing year of age, and less stress as a stage performer, I find greater incentive and pleasure in conceptualizing and constructing works that tease out the many facets of my identities. As such, the company has become an expressive vehicle and creative outlet for my continuing evolution as an artist and for countless community members to engage in dance.

Like the other companies featured in this dissertation, my practice has developed as dance with a point of view, where I link form with message to explore and discover the beauty, depth, and dimensions of the culture(s) that informs my person. In my many years of practice, I have danced across many divides, absorbing the broadest range of dance techniques my body can absorb. I have learned that in each arena dance is ultimately about the body engaged in the critical elements of discipline, technique, and passion. In each form, the body materializes the cultures that are embedded in its rehearsals. Within each dance, culture, histories and traditions give the form its value in the communities in which it is performed and recognizable as a common language.

As a cultural arts group that evolved during the Chicano Arts Movement, Aztlan too rooted folklórico as its initial practice where the first two decades under mother's direction cultivated relationships with Mexican agencies and dance maestros for initial

dance repertorio.¹⁷¹ In the late 1980s-90s as multiculturalism embedded in the Austin community and Chicana/o culture made inroads into mainstream culture, more cross-cultural opportunities became available in Austin's dance, I seized the opportunity and moment to reinvent my dance. My artistic reawakening was marked by two important national and international events that took place in 1992, they were: the United States' Quincentenary celebrations of the 500th anniversary of Columbus' discovery of the Americas, and the *Splendors: Thirty Centuries of Mexican Art* museum exhibit that toured the U.S.. Within Chicana/o and indigenous communities, the Columbus anniversary was problematic as it represented five hundred years of violence, colonization, and genocide towards the native peoples of the Américas (Tinker vii).¹⁷² As a former practicing danzante with affinity to indigenous beliefs, these views of discovery directly influenced my new direction in barrio concert dance. Similarly, the *Splendors of Mexico* touring exhibit that showcased thirty centuries of Mexican art failed to acknowledge Chicanas/os in dance as part of Greater Mexico's heritage. During the Splendors exhibit, while I was in arts residency in San Antonio, the Chicana/o community thus organized ancillary performances and exhibits that featured Mexican-American art, giving greater inertia to my Chicano reinvention. Both events challenged the way I thought about art, culture, and community. America was claiming to have

¹⁷¹ See note 40.

¹⁷² Author Charles Hale in the special issue brings together several primary sources that reflect the views and impact of the Quincentenary on indigenous communities. For more see: Charles R. Hale, "Indigenous Documents Related to the Quincentenary," *American Indian Culture and Research Journal* 17, no. 1 (1993). See also: George E. Tinker, *Missionary Conquest: The Gospel and Native American Genocide* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1993). vii.

discovered me, and yet I remained invisible in this U.S.. Mexico expects national allegiance through my dance body and yet continues to consider me a foreigner to her land.

This period of my reinvention occurred slowly, with my evolution from Chicano-movement, community-based dance practice to a radical activism through dance. The answer to this critical identity crisis was to define myself anew with the community that has always supported and today continues to support my work: the East Austin Chicano barrio community. The barrio created me and all of the relationships, experiences, and values that I hold dear as an artist, and an activist. From this space, I have an identity from which I can negotiate the tenuous relationships I hold with both spaces of my “origin.”

My work shifted dramatically during this time. I understood that through dance, I was becoming a community storyteller who was unveiling the ironies of nationalisms and nationalist identities and revealing the realities of life in the local barrio. As a custodian of culture, I worked to mind and mine the nuances of what makes barrio communities particularly rich and interesting. And, as a people’s historian, I listened to and learned from my neighbors: from my barrio hermanos (brothers) on the dash to take care of la familia, from my Brown Beret elders who I marched with, from the people dancing at Church Jamaica – everywhere where there was movement. I crafted dances to mark these times.

Like Floricanto’s Gema Sandoval, I was always concerned with how to construct dance that valued the cultural space of community and provided new visions of life.

During the exploratory period of my reinvention, the community warmly supported my initial choreographies and have since come to know me as “their” artist. Each inquires about what I am currently working on, offering heartfelt ideas for me to consider in future choreography. *Loterialandia* is one of my latest projects that captures the rich dance between cultures and in which I bend traditions and redeploy stereotypes in service to a contemporary narrative that nurtures progressive claims to being both “de aquí y de allá” (from both here and there). My artistic approach in this work was to seize the characters on the face of the cards and reinterpret them within a contemporary Chicano context. Why? In my life, much of the dance that I have been exposed to rarely renders me as I imagine myself. I love folk dance such as Spanish flamenco and Mexican folklórico, but in the doing of these forms, somehow I feel I am always dancing someone else from somewhere else. I am not from Spain, nor from Mexico. I also love modern dance and ballet, but again, somehow these dances feel as though they belong to someone else. Thus, in my artistic practice, I have developed the courage and confidence to imagine my own dance – a dance that feels right, feels brown, and that moves in the liminality that I live and dance daily.

CRAFTING LOTERIALANDIA: THE REHEARSAL

Since my youth playing the game with neighborhood friends, the lotería card images always piqued my imagination. Like Lucha Libre wrestling, Dia de los Muertos, and stories of La Llorona, the weeping woman, the Mexican loteria cards live as inventory of Mexican tradition – and more, an inventory of one’s life, and of the stereotypes that guide Mexican social life. During our extended rehearsal breaks we

typically walk next door to La Michoacána Mexican food market to get our replenishment drinks. Behind the register is a display that has knick-knacks, and where Loteria cards over the years are displayed. The stock inventory around them rotates, but always the Loteria cards remain. In the register line, children can be seen marveling at the images. We ourselves have commented about the cards. The cards are part of our material culture.

During the nine-week creation and rehearsal period leading to the June 2013 performance run of *Loterialandia*, Aztlan Dance Company dancers explored how to give life to the static iconic images of the century-old traditional¹⁷³ game. Like the American bingo game, Loteria is a card game of chance where the objective is listen to the game-callers poetic oration as players decipher its meaning in order to place a frijole (bean) on master Loteria cards into a winning combination. Winners will shout Loteria when a row or column is filled. As with other choreographies our company has done, the process started by locating a cultural site to explore, examining approaches for interrogation, defining the community messages we feel important, and establishing bodily engagements that will inform the dance. The eleven dancers involved – eight female and three male – ranged in age from 21 to 37, and come from diverse backgrounds that range from students to nonprofit career oriented professions. Each dance artist has found a home and purpose by spending countless hours in training and performance in the company's East Austin home, where it has maintained presence and programming since inception.

¹⁷³ Loteria is a copyright of Jose Clemente, 1887.

As this project focused on the dynamic role of the *lotería* card icons in our lives, our imagination and our collective memory, we started this project by scattering cards across the center of our East Austin dance studio floor. We immediately set to work. Each dancer selected a card from the deck that resonated with personal meaning and significance. For example, Miguel Aparicio selected the card of *el valiente* (the courageous) because as a UT biology student he envisioned himself through the card. The process continued as each dancer contributed their thoughts and insights on the cards they selected and other's cards. Then, collectively, we interrogated each of the cards' characters: what does *La Sirena*, the mermaid, represent? What does her image communicate? How does she move, and to what music? How do we liberate her from her stereotype? How do we reinvent her, reimagine her within our modern lives? How does her character interact with the other characters? And so on.

From *La Sirena* to *La Muerte* (death), *La Dama* (the lady) *El Valiente* (the courageous); from *El Diablo* (the devil) to *El Apache* (the AmerIndio), among others, we considered each one and let them escape their iconic renderings and remake/revise their fixed roles. The card of *El Soldado*, the male soldier – frozen in time as a government sentry – demanded to be released to become a guardian defending the rights of the people and fight against injustice. He insisted on being a female Chicana/o Brown Beret moving to the pulsing beat of working-class cumbia. The card of *La Muerte* refused her *Día de los Muertos* stereotype, the one with a large flowery hat and artsy colorful cheeks and eyes. Here, she wanted to dance a delicious dangerous xylophone waltz as a *nepantlera* guiding souls on journeys in the between-ness of worldly and unworldly domains.

We connected some of them with their difficult, even painful social and cultural past, and tried to revise their story. The card of el Apache, the Native American, asked to be returned to his family tribe, to be able to share in his ancestors' rhythms – to know that despite a brutal and violent history, the blood still runs red through our veins. The loteria cards spoke to us in ways that required us as artists to feel their experiences through our bodies to understand how each desired to be represented through dance movement. For example, through contemporary native music and modern indigenous dance, the movement designs we ended up creating for El Apache were angular, grounded, rhythmic, and communal.

The processes was repeated for each card character and object we had selected – approximately 26 in total – as the rehearsals continued to build on each other, evolving the diverse cast of characters in relationship to one another and to us. The cards were shuffled, arranged, and ordered in the center of the dance floor so that they entered into conversation with one another. The image collage we formed produced a collective cultural mind-map arranged in a way that created meaning that was larger than the significance of any individual card. It represented an imagined arrangement of cultural relationships organized for the purposes of telling new stories. Like the barrio, which functions on the basis of social relationships and a collective cultural mind map,

and like the dancers, who came to the studio from their respective personal networks of community relationships, so too, the cards were imagined to come from networks of recognizable community cultural spaces. Collectively, the cards and the

dance bodies that emerged from them critically zigzagged across the multiple landscapes that together illustrated the complexity of Chicana/o identities.

The *Loterialandia* concept brought dancers' individual and social knowledge and personal interpretations of each image into public conversation, becoming the source material for choreography. Once arranged, the cards were scotch-taped together, then the collage was carefully affixed to the dance studio mirror, where it was situated between the expressive dance body and its mirror reflection. Now was the time to let the characters and dancers move together to create the dance. The images informed the dancer, and the dancers informed the images, together fashioning new ideas for choreography and for collective views of culture imagined through icon. We prepared to give each card embodiment as the card images were preparing to dance through us.

The work also purposefully challenged the normative conventions and assumptions of both American and Mexican dance forms. For Mexican-American audiences, bailes folklóricos, traditional Mexican dance, remains the most fluid embodied reminder of the Mexican homeland, even if only imagined. The dance form reinforces Mexican national identity and solidarity of the working class, making it an important component of community cultural practice. While respectfully valued as foundational dance form, I note that it also falls short in registering the important American dimension, the cultural tastes and aesthetics, which is also part of the American-Mexican experience. In the studio, we hold lengthy conversations about how we draw from diverse dance lineages as performers. I continually demand that the dancers situate themselves at the intersections of Mexican and American influences, where we work to make sense of both

worlds, consciously, and through the dance. After all, the company dancers in this project are a collage of Mexican immigrants, Mexican-Americans or Chicanas/os, Anglo-Americans, and African-American people – students, laborers and professionals who are a microcosm of the Austin barrio community. The Chicano thematic in dance frames these important social relationships that we all engage in our daily lives, as the reality of our diverse community. Like the Loteria card images released from their constructions, our barrio aesthetics allows people to remake themselves in new community relationships where mestizaje and borderlands allows freedom, exploration, and expression – a humanity.

LOTERIALANDIA LIVE: THE PERFORMANCE

On the stage, in front of a deep-blue abstract mural with oversized agave images, five dancers move powerfully: grounded, graceful. Dancing to the rhythmic music of contemporary Son Jarocho music, a folk musical style from the Mexican state of Veracruz, by California musical group Las Cafeteras, they perform the characters of *obreras* and *obreros*, U.S. migrant farmworkers. Four female dancers – Vanessa Alvarado, Holli Hulett, Cathy Gonzalez and Holly Wissmann – are dressed in minimalist outfits, assorted earth-tone double-cut skirts with uniform black-fitted tops and waist sashes. The male dancer, Miguel Aparicio, wears brown, loose pants, a white shirt, and a matching waist sash. Collectively, the dress wear is modest and unpretentious, harkening to a working-class simplicity.

In movement architectures that fluctuate between weighted body expression and bursts of extensions, limbs reaching away from dancer's torso, the dance evokes cool

breezes that break the burden of the hot summer sun. The movements also conjure momentary breaks in the mind- and body-numbing routine of farmwork labor, where glimpses of humanity express life beyond the mundane, timeless chore of cultivating earth. In one particular sequence, the dancers perform a dance phrase in unison that breaks into cascading cannon formation. In this series, the body bends forward as arms accentuate a reach to the floor, followed by a circular pattern of reaching around and toward the sky, and back down. The movement of the back echoes the backbreaking work of obreros. This movement is immediately followed by a fast turn, and then the dancers break into barefoot zapateado footwork while moving backwards. Repeating this sequence in formation – rotations of duets, trios, and then together – the succession suggests the dynamic movement of agricultural field rows, like wind gusts traveling across the field, rippling leaves, or of farmworkers moving down the field. The dance body emulates not just the field workers, but the natural elements that the workers are in. Concluding this cascade of high-energy movement, the dancers all move together to stop downstage left. In unison, they gaze into the distance, as though looking to the next crop, and wipe the sweat off their forehead. This pause creates a time contrast where, for a moment, the body rests, before the dancers break formation and move into more dance movements that evoke labor and life.

The scene described above, from a choreography titled “Los Obreros” (The Farmworkers), was one of four selections from the Aztlan Dance Company’s performance of *LoteriaLandia* in June 2013 in the Santa Cruz Center for Culture. The show was nominated by the 2013-14 Austin Critics Roundtable in choreography.

Through our lotería mind-map collage that was taped to the studio mirror, the cluster of cards that represented agriculture – La Sandia (watermelon), La Pera (the pear), El Melon (the cantaloupe), and El Nopal (the cactus) – became the paradigm for our creative choreographic endeavor in this scene. We logically linked the agriculture cards with the cards of El Sol (the sun) and La Mano (the hand), which are central to farming. While each card's face value was a simple two-dimensional representation of a fruit or a vegetable, within our barrio cultural sensibilities, they represented much more. They represented family sustenance, labor, cyclical earth cycles, and decades of oppression of a people who toil the earth for the luxuries that modern society takes for granted. For us, we decided, those cards represent the honorable, hard labor of the migrant worker's body that is caught in a system that has guaranteed its oppression.

Like the other card clusters that each communicated barrio stories, our work in this segment of *Los Obreros* was three-fold. First, we worked to identify our gente (people), offering them a noble place of visibility within our urban consciousness. In the studio, we all talked about how we, for the most part, all have family who have been part of the U.S. migrant labor history and experience. The work was of importance to us, as it represented lineage and heritage. Second, we worked to understand the migrant body's labor in order to construct movement architectures that reflect and make visible the invisible migrant body. Our studio conversations highlighted how when we see photographic images of migrant laborers we make visceral connections that run deep, perhaps because we are dancers, commenting on how we can feel the aches, pains, and exhaust of the bodies that could be ours engaged in the twelve-hours days in the hot sun.

We were all committed to creating aesthetics that reflected this within the dance – what we call movement with meaning. The work demanded of us that we be honest, pure, and real to our selves first and foremost. Finally, the third aspect of our work in *Los Obreros* is that we wanted to make sure the work was about struggle, dignity, and pride for our communities and for ourselves.

Loterialandia contributes to a barrio aesthetics that maps bodies across space, time, and location, anchoring them to the nuances of cultural practices we understand within our local, material communities. Highlighting the Chicana/o imagination that emerges from the practical concerns and engagements of our daily lives – here, the recycling of Mexican lotería card images – the work recasts marginal experience as something that contributes to worldmaking, what Chicana/o Studies scholar Mary Karen Davalos describes as “creating a sense of place by naming the site of belonging.”¹⁷⁴ Austin arts critic Robert Faires, in his review of *Loterialandia* comments on how the company has nurtured barrio aesthetics in a such a way that our borderlands dance becomes engaging and inviting, he states, “the true joy, the deep joy – is rooted in a love of creation and is released when the artist creates something and knows that this is what she or he is meant to do. It’s personal pleasure bound up in a profound sense of purpose.”¹⁷⁵

In the *Loterialandia* performance, as with our other projects, audiences find home in the artistic and cultural choices we select as we reorder, remake, and reimagine

¹⁷⁴ Karen Mary Davalos, "A Poetics of Love and Rescue in the Collection of Chicana/o Art," *Latino Studies* 5(2007): 84.

¹⁷⁵ Robert Faires, "All Over Creation: Ode to Joy," *Austin American Statesman*, June 28 2013.

elements of material Chicana/o culture into choreographies that narrate barrio experience. For example, in *Loteria Landia* larger than life characters, everyday movements, over the top costumes, music that links to the cultural community, bilingual language, local stories, among a host of other artistic choices uniquely situates the work within a menu of brown stylistics that turns space into place with meaning. The dancers are trained to embody the collage of referents that they move in, carrying within their body awareness of the values of the community in which we dance. American modern dance remains outside the experiential field of awareness for Mexican-American communities. Typically individualistic, abstract, and color-muted, modern dance embodies American values associated with upwardly mobile middle-class aesthetics, with which only a fairly small percentage of Mexican-Americans identify. By way of contrast, Chicano/Mexican-American aesthetics revolve around bold, strong colors, powerful figures, and symbolic images that call us to identify with the space of our ancestral home, real or imagined. One can look at how Frida Kahlo, La Virgen de Guadalupe, colorful woven Saltillo serapes, lowrider cars, or the bright, swirling skirts of folklórico dancers serve as pinnacle examples of the aesthetic tastes and choices that continue to emanate from Chicano communities.

This Chicana/o choreography does not forget the Mexican influences, but rather takes ideas of home, culture and tradition to new places and times that locate them in the Austin barrio present. Our dance performance dances who we are in the now that includes our roots in our pasts, but also our realities in the present and our hopes and visions for the future. While dancing this important transnational and trans-temporal

aspect of our work, the choreography also reflects and performs the difficult and tenuous relationship we continue to have with our American patrimony. By creating work that directly speaks to our cultural difference(s) within America society, we resist the silences and marginalization that American hegemony and assimilation imparts. No alienation here. Critically grounded in the multiple influences of our environment and rooted in both American and Mexican cultures, *Loteriandia* explores the complexities of Chicano identities by negotiating liberating third spaces that dances the in-between-ness of who we are as a community. And indeed, it's the geo-spatial logics and dynamics of the barrio that provide us with the knowledges and place/space to negotiate that borderlands – to convert it from something that has been historically and even personally painful, to something generative and beautiful that makes sense to us and has meaning, that gives us a sense of self and of our place in the world. Like the lotería card characters that we allowed to escape from stereotype, from their fixed roles and the rendering of them in the eyes of others, so, too, do Chicana/o choreographers, dancers and audience members get to break free as they take part in these performances, fashioning their own identities, desires, and their places and roles in the social world.

THE SACRED CIRCLE: PERFORMANCE, COMMUNITY, CULTURE

With deep, saturated red theatrical light casting heavy shadows on their bodies, three women perform independent energetic dance movements to the mesmerizing recorded cumbia¹⁷⁶ musical rhythms of Mexican Institute of Sound. Dressed in iconic

¹⁷⁶ Mexican cumbia is a grassroots working-class musical form that circulates along the US-Mexico borderlands. Recognized for its driving repetitive percussive beat that “resonates with primordial

1960-70s Chicana/o Brown Beret-inspired dance outfits replete with brown military shirts cinched at the waist with large black belts, black mid-thigh shorts, black leg warmers that guise as boots, and brown beret caps, they execute strong and structured angular dance movements. On stage left, female dancer Holly Wissmann is in a forward bent crouch position dancing cumbia rhythms by shifting weight back as arms accentuate her leans. Her movement is interrupted by a fast spin turn with arms in the air that culminates in a deep lunge and strong slap of the floor with her right hand. Within the same musical frame a second female dancer, Holli Hulett, is positioned stage right and pops her shoulders back and forth moving from an upright standing position into an incline position and back followed by a fast spin turn. She repeats this movement sequence a second time adding large arm extensions that further accentuate her body pops. The third female in the center of the stage, Marisa Limón, sways a bright jade-colored rebozo, or traditional Mexican scarf, over her head through the air where she finishes the musical phrase by draping it over her shoulders, wrapping it around her neck and crossing her chest in the iconic Mexican revolutionary bullet belt format. With arms free from the rebozo she signals her counterparts to join her in the following movement verse.

Indigenous drumming,” multiple artistic interpretations by US-Mexico border artists have made this Colombian originated form a quintessential transnational border practice. For more see: Broyles-González, Yolanda. "Norteno Borderlands Cumbia Circuitry: Selena Quintanilla and Celso Piña." *The Shade of the Saguaro/La Sombra Del Saguaro: Essays on the Literary Cultures of the American Southwest*. Eds. Prampolini, Gaetano and Annamaria Pinazzi. Borgo Albizi, Firenze, Italy: Firenze University Press, 2013. 173-94. Print.; Gudiño, José Juan Olvera. "Cumbia in Mexico's Northeastern Region." *Cumbia! Scenes of a Migrant Latin American Genre*. Eds. L'Hoeste, Héctor Fernández and Pablo Vila. Durham, London: Duke University Press, 2013. 87-104. Print.

Running symmetrically around the perimeter of the dance stage all three dancers convene at the front and center edge of the stage. With white light burst flashing from various directions the scene echoes a sense of chaos, unrest, and urgency. Piercing the invisible forth wall of theater that traditionally separates performer from audience the dancers take this choreographic opportunity to look directly at their viewers where they return gaze as they address their audience. Projecting their chests forward and raising a strong chin, they take turns pumping clenched fists in the air that is evocative of the visual protest imagery of the 1960-70s Chicano Movement, or El Movimiento, and the struggle for justice.

At the next musical break together they move back from the front edge to the center of the stage. In unison they begin a marching step sequence that is intermixed with powerful indigenous steps. They alternate tapping their heels four times and break the movement by stomping their bare feet into the ground where they perform a signature Danza Nahuatl¹⁷⁷ step called the *paso de la cruz* (step of the cross), where each foot marks the four sacred cardinal directions on the floor. From the *paso de la cruz*, they forcefully pump their leg upward twice followed by an extension and ball change to turn

¹⁷⁷ Danza Nahuatl, also known as Danza Concheros or Danza Azteca-Teochichimeca, is a syncretic ceremonial dance tradition with roots to pre-Columbian culture and remains actively practiced today by indigenous adherents in the Valley of Mexico. The 1960-70s Chicano movement rooted danza practices throughout the US Southwest where continue to be reflected during ritual days of obligation, such as the Catholic Day of Our Lady of Guadalupe. For more on danza nahuatl, see: Maria Teresa Ceseña, "Creating Agency and Identity in Danza Azteca," in *Dancing Across Borders: Danzas y Bailes Mexicanos*, ed. Olga Nájera-Ramirez, Norma E. Cantu, and Brenda M. Romero (Urbana: University of Illinois, 2009).; Elisa Diana Huerta, "Embodied Recuperations: Performance, Indigeneity, and Danza Azteca," in *Dancing Across Borders: Danzas y Bailes Mexicanos*, ed. Olga Nájera-Ramirez, Norma E. Cantu, and Brenda Romero (Urbana: University of Illinois, 2009)..

into a new direction where they again repeat the verse. Seamlessly fluctuating between unison to independent dance movements, the dancers maintain a grounded and forceful aesthetic, evoking a sense of solidarity, urgency, and action. In the final portion of this Brown Beret vignette the dancers perform a three-part canon that moves them through spaces of the indigenous, contemporary, to modern. Displacing one and other as they rotate through movement sequences they demonstrate the body's faculty to interpret multiple dance forms. As the music for the Brown Berets vignette from the Aztlan Dance Company's full-evening choreography of *Loterilandia* (2013) concludes the three dancers finish downstage in a strong and defiant pose with chests out and fists in the air, iconic Chicano protest imagery.

At the end of each performance I convene the dancers and technical crew in the center of the stage to address any technical or choreographic issues that may need attention for the following evening's performance. Stepping onto the stage, I looked just beyond the apron to notice José and Modesta Treviño seated in the second row of the theater's auditorium. The Treviños were active Brown Berets in Austin's 1970s Chicano Movement. Now in their 60-70s, with salt-and-pepper hair framing their canela-brown faces aged with wrinkles of wisdom and experience, they quickly stood from their seats and approached the front of the stage to congratulate the dancers.

Modesta commented on the euphoric feelings of seeing and feeling dance that reflected the many aspects of her Chicana cultural being. As she spoke vivid memories raced through my mind of their work as activists during the Austin's 1970s Chicano Movimiento and since. José, having suffered life-altering ailment, looked over his thick-

rimmed spectacles and deep into my eyes where I again saw the flickers of the spirited flame that is the fire of fight that represents the Chicano movement, then as now.

Through his finely groomed gray mustache and in a soft and definite voice he uttered “*felicitaciones, más mil respetos* (congratulations, my greatest respects).” As brothers, or *carnales*, in lifetime of expressive activity in barrio expression, I was no longer the chavalio (youngster) from days ago where I existed as a child actor on the supporting periphery of marches and protests and the typical ensuing physical confrontations between the Brown Berets and uniformed authority. Roughly four decades later the majority of my work draws from those early and unrecorded experiences into new dance that remembers and reconstitutes the many barrio spaces I have sojourned. José looked deep into my eyes, and I his, as we both understood the parallel spaces of Chicanidad that we both work in--- that mirror one another across space and time. Then, as now, we both continue the untiring labor to bring social, cultural and political awareness, advancement, and empowerment to Chicana/o marginalized barrio communities, the places we both live and work in.

Racing through my mind I wondered what they saw? How did their lived experience and my lived experience as a youngster intersect within a larger public sphere that echoes the past in the present? I also wondered what they experienced by seeing representations of Chicana/o struggle staged performatively in a contemporary context with dance bodies that were decades removed from the actual moments of El Movimiento?

The circle was complete. I realized memory was active and at-work zapping through bodies and minds of everyone, at every stage of production. From José and Modesta Treviño remembering the activism of El Movimiento's efforts decades ago; from dancers embodying the unwritten histories of the fight for justice; to audiences imagining, experiencing the passion and power of El Movimiento; to the memories of cultural arts and social activism working hand in hand then, as now. Memory and barrio aesthetics was performing, giving life and body again to ideas, images, and recollections of El Movimiento. Through this recollection and remembering through dance, frames of identification were created for all that were present and shared in the performance.

Chapter 5: Conclusion: Chicana/o DanceScapes

“Utopian performatives describe small but pro-found moments in which performance calls the attention of the audience in a way that lifts everyone slightly above the present, into a hopeful feeling of what the world might be like if every moment of our lives were as emotionally voluminous, generous, aesthetically striking, and inter-subjectively intense.”

~ Jill Dolan

On October 23, 2015 I attended a special performance showcase headlining Los Master Plus from Guadalajara, Mexico, with special guests Corpus Christi, Texas’ Master Blaster Sound System and Austin’s own Peligrosa DJ Collective at Austin’s Empire Control Room. The performance was promoted as the Austin cumbia musical event of the year. *Cumbia fronteriza* has become the popular music and dance of el pueblo, the barrio.¹⁷⁸ In the sold-out open-air hall seats were arranged towards the rear of the hall in order to open a dance floor directly in front of the stage. The spatial arrangement purposefully brought audience and musicians into intentional close proximity, inspiring a mutual and shared energy between audience and artist through live performance.

As I looked across the hall, I noticed it was filled to capacity with a diverse collection of predominately working-class and multi-aged Latinas/os and non-Latina/o allies. There was energy in the air that cultivated a shared sense of community. As my partner Holli and I squeezed our way stage-front, I greeted countless friends and acquaintances I have come to know through my many years of community-based work here in Austin. We would exchange saludos (greetings), chat about the Los Master Plus’

¹⁷⁸ In chapter two I discuss cumbia music as a music and dance form that embodies a working-class aesthetics.

radical rasquachian take on border culture, and comment on how with their slick remakes of popular music culture these artists embody the crossings through courageous acts of rebellious nonconformity. Like clockwork each would also inquire about my next dance Aztlan project. I would give the routine jingle that after my academic work I move into the magical world of Chicano Super Heroes in crusade for barrio justice. Many immediately attempted to make connections with Mexican Spanish language television characters like Chavo del Numero Ocho, Cantinflas, or Lucha Libre's Blue Demon, among others. A couple of astute amigos made the link to my larger artistic objectives, commenting that it is indeed time for more Chicano Movimiento. I could feel the evening's excitement building by each passing minute. We finally made our way to our Aztlan tribe who had already staked out prized real estate in front of the stage for dancing.

As the sound check was complete Los Master Plus stepped onto the stage to a thunderous audience reception. Through their border-crossing performance style of rendering all things American and Mexican invalid, unless it is intermixed through cumbia fronteriza idiom, they defy categorization. With narco handlebar mustaches, dark shades, cowboy hats, and of course, gaudy gold neck beads, the duo interprets musical pieces from American artists like Snoop Dogg, Gwen Stefani, Bee Gees, along with Latino classics such as Selena, Calle 13, and Juan Gabriel, among others, into performance mixtures of "cleverness and guapachoness to please even the most stuffiest of cumbia experts," notes Empire's press release. In their first opening shout out to the audience the artists ask, "donde estamos, mi raza?" (where are we, my people?), followed

by “puuuuuro Frontera” (pure border). The space was acknowledged, borders were identified, in order to be disrupted, crossed, and reconstituted, as the mesmerizing cumbia sound started the hour and a half long ritual of dance and community making.

I share this final anecdote as it illustrates how Chicana/o culture continually creates and structures place, or space with meaning, to perform its particular registers of border consciousness. These crossings involve negotiating the multiple spaces and divides that fragment any sense of a cohesive cultural script. As such, a borderlands resident we come to acknowledge diversity from within, celebrating cultural innovators that add more dimension to our borderlands subjectivities. In short they expand the space we imagine ourselves and provide more freedom for its interpretation.

The artists and dance companies in this dissertation are important to the Chicana/o community’s cultural project as they catalogue, archive, and develop innovative repertoire from vital sources that surround us, codifying the aesthetics that have long nurtured the body, soul, and spirit of our communities. Like myself and the Aztlan Dance Company, each of these dance organizations are tuned in to the traditions that have nurtured Mexican-origin people and places through the decades, while also imagining new ways of interpreting and representing the Chicana/o body (physical and social) and experience moving forward.

I have maintained my practice in the arts during the course of this dissertation. I have continued to develop dance projects, have collaborated with other Chicana/o artists and groups, and have served on a host of panels and policy initiative roundtables where I advocate for Latina/o arts. I am asked to serve annually on funding panels for the arts at

the local, regional, and national levels, where I bring to the review process my insights on Latina/o and Chicana/o dance and culture. On these panels, I am challenged with the institutionalized systems of categorization that have the effect of containing, controlling, and even disciplining communities of color as “other.” For instance, if a dance company’s grant has an ethnic cultural dimension, it is placed into the “folk” stack of applications. If the arts organization is located within a culturally specific, usually redline underrepresented municipal geographies; it is placed in the “outreach” stack. If the dance forms the petitioning group engages fall outside of dominant, white Euro-Western classical or modern categories in dance, they are considered suspect or dismissed as less important/valuable, where they typically rank at the lower-end of the evaluation matrix. The bodies represented in these groups and grant applications are barriozed through the institutional bureaucratic process, crippling their access to financial and development opportunities. My efforts in funding, policy, and community initiatives meetings are to shed light on the need to look beyond limiting practices that have relegated communities of color to lesser status.

I find even more troublesome when I serve on policy or grant review panels with colleagues in diverse disciplines, and that are for the most part Latina/o and people of color, how they, too, register dance and bodies of color in dance within historical racial categories. I am called to these review panels as the dance expert, and I am usually assigned the first speaker for the allotment of dance grants applications. When discussing sister disciplines of theater, visual arts, music, film, and interdisciplinary projects and organizations, the evaluation language from my peer reviewers typically includes

descriptors like “diverse,” “innovative,” “provocative,” “avante-garde,” “cross-cultural,” among others, and registers the work within ideas of progress and models for social impact potential. With dance, however, peer reviewers do not see the proposed projects this way.

Instead, like the *Visiones* documentary that opened this dissertation, they fall prey to prevailing views of the body, reifying hegemonic practices of category that fragments the brown body in dance. In these review panels by artists of color, nonetheless, peers from other disciplines suggest that organizational project be divided so that they can wrap their minds around the diversity of work in dance. From these high level arts administrators and artist, dance and the body once again falls into the stunting, limiting categories of “traditional/folk/othered” versus “modern/American/white.” Routinely, I seize these moments to share with arts colleagues the systemic problem and dangers with predetermining the dance body through category. I explain that a decision based on the perceptions of high-low arts binaries restricts and constrains innovation across the spectrum for our own communities and reifies hegemonic ideas that Chicana/o and Latina/o artists have consistently had to work against. Indeed, some of the most exciting work happening today is occurring exactly at the intersection where the collapse of these categories takes place, as illustrated in this dissertation. The diversity produced by the crossing of borders, the mixing of cultures, and the new formations that represents our contemporary moment in dance stands as our community cultural treasures *because* they are allowed creative freedom to “be,” to exist without limits and takes us all with them. I express to my peers that the brown body in dance, as with its sister art forms, must be

given space to interpret and interrogate ethnicity, culture and community, and be granted license to engage creatively in fusing and blending our diverse contemporary experience into hybrid cultural and artistic forms. After offering example in sister arts fields, my colleagues do make immediate connections and are able to understand the significance of the current moment in dance where change is occurring, making space for the recovery and recuperation of the brown body and experience.

There remains much work to do politically and analytically, and many questions and issues that interest me have been generated through my research and explorations, but that are beyond the scope of this dissertation. Future research into and writing on Chicana/o dance should consider deeper exploration of gender and sexuality in barrio practices and how they offer hospitable space for identity production; expanded readings of the brown dance body in whitespaces that explores analysis beyond virtue of being ethnic and Spanish surname; more individual stories that amplify the contributions in dance of this fast growing community; and last contributions by allied non-Latino dancers and audiences.

In the meantime, I conclude this dissertation with the epigraph above that references performance studies scholar Jill Dolan, whose ideas were instrumental to me early on in beginning to think critically about my work in dance and grassroots performance. Having spent the better part of my life engaged in Chicana/o barrio-based work, I have continually searched for ways to describe and articulate Chicano dance within different artistic and cultural arenas I engage. Dr. Dolan's simple advice to me then was to start by looking at myself, to theorize the spaces I navigate and let this

information communicate across and to all the communities that I work in. She would remind all of us in her class to find and harness the magic of those utopian moments in art when community is at its truest self. In my journey from my Eastside Austin barrio dance studio on one side of the highway – the proverbial border – to the other side to attend the University of Texas at Austin, I have developed a love for navigating such spaces, for bringing my different worlds together in ways that revives me. While I unquestionably relish moments of utopia in performance, where hope and imaginations of audience and artists align in dance, I also find those magical moments in the everyday ordinary of community. In front of the dance studio as I gather myself before the intense two hour rehearsal that fast approaches, the little elderly woman with a cane walks up to me from the sidewalk. She regularly walks by the studio as she lives but only a few blocks away. She calls me close, and in a soft voice tells me “Mijo, I will not be able to audition for your next dance project. Perhaps la proxima.”

Vita

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Permanent address (or email): <nn Street Name, City, State Zip>

This dissertation was typed by <the author, or typist's name>.

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