Ballet Folklórico: Celebrating Heritage and Creating Identity through Dance

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Author’s note. As a child, I watched ballet folklórico performers at almost every community event. Church functions, Cinco de Mayo celebrations, and political fundraisers were some of the places that I recall seeing their performances. I can vividly remember as the dancers entered the room—heads held high, hands on their hips. As they went to their formation spot, I could see the smiles spread across their faces. I could tell that some dancers were nervous because their smiles looked strained behind the heavy make-up of their eyes. Other dancers, especially the girls in the front row, did not seem nervous at all and their red lips did not twitch once. Instead, they seemed confident and excited. The music began and it sounded scratchy, as if recorded from an old record. The dancers began intricately moving their feet in rhythm with the music, and the multi-colored skirts of the female dancers swirled in precise and deliberate patterns. As the dancers turned, moved, and clicked the heels of their shoes, the crowd spontaneously clapped, whistled, and shouted the traditional grito, or yell, to cheer on the dancers. The song ended and as the dancers posed, the crowd went wild with applause because they were not just watching, but taking pride in seeing their friends and family display their heritage.

Ballet folklórico, while conceived in Mexico, transcends political borders. Mexican Americans in the United States borrowed this practice from their motherland, but adapted it to fit their needs. In Austin, Texas, many ballet folklórico groups formed because of the renewed interest in Mexican heritage that the aftermath of the Chicano Movement sparked during the 1970s. Three of these groups, AZTLAN Dance Company, The University of Texas Ballet Folklórico, and recreational programs founded by Rodolfo Méndez, are still active today. Austin was home to a diverse group of Mexican Americans in the 1970s and these groups mirrored that diversity. One began as a neighborhood endeavor, another as a student organization, and the last as both a professional and a benevolent venture. These three Austin organizations provide a case study about the development of ballet folklórico in the United States. They also show how ballet folklórico shaped the changing identity of Mexican Americans.

Dance has been a part of human life since humans created culture. Almost every ethnic group in the world has some form of dance that is original to its society. Mexico has a unique history as a place of cultural collisions. There are a variety of indigenous groups in Mexico, with the most well known being the Aztecs and the Mayans. The cultural practices of these indigenous groups reflect influences from places ranging from the United States to South America. Spanish explorers first encountered these indigenous groups in the sixteenth century when they traveled to North America in search of new opportunities. The people of Spain share in the collective continental history of Europe made up of various conquering
empires including the Romans and the Moors. The Spanish people brought their diverse culture to the new world, and as they intermixed with the indigenous population, cultural exchange and fusion occurred. The indigenous cultures of Mexico primarily used dance for sacred and religious events. Europeans also used dance for ritual events and for social purposes. Gatherings centered around holidays and life cycle celebrations, such as weddings and birthdays, commonly brought musicians and dancers together. Celebration is an expressional use of dance that has continued in the ballet folklórico tradiotion. As in most conquered countries, the traditions of the conquerors were more highly valued over the traditions of the conquered.

In 1910, Mexico experienced a revolution. One of the cultural results of the revolution was a shift in focus to celebrate the mestizaje, or mixture, among the heritages of the people of Mexico. Through the arts and cultural expression of the following years, the idea of mestizaje became widely disseminated. Amalia Hernández was a cance instructor at the Mexican Academy of Dance in Mexico City. In 1952, she popularized ballet folklórico dance with the creation of a new modern ballet group that would become the renowned Ballet Folklórico de México. Hernández drew from her observations and experiences with the different regions of Mexico to incorporate those elements into her knowledge of modern ballet. By combining colorful costumes, regional music, and dance steps, Hernández created a new way for Mexicans to celebrate their mixed identity. Folklórico dance existed before Amalia Hernández appeared on the scene; however, she made it the lasting legacy it has become.¹

Dr. Olga Nájera-Ramírez, a folklorist who studies Mexican American dance and culture, states, “Folklórico dance is a dynamic transnational expressive medium through which Mexican communities on both sides of the United States-Mexico border create and pass on a strong sense of group aesthetics and identity.”² Ballet folklórico performances usually consist of dances representing different regions of Mexico. To express the essence of each region, directors utilize costumes, music, and movement. Oftentimes the dances revolve around original customs, such as courting rituals and displays of machismo, or manliness, as in the Nayarit regional dance where men dance with machetes.³

Costumes display the indigenous influences on fashion and use cotton and other natural materials in the design. Embroidery and hand stitched adornments also reflect a more indigenous style of dress. Braided hairstyles usually accompany the costumes. In contrast, European-inspired costumes use manufactured cloth, like lace and silks. European accessories include hair combs, fans, and elaborate jewelry. For example, the state of Veracruz is on the eastern coast of Mexico where many ships entered Mexico after a journey across the Atlantic. The costumes of the female dancers from Veracruz reflect European fashion with full skirts and yards of white lace. The music of Veracruz has influences from Africa and the Caribbean due to the proximity of Veracruz to the Caribbean and the coastal border that brought ships from Africa. The state of Jalisco is located on the west coast of Mexico and has a traditional rural history tied to ranching with a mixed heritage of indigenous and Spanish ethnicity. Mariachi music has its roots in this region, and for that reason, male dancers often wear costumes resembling Mariachi singers. For the most part, the dresses worn by the women dancers have bright colors and multicolored ribbons. A legend of a woman born in Asia who came to Mexico is the inspiration for the famous china poblana costumes worn by performers representing the state of Puebla. The costume includes a white peasant blouse and a sequined skirt, often with a patriotic design. The Nuevo Leon
region borders Texas, and the costumes and music of the region represent the influences of the cultures along the border. The ballet folklórico music of the Nuevo Leon region exhibits the Anglo influences, such as, the German polka and Scottish schottische. The costumes also closely resemble the stereotypical dress of Texas. For example, the costume of the men often includes a fringed jacket and a “cowboy” hat.¹

Mexico and the United States have an intricately interwoven history. Parts of the southwestern United States belonged to Spain until 1821 and to Mexico until 1836, and the people in the southwest region hold close ties to their parent culture. Migration between the two countries has been constant throughout the history of North America, especially in the years following the revolution in Mexico. People crossing the borders into the United States brought their cultural practices with them. The practice of Mexican folklórico dancing in the United States has been evident as early as the 1930s, but it was not until the 1960s that it was widely practiced. In the 1960s, the people of the United States experienced a social revolution, with the goal of making equality standard across the nation. Racial injustices and discrimination were issues at the forefront of this revolution. As a part of this larger movement for equality, Mexican Americans began to organize into the Chicano Movement. Comparable to the post-revolutionary period in Mexico, the leaders of the Chicano Movement inspired a renewed interest in their indigenous and mixed heritage to foster pride and encourage a united front. Once again, art and literature were a popular means of propagating cultural unity. Ballet folklórico was one form of cultural expression that Mexican Americans used to celebrate and promote pride in the mixed heritage. In 1962, amidst this cultural revival, the Ballet Folklórico de México went on tour in the United States for the first time. Mexican Americans experiencing the presentations saw the group as a legitimate expression of their Mexican heritage.

Texas played a major role in the Chicano Movement. The Mexican American Youth Organization (1967) and La Raza Unida party (1970) both began in Texas. It also contributed local leaders to the national cause. Austin, the capital of Texas, has a large population of Mexican Americans. During the 1960s, Mexican Americans marched from hundreds of miles away to join local Mexican American Aunites at the Capitol grounds to protest for equal civil rights. The Chicano Movement had a large following of students and youth, and the University of Texas in Austin was a prime location for student involvement, since the Mexican Americans enrolled at the university came from across the state. The Mexican American community in Austin was equally as active as the general student community at the university. Organizations such as the Brown Berets, the Mexican American Youth Organization, La Raza Unida, and the League of United Chicano Artists flourished throughout the city.³ Dr. Russell Rodríguez, an anthropologist and avid musician, clarifies that while ballet folklórico was a popular part of the artistic renaissance of the Chicano Movement and often performed at political events, it was not political in its nature. Instead of promoting a political cause, ballet folklórico was a celebratory act to give pride to a group. Rodríguez explains that ballet folklórico in the United States helped Mexican Americans define their identity, celebrate their heritage, and form strong communal bonds.⁴ Several ballet folklórico groups formed in Austin during the 1970s in response to the rise of Mexican Americans searching to celebrate their culture.

Maria Salinas founded AZTLAN Dance Company in 1974. Salinas was born in the Rio Grande Valley of Texas but moved to Austin in 1965. Planners for the Austin Aqua Festival called for the creation of a float with a Mexican American theme for their parade,
and a coordinator asked Salinas if she knew any children who could ride in the float. Salinas talked to families in the community and had her mother mail her some costumes so the children could participate in the parade. After Salinas saw the interest of the parents and children in the Mexican American culture, she took it as a sign from God that she needed to take an active role in teaching these children about their heritage. Salinas, along with the help of other families in her community, started a dance company to teach cultural history through ballet folklórico. Salinas found her philosophy of teaching children the importance of where they come from so they know where they are going. She was aware of the discrimination and struggles around her, and she wanted her students to remember to fight for their rights. To balance the growing pride for Mexican heritage that her students were gaining, Salinas reminded them they were not only Mexican, but also American. They had rights as Americans and needed to take pride in their American heritage. Dance was the tool that Salinas used to cross borders. Her students have performed at many venues, including in England and Mexico City. Salinas stresses the community aspect of her company. Not only do parents and community members help in the fundraising for such trips, but also they learn about the history and regions of Mexico along with the children so they can learn to take pride in caring for the regional costumes. Today, under the direction of her son, Roen Salinas, AZTLAN Dance Company continues the tradition Maria Salinas started. AZTLAN Dance Company has expanded on the traditional ballet folklórico repertoire. Now the company includes dances that incorporate modern dance styles and expressive new dances that emphasize the American experience of Mexican Americans. They have choreographed dances that include American history, such as barrio life and the zoot suit era in Mexican American history. While the company still focuses on traditional ballet folklórico, they are moving into a new era, which will provide them with space to explore how to convey and celebrate their culture outside of the traditional confines of ballet folklórico.

Rodolfo Méndez was a classically trained dancer born in Austin. Once his career took off, he travelled the world. He performed with a dance and theater group in the Peace Corps and various companies in New York and Spain. In 1978, he found his way back to Austin, where he began a program with the city’s Parks and Recreation Department. Despite his classical background, Méndez’ program taught ballet folklórico to adults who wanted to practice a form of dance that reflected their heritage. During the brief time he spent in Mexico City, Méndez took classes in ballet folklórico and immediately discovered the similarities in the steps to other European dances he knew. Today, Méndez has formed several outreach programs to involve Austin youth in dance and theater. He offers free classes to his students and is able to teach directly at local schools, such as Martin Middle School. He encourages his students to practice classical techniques and incorporates several other traditional styles into the version of ballet folklórico he teaches. Méndez goes as far as using Russian steps in some of his ballet folklórico choreography. When other instructors ask about the authenticity of his choreography in Mexican dances, he replies, “What is Mexican?” To Méndez, “Mexican” is comprised of a concoction of several different elements. In all of his travels, he is aware of how small the world is but also how interconnected it is. He has dubbed his style of dance “Mendestein.”

Students at the University of Texas formed The University of Texas Ballet Folklórico in 1975. San Juanita Martinez taught an ethnic dance class at the university in the 1970s, and several of her students expressed interest in forming a ballet folklórico group. In 1975, those students met to begin their organization under the university’s Division of Recreational Sports. Several of the students brought their knowledge of ballet folklórico from practicing
in their hometowns. One of the students, Roy Lozano, became the first teacher of the group with the assistance of fellow dancer Sylvia Sierra (nee Quiñones). Lozano would go on to dance with Amalia Hernández in Mexico City and start his own company when he returned to Austin in the 1980s. The students pulled together their limited knowledge of ballet folklórico to teach each other. They shared a common goal to learn and share the dances they practiced as part of a search to educate themselves about their Mexican heritage. Students traveled to Mexico when they had time and money for workshops, and other ballet folklórico groups traveled to Austin and held workshops for the group to attend. The students incorporated their research about music and costumes into the shows as they learned new aspects of ballet folklórico. In order to pay for costumes, the group danced at Carmen’s La Tapatia, a restaurant in East Austin. Through word of mouth and university community members, the group found local seamstresses to make their costumes. With several ballet folklórico groups forming in Austin, the university group invited the others to be guest performers at their shows. The University of Texas Ballet Folklórico continues today and still encourages students to come and learn about their heritage.¹¹

Even though the ballet folklórico groups formed in Austin had different beginnings, their initial reason for organizing was the same. Each group, like others throughout the nation, formed because there were Mexican Americans yearning to understand their parent culture. These Austinites wanted to take pride in their heritage and looked for a way not only to practice their culture but also to display it to others. They took pride in a history of mixed ancestry, rich music, and vibrant colors. Maria Salinas wanted the children in her community to understand where they came from. Adults and children wanting to understand their roots sought out Rodolfo Méndez for direction. College students, away from their families for the first time, sought a safe place to explore their culture with students who shared the same interest.

As these groups furthered their knowledge about Mexican history and culture, something obvious was missing. Salinas was aware from the very beginning that Mexican Americans held dual identities as both Mexican by heritage and American by birth. Ballet folklórico only addressed the Mexican half. In the United States, Mexican Americans are changing their practice of ballet folklórico to fit their changing identity as Mexican Americans. As people move and integrate new cultural aspects into their identity, they change the way they see themselves, and a new identity forms. Not only do Mexican Americans use ballet folklórico to celebrate culture, but to form an identity as well. Dr. Anthony Shay, who choreographs and studies dances from around the world, writes about the immigrant experience with folk dance in the United States. He states that Americans of different ethnic heritages often look for an activity to tie them to their homeland. By participating in those activities, they imagine that what they are doing resembles what their counterparts in their homeland are doing. Shay says this nostalgia for their parent culture often results in the practice of a stereotypical or romanticized version of their culture. Movies and other media sources play a major factor in the idealized portrayal of a foreign place. In many cases, Mexican Americans are multi-generational Americans, and those searching for a connection to their parent culture have not been to the country of origin to which they are seeking a connection. In addition, as a shift in the self-identity and self-representation of the ethnic group occurs, so does a shift in their performances.¹²

AZTLAN Dance Company recognized the importance of the “American” in Mexican American from the start of its program, and this was precisely why it searched for
methods in which to celebrate the Mexican American traditions of the United States. The history of the Mexican American experience brings a unique dimension to the choreography. The discrimination Mexican Americans faced as they struggled for justice in the decades leading up to the Chicano Movement is one such influence. AZTLAN brings aspects of this struggle to light through dance. Just as most Mexicans did not celebrate their mestizaje until after the Mexican Revolution, most Mexican Americans in the United States did not celebrate their Mexican heritage until the Chicano Renaissance of the 1960s. The Salinas family was able to use dance to educate children about the Mexican American experience. Their new routines, featuring themes like barrio life and the zoot suit era, show the students and audience their pride in the Mexican American experience, in spite of the struggles they faced. This new inclusion expands on Shay’s theory that changes in self-representation create changes in performances. In the 1970s, Chicanos wanted to understand their repressed Mexican identity, so they focused on the Mexican aspects. In the twenty-first century, Mexican Americans are searching for ways to understand their repressed Mexican American history and identity, and they are searching for new outlets to express that identity.

Some traditionalists in the United States do not think these trends are Americanized versions of ballet folklórico, rather something else entirely. Many scholars question the authenticity of ballet folklórico in general because not all of the elements are necessarily authentic to the history of Mexican dance. For example, as the Ballet Folklórico de México expanded its repertoire, they included dances that represented the Olmec culture, which is the oldest known indigenous culture in Mexico. While not much is known about the Olmec, except for their archaeological remains, Hernández created an Olmec performance from the personal interpretations she gained from studying their material culture. She could not possibly have known with certainty, though, how they incorporated dance into their lives. The history of Mexico is not static, and it can change as people find new perspectives to explore. Hernández developed a dance to celebrate the soldaderas, or woman soldiers who served in the Mexican Revolution. These women did not have connections to dance; however, Hernández used their story to develop a performance to celebrate the roles they played in the history of Mexico. Is this practice of portraying the essence of a group authentic? One could argue that while Amalia Hernández based her dances on the regional variations she researched, they are no more than a creation of her own creativity because of her addition of modern techniques and personal interpretation. In fact, after the success of Hernández and her company, regional groups in Mexico began to integrate her steps into their practices even though they were supposed to be the authority over the origin of their culture.

The inherent nature of dance to represent artistic and personal expression can challenge its historical authenticity. Méndez draws on his personal experiences of dancing all over the world in his instruction of ballet folklórico. He sees Mexico as a diverse melting pot in a small world. Just as Hernández incorporated formal ballet and modern dance into her formation of ballet folklórico, Méndez draws on his personal background to package his brand of Mendestein ballet folklórico. Is his choreography any less authentic than the choreography that Hernández invented? People who celebrate an assortment of customs from countries all over the world make up the Mexican and American population we see today, and all of those countries have an impact on our culture both directly and indirectly. As modern technology makes transmittance of culture faster and more accessible, it is likely this trend of utilizing new techniques will increase. Likewise, Roen Salinas incorporates Mexican American history into the AZTLAN Dance Company to focus on zoot suits and
other uniquely Mexican American connections. Do these interpretations discredit the practice of ballet folklórico? First, let us remember that it is perhaps impossible to detail the exact original dance of a region in Mexico, since the diversity of each region brings several aspects, and certain steps and traditions span across regions. In addition, the Spanish and African influences to each region are not original, but rather a history built layer upon layer of diverse influences.

While an authentic display may not be the intention of these performances, they do leave us with an important lesson about that region. Through the music and costumes of a performance, an audience can understand the unique mixture of diverse ethnicities that form that region. Choreographers intricately design each dance to teach history and convey heritage to the audience. The subtle differences among regions not only show glimpses of those regions, but also when reviewed as a whole, they reveal the collective identity of the country. Hernández' inclusion of Olmec and soldaderas in her repertoire are examples that she was actively trying to educate others about the history of Mexico they might not have otherwise known. Although it is a creative and romantic version, it teaches the audience a lesson. Just as Hernández wanted ballet folklórico to portray the multi-layered heritage of Mexico, Mexican Americans have built their own layers on top of Mexican and American histories to form their own portrayal of heritage. In both Mexican and Mexican American folklórico dance, there is a group involved in displaying and celebrating the heritage they envision to be inclusive of their personal experiences. Scholars should not study whether ballet folklórico is authentic, but instead focus on how it represents the identity of the participants.

Whether ballet folklórico is in fact an authentic interpretation of Mexican culture and history, it can be exceedingly useful to study. There is an international group called the Asociación Nacional de Grupos Folklóricos that focuses on the “research, preservation, presentation, and education” of the Mexican culture. Folklórico groups meet to exchange information towards the advancement of preserving Mexican culture. There is minimal information published about ballet folklórico, and new studies would be of great value for others to understand the differences and similarities in international practices of ballet folklórico. Most ballet folklóric groups in the United States began through people who were self-educated about ballet folklórico, and the practice of regional groups sharing choreography and travelling to Mexico for lessons make the Mexican American experience practice distinctive in its development. If there are variations among groups and improvised methods in Austin, then there are likely variations elsewhere. The role that the community played in supporting these ventures is an important aspect to their survival. Oral histories and community research could uncover further insights as to the relationships of community members and the extent of their participation with the ballet folklórico groups. As scholars continue to debate the authenticity of ballet folklórico, these presentations display an authentic factor about the identity that the groups perceive about themselves. The 1970s showed that Mexican Americans wanted to focus on their Mexican heritage to define their identity. In the twenty-first century, Mexican Americans have begun to focus on their experiences in America. By looking at the context of the world in which these changes in the presentation of ballet folklórico are occurring, scholars can delve further into understanding the creation of Mexican and Mexican American identity.


5 Arnoldo De León, Mexican Americans in Texas: A Brief History, 2nd ed. (Wheeling, IL: Harlan Davidson, Inc., 1999), 124-150.


7 Voces de Latinas, “Conversaciones del Pasado: Reflexiones del Presente,” unpublished DVD Austin, TX (Sunday, October 9, 2011).


9 Rodolfo Méndez, interview by Esther Rivera, Austin, TX, April 4, 2012.

10 Rodolfo Méndez, interview by Esther Rivera, Austin, TX, April 4, 2012.

11 Michael Carmona interview by Esther Rivera, Austin, TX, April 1, 2012.


13 The Ballet Folclorico de Mexico, souvenir program, 1980.

14 Shay, Choreographing Identities, 44.