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*Destiny's Cultural and Spiritual Healing: The Practice of Care and Unlearning in Choreographing*

Destiny Rivera-Gomez

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Destinys Cultural and Spiritual Healing: The Practice of Care and Unlearning in Choreographing

By

Destiny Rivera-Gomez

Submitted to Scripps College in Partial Fulfillment of the Degree of Bachelor of Arts

Professor Kevin Williamson
Professor Martha Gonzalez
Dedicación

A mí tía Ofelia,

Te extraño cada día y durante cada Danza. Eres el fuego que enciende mis movimientos. En tu nombre y espíritu, continuo a Danzar, luchar y sonreír.

ometoetl
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brilliant dancers but they are compassionate, caring, and loving individuals who were patient with me. Who took the movement I gave them and carried it with love and cherished it as they performed it on stage. Thank you for the conversations, the laughs, and the tears.

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Introduction

Background and Positionality

The beauty of dance, no matter how much you try to institutionalize, commercialize, and suppress its power, has roots firmly grounded in the spiritual realm. Dance is a transcending force of lived experience and truth. Dance is a practice of knowing and communicating. The conception of dance practices are preservations of a time and place and the embodiment of a people, animals, memories, and timeless lessons. Histories can be captured, feelings translated, trauma inherited, resistance manifested, and humanity preserved, all through dance and dancing bodies. Dance is a foundational way of knowing, a form of archiving information. Its ability to retain information is telling in that dance is a language and a form of communication that can harness and illustrate ideas.

Dance is my method to transcend silenced narratives and unlearn oppressive ideologies. I tackle this in my thesis piece “Braiding Wounds, Wearing Pride,” where the narratives of indigeneity, immigration, the toxic American dream, generational healing and celebration are intimate reflections of my personhood -- that I illustrate through movement. I turned to dance to redeem a sense of self after losing myself in the trenches of disconnection, imposter syndrome, fear of conformity and self-rejection. How I chose to cope and process my struggles with depression, crippling anxiety, acclimating to Scripps community, learning about my ancestral lineage and indigenous identity was through dance. The Danza practice held on Wednesdays in La Puente, California is where I gather with other Danzantes who come from Mexica and Nahua tribes and are also people of other tribes and traditions, claiming multiple identities. In learning the ceremonial Danzas I learn about the ancestral language Nahualt, the herbs used for spiritual
cleansings, and how our Danzas inform the histories of our ancestors. Dance and Danza are mediums of communication and expression that feel right and empower me. But it didn’t feel safe at the Claremont Colleges for the majority of my college career as a member of the dance community and an artist who wanted to create and perform. Coming into the Claremont College dance space with no prior knowledge and technique in the dominant forms of dance like modern, contemporary and ballet, was a significant insecurity that deepened my experience of alienation. Dance being my practice of joy, became my practice of self-deprecation. I did not feel worthy of sharing space with the company-trained, pre-professional, predominantly enrolled non-people of color dancers in the technique courses I took. Audition spaces at the Claremont Colleges felt isolating because the dancers emphasized a specific kind of trained background that was undoubtedly common.

I want to address that what I was experiencing was no one’s fault, and in no way do I blame my dance peers for the talent and skill they possess. I was struggling with my own perceptions of self-worth, juggling frustrations with the lack of resources I had growing up and my distrust of the college institutions I was in. I was struggling to separate what I knew about the existing disparities that exist in marginalized communities like the one I grew up in, in Pomona and how I felt cheated by not having the same opportunities as my peers.

Coping with these realizations became a present driving force in my choreographic process for my thesis. I chose to confront my feelings of shame, insecurity, and neglect by investing time in renegotiating my relationship with dance. The renegotiation was realizing that my relationship with the dances of my culture were valuable, and that the act of rejecting myself was a continuation of the harm and violence my ancestors faced for daring to feel empowered and connected through dance. I took on the role of simultaneously healing myself by practicing
methods of care for the dance forms that culturally and spiritually resonate with me. But this has not been an easy process, practicing care for the grief and trauma is exhausting and emotionally painful. Educating myself through research, conversation and movement practice was equally challenging and arduous. My work asks: how do I remember my ancestors, grieve for them while trying to end the harm in present day society? How do I balance my own emotional wellbeing while unlearning racist and colonial rhetoric about my ancestors and learning their true testimonies? What methods can one implement in their choreographic process and conception of dance to emphasize the importance that spiritually and culturally related narratives should be performed with respect and integrity? And how can work be performed in institutional spaces and not further harm perpetuated through erasure of the testimonies interwoven in the contemporary dance practices?

To answer these questions, I identify the approaches I implemented in my choreographic process that value the use of asking for permission, self-reflection, facilitation, unlearning, asking for support, and honoring testimony.

**Choreographic Conception**

Reflecting on my relationship with dance, the embodiment of the practice of dance has been a means to feel joy, a medium of expression and a pathway to building community. Equally, dance is also a way that I stay connected to my heritage, identity, and culture. It reflects the practices and beliefs my family has had access to and has been deprived of. Hence the oppressive spaces and systems we have lived under. To that point I have worked really hard to appreciate and seek them out because of their slim presence on the Claremont College campuses. Danza only showed up less than a hand full of times at events like that of the Catholic holiday of Our Lady of Guadalupe held by the Chicanx Latinx Student Affairs (CLSA) in 2022, Baile folklórico
was recently revived in 2023 at Claremont Mckenna College through a student-led club, and Latin American social dancing can now be found taking place through another new student-led club called 7C Latin and Caribbean Dance Club. The limitations that exist have had a significant effect on my three-year residency at Claremont Colleges, I cannot tell you whether the presence of these art styles existed before me and if it will change after me. But the lack of representation impacted how I participated in spaces where I did not feel represented, seen and celebrated. I isolated myself from the dancers in numerous spaces and purposely did not attend dance auditions my first semester on campus and living in the dorms. And to the best of my knowledge there were no dancers with my cultural background in dance.

Similarly, due to my specific research interests, I relied on mentors outside of the Claremont colleges, such as my maestros in Danza, the mothers who organize Baile folklòrico for their community in the city of Pomona and Latine social dance spaces like Moonshiners Bar & Lounge where they have Salsa, Bachata night on Thursdays and the Pico Rivera Sports Arena that holds bailes on Fridays and Saturdays, to guide me in finding relevant scholarship on certain topics and to build my movement vocabulary. Channeling support and knowledge from mentors outside of the colleges was important because they had access to information of the practice outside of college and could relate better to my dance background.

The tightly intertwined nature of my senior thesis dance piece that is rooted in my lived experiences and the lived experience of communities I connect with, requires me to handle my creative process with care, sensitivity, and an open heart. Through setting time to intentionally converse with myself on sensitive topics asking permission from elders, and navigating self-permission to explore practices, like Danza, outside of their traditional forms were a few of the intentions and agreements I made with myself for my research and choreographic process.
Practicing accountability and responsibility to myself and the communities I want to reach with my art, at times I denied myself access to regalia, setting Danzas on non-practitioners and doing Danzas I knew little about. Honoring and respecting those who came before me, those who exist today and those who learn from me was a practice of recognizing the disregard indigenous and native american traditions have faced. How Danza has been harmed and not contributing through my ignorance and entitlement.

To dance the styles, I incorporated in my piece, I took time researching them, all to different extents, and utilizing the knowledge my teachers and dance community have shared with me to inform the movement I put into the piece. Out of a concern that I would add to the harm and exploitation sacred dance practices if I was not intentional about my own practice in the Scripps studio and stage, my approach was rooted in transparency and testimony. Dance is not a privilege that every community gets to enjoy recreationally, dance has shown up as forms of resistance and preservation of a people and their autonomy. The right to experience joy and expression through the art of dance on our own terms has a history of enforced bans by colonial societies. Demonizing the practices of indigenous peoples. My concern stems from the history of the persecution and policing of indigenous peoples for practicing their cultural, religious, and ceremonial dances.

I value the intent to honor ancestral lineages of dance practices. This was especially important for Danza Azteca, due to its delicate history with restriction, I spent a generous amount of time reading up on its history as a practice of the Mexica tradition and having conversations with my mentor Alejandro Juarez, who reintroduced me to the Danza practice and invited me to be a member of the dance group, Danza Azteca Mexica Toyacaan. I’ve learnt that Danza Azteca and its practitioners for centuries were subjected to cultural erasure and genocide. Danza, which
is practiced in the Danza Azteca and La Tradición Conchera practice, has been historically criminalized, and prohibited by Spanish colonial rule. Being so, Danza became a practice of resistance, self-determination, and survival as much as it was a practice of spirituality. With such a difficult history of violence and suppression, the Danza practices require all practitioners to be respectful and to hold space for conversation on how best to carry on the tradition and its cultural significance.

**Research/Lit Review**

Having a quality understanding of the dance practices used in creating performance and demonstrations is a model of care and respect. However, it is especially important when the movement is culturally affiliated to a group of people who practice certain patterns traditionally. Not only is it a sign of respect to engage thoughtfully, but for practices that have been appropriated and erased, unlearning ideologies that misrepresent a practice is a method to right the wrongs. By setting a model of unlearning, new practitioners or guests of the dance practice can help stop the continuation of harm to the communities who the practices belong to, because they have worked in recognizing that certain historical perspectives they have learned were wrong about native American and indigenous practices.

Connecting the colonial harm of indigenous peoples in the Americas, the anti-Mexican rhetoric in the United States and the consistent pillaging of Latine America through research and researching the dance styles is an essential practice of care. A way to practice the movement and philosophy of the dances with respect to the ancestral line of practitioners and their histories. In researching and learning from community practitioners and researchers I practice the skill of unlearning any harmful rhetoric I may have consumed about these practices. Practicing preventative measures to not be an accomplice in the spread of false and white supremacists’
ideologies about dance practices of vulnerable communities. Therefore, here is a literature review of the work I have relied on to educate myself on the dance practices I embody and utilize in my work.

**Danza Azteca**

Claiming Aztec blood and lineage has been used as a form of empowerment for mixed communities in Mexico and in the United States especially among Chicano identifying communities. Anthony Shay dancer, choreographer, and author of, “Choreographing Identities: folk Dance, Ethnicity and Festival in the United States and Canada,” who said that “Dance, because of its embodied character, is an ideal vehicle for cultural representation,”(Shay 19) which relates to the role Danza Azteca had for the rise in Chicano identity and its formation. Chicanos looked for reasoning in their ancestry to validate their place in the United States, to have something to look to for empowerment and to be acknowledged as indigenous to the land to combat the xenophobic and anti-Mexican behaviors that have existed in the United States since the 1848 Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo. But claiming indigeneity without considering the intersections that exist in the Mexican identity can be harmful by continuing the appropriation and erasure of existing indigenous communities in Mexico and the United States who have their own identities and issues that are related to their indigenous lifestyle. Failing to acknowledge that indigenous peoples continue to be hyper vulnerable communities is a habit that upholds colonial practices of erasure. Colonial tools of erasure are upheld when we do not educate ourselves or open ourselves to conversations that discuss perspectives and testimonies from marginalized communities. The same for not unlearning harmful stereotypes. History books and digital media have showcased harmful stereotypes of the drunken-Indian, the blood thirty Apache or violent human sacrificing Aztec. or debunking bias myths and rhetoric about them is a
continuation of harm. How indigenous people from the Mexico region have been described as or labeled goes as far as the court room. Arturo Madrid author of the essay “In Search of the Authentic Pachuco” talks about the use of degrading and false stereotypes Anglo-American lawyers used to appeal to the court to criminalize and dehumanize Mexican American men. Arguing that because of elements of their, “cultural and biological background,” Mexican American men were “prone to violence” (Madrid 19). Madrid also cited the statement, “All [a Mexican] knows and feels is a desire to use a knife or some lethal weapon, his desire is to kill, or at least let blood,” because his indigenous identity as mestizo has been wrongfully understood and reduced to the savage rhetoric about indigenous and native american people (Madrid 19).

Learning from living practitioners and experienced teachers is one way I practice pattern prevention of continuing false ideas about indigenous practices and communities within my own personal practice, in using it choreographically and performing it outside of ceremonial spaces. Unlearning through applying a critical lens of observation, comparison and questioning is my other practice of prevention to no longer consume false information about indigenous and native American people.

Growing up I commonly observed many Mexican households decorate their homes with photos or ceramic art of the last Aztec ruler Cuahtemoc, the Aztec calendar or the very popular painting of the Aztec warrior carrying an unconscious princess, known as Popocatepetl and Iztaccíhuatl. Growing up I would claim Aztec blood because of my slim understanding that Mexico was once home and ruled by the Aztec empire and we were all descendants of the Aztec people who carried mixed Spanish and European blood. I knew nothing of co-existing indigenous tribes that lived in the now Mexico region or how they are present in society today. Practicing their own traditions, language, foods, clothing, and other daily life practices. In
conversations I’ve had prior to college, everyone who was from Mexico was from Aztec descent and that indigenous people no longer existed in modern times. What traditions we did do was a remembrance.

In identifying with the Aztec lineage, during my early teen years, I used to be a part of the Epiphany Catholic Church Danza group in El Monte, California. My late tiá Ofelia was a Danzante with the church and had been for years. Honoring her religious beliefs and dancing during special holidays like the birthday of la virgin de Guadelupe, Jesus’ mother Mary. The virgin Mary was an adaptation of Spanish Catholic religious belief to seduce the indigenous peoples of the regions of Mexico to become followers. Her identity was intertwined with the identity of Tonantzin\(^1\), the goddess of earth and corn, who was said to had appeared before Juan Deigo, an indigenous man, “at the site of a temple for Tonantzin before the Spanish destroyed it,” according to the article “Virgin of Guadalupe, first Indigenous apparition of Mary, remains sacred and towering figure among Latinos.” The author then shares how by intertwining these two figures, the figure of Tonatzin was able to be preserved and survive in spite of the attempts to erase her existence. So, celebrating the Virgin Mary with indigenous practices is telling of the intersections that exist in the Danza Azteca practice. And it was not just the movement that symbolized indigenous remembrance but wardrobe as well. My aunt dressed in a burnt red and gold traje\(^2\) decorated with Mexica art, symbols and design, her headdress was the same color as her suit but what really made the outfit stick out were the peacock feathers that lined the headdress making the piece 4 feet long and 3 feet tall.

\(^1\) Nahuatl for “our mother”
\(^2\) Spanish for suit.
It was through my tiá, that I became involved in the Danza tradition through the church. And from what I have come to learn, is that the Danza I practiced and performed was a variant of la Tradición Conchera. La Tradición Conchera style of Danza exists through Catholic beliefs and according to author Jennie Luna, “The Tradición Conchera emerges from the pre-Cuauhtemoc roots of the sacred dance traditions of central Mexico as a product of history and cross pollination that occurs with the Catholic belief system,” which was a direct result of the religious and land driven conquest in the southern region of the Americas by Spanish conquistadors and the Catholic Church (Luna 47). Outside of the Catholic church exists Danza Azteca or Danza Mexica Learning that the Aztec label, I claimed so dearly was a name given by the Spanish conquistadors. The act of renaming an entire population of people was an assertive demonstration of dominance and superiority. By renaming areas, people, ideas, the power of knowing is taken from people, and they are forced to learn the ways of the self-proclaimed superior group. Knowing the names that indigenous populations identified themselves with is an important practice in recognizing the autonomy of a group of people. There is value in the unlearning and learning of appropriate truths because it demonstrates respect and integrity towards communities who have been robbed of it. As well as recognizing the complexity of naming and the intersections where naming for the purpose of dehumanizing or exemplifying superior can be turned by the appointed inferior group into language of reclamation. For example, the term Aztec or Azteca was an appointed term meant to denigrate a language and the people it belonged to some, not all, Chicanos, Mexicans, Mexico, and Nahua folk continue to use the word in positive and reformative ways. Hence the Danza Azteca and Aztec inspired practices. Practicing a malleable vocabulary pushes the conversation and practice of inclusivity, awareness, and ground-level reparative methods provides the plausibility that harmful rhetoric is
not being continued to the extent in which they have existed in history and common knowledge. Tackling labels and what is or isn’t correct is tedious. So, it is important to be open to conversation, learning and unlearning, not to find the correct label, but to be aware the numerous identities communities align with or that best describe them during a time and place.

Scholars Mario Aguilar and Jennie Luna on the Danza practice do not emphasize the vital role of labeling and naming but in their research about the history of the Danza and the indigenous people of the central area of Mexico in which the practice claims roots in, it is apparent that areas of labeling, the practice of Danza and the narratives of indigenous communities have all been skewed by incorrect and appropriated history telling.

On the topic of labels among indigenous peoples who practice Danza, author Mario Aguilar in his dissertation, Rituals of Kindness: The Influence of the Danza Azteca Tradition of Central Mexico on Chicano-Mexcoehuani Identity and Sacred Space, uses the term Indigenous in his work to refer to the Indigenous people of Mexico according to Nahuatl language and uses Mexcoehuani to reference all the indigenous people who have roots in the region of Mexico. Mexcoehuani means “someone who has arisen, come out of (or come from) Mexico” (Aguilar 9). During the conquest of land and Mexcoehuani people, who were the original inhabitants, experienced religious conquest of Catholic conversion and have their souls saved. Under the power and belief of the Catholic church, the Spanish enforced rules on Indigenous peoples that included prohibiting Indigenous communities from practicing their ceremonial and sacred dances. To survive the prohibition of movement and music, sacred practices were preserved by private and secret practice within homes or secluded spaces. Author Jennie Luna in her work, “La Tradición Conchera: Historical Process of Danza and Catholicism,” shares that some linkages have been found among families who were able to preserve certain spiritual practices
that date back to the pre-Cuauhtémoc era and it was owed to the hidden in-home practicing of the dances that took place during the Spanish colonial rule. Otherwise, it was fatal to be found engaging in Indigenous practices by Spanish authorities because “…individuals could be found burned alive at the stake,” for engaging in the spiritual, cultural practice of sacred dance (Aguilar 48). Practicing these sacred dances, maintaining the music rhythms and beats were punishable by death and yet today we see a variety of styles of the Danza prevailing.

Today, Danza is witnessing a growing community. One that feels empowered, connected, and supported through dance practice. Danza has offered many chicanos, mexicanas, mestizos and mexican americans a practice of self-determination and belonging while being in a country that denies your humanity and the right to live within its borders. While the whole country may not agree with this, it is evident through the historical events of forced removal of Mexican origin, Mexcoehuani, communities that we are community that is consistently told we do not belong.

Danza offers spiritual healing of the soul and spirit that continues to inherit trauma. Danza is a ceremonial practice that calls on the Nahuatl deities, the 8 directions, the natural elements, and living beings like animals. Our dances are named after animals and elements, or our movements channel them. El Fuego is a dance of endurance, channeling fire the body feels a burning sensation from the pace of the movement. A fast rhythmic drum accompanies this movement whose steps are fleeting. Danzantes will channel the ferocity of fire and its energy, as it channels for many other Danzas. The Danzas I personally know at the moment are La Paloma, El Vendado, El Permiso, El Fuego, and Ozomatli. Every dance is a prayer. El Permiso opens the ceremony, is danced before transitioning to another dance or passing the lead to another Danzante in the space. It also closes the ceremony out. The Danza asks permission from the
ancestors and the land, our mother earth, to let the Danzantes use the space. Acknowledging the four main directions of north, east, south, west, and the four main elements soil, fire, water, and air, through movement. For example, spins are representative of air. The prayer ends in a bow or kneel to the earth and to the sacred altar created for the ceremony.

**Baile Folklòrico/Mexican Folk Dance**

One of the most visible dance practices of Mexico, Baile folklòrico, recognizable by its dancers and their giant skirts from the Jalisco-region style of the Jarape Tapatío. Baile folklòrico, is arguably Mexico’s national dance, recognized by its global peers. Dancer, choreographer and researcher, Anthony Shay has argued that “[the] costumes and the jarabe tapatío have become regionalized representation of Jalisco and its principal city of Guadalajara, but above all they constitute the visual essence of all that is Mexico for both mexicans and mexican americans,” which is communicated to its audiences and venues. Olga Nájera Ramírez in her introduction of, “Social and Political Dimensions of Folklorico Dance: The Binational Dialectic of Residual and Emergent Culture,” would also agree that baile folklòrico dancers are justifiably, “public symbols of Mexican culture,” reflective of popular historical narratives of the different regions and states of the country along with their individual state heritage (Ramirez 5). The clothing that is used is representational of the patterns, fabrics and dyes that were brought to or from their regions. Some clothing was representational of the type of agriculture that took place, the gender norms, and social classifications. The movement of many of the folk dances in Mexico are paired with boots or heels for the very popular footwork of the zapateado. Zapeteado is a percussive movement shared by both gendered dancers of the baile folklorico dance form. In the piece “Braiding Wounds, Wearing Pride” zapateado was not directly used. A branch of the baile folklorico from Veracruz, Mexico, Jorocho, was what was used in a section of the dance piece
along with Jalisco styled skirt work. The Jorocho styled foot work is a swing-tap movement of the legs and feet. Where the legs are swinging across the body in attitude, tapping the opposite side of the floor with the opposite foot. The movement would be percussive if paired with boots or the baile folklorico shoes that have nails hammered at the bottom of the heels and front tip of the shoe. The movement is symbolic of the rural and ranch life who imitate the hoofed animals of their land like horses, bulls, and goats. With kick and swing motioned dance steps, it’s an imitation that forms the movement of this regional dance style.

**Themes in the piece**

Land Immigration:

My grandma, Maria Lourdes Solis, is from Guadalajara, Jalisco. She migrated when she was 18 years of age and crossed the border at 8 months pregnant, leaving her first born son with a friend of hers who was going to cross the border by car. Hearing her story of travel inspired the journey that takes place in the beginning of my piece. At the time of her crossing, she was 8 months pregnant with Diana Mesa. My grandma told me about the time she crossed the border. She struggled immensely to find a person who would take her across the border because she risked the possibility of giving birth during the travel. Coyotes, which are the people who help people cross the border through specific routes, were hesitant but finally one agreed. During these crossings she would have to stay alert to the coyotes’ warnings or signals. Sometimes needing to throw herself to the floor if the coyotes signaled that there were Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) officials nearby. ICE is also known as La Migra in many Spanish speaking communities. My grandma had to hike mountains and cross the Rio Grande River before making it to the desert.
My mother and grandmother are the women who inspired the mother and daughter spirits of my piece. Motherhood serves as the needle and thread that interweave the dance piece together and sets a storyline. However, the story of immigration and the hardships is not an individual narrative reserved for my family. It is shared life experience of my 1.5 generation and first-generation citizen Latine peers, it is a present narrative in the Chicanx/Latinx literature I engage with and a generational inheritance of many migrant communities coming from all backgrounds. For me it is directly linked to the individuals coming from Latin American countries. The stories of migration that I have heard, read, or witnessed shape how it shows up in my dance piece.

The desert is a symbolic landscape that determines life and death for many migrants from north, south and central America who enter the United States through the US-Mexico borders into Arizona, California, New Mexico, and Texas. Although migrants from these regions are expected to travel through mountains, rivers and oceans, the desert terrain is known to be the point where many migrant lives are claimed. The International Organization of Migration (IOM) has recorded, “…686 deaths and disappearances of migrants on the US-Mexico border in 2022, making it the deadliest land route for migrants worldwide on record,” with almost half of those deaths being attributed to the extreme conditions of the deserts which the IOM shared were the Chihuahuan and Sonoran deserts. The Chihuahuan desert covers the southwestern part of the United States and the northern central parts of Mexico. Many immigrants coming through the US-Mexico border confronts the journey through the desert including my non-paternal grandma and paternal father.

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3 1.5 generation means children who migrated to the United States during their adolescences.
Religion and Spirituality

Performing the Catholic religion and the spiritual beliefs of Aztec deities is a complex and difficult theme that takes place in the thesis dance piece. Performed is the Sign of the Cross prayer associated with Christianity. While I am no longer a follower of the faith the blessing in my piece is a symbol of protection to the loved one, that I grew up performing and to this day is performed by my grandmother to me. It is not only a symbol of protection but in other words, it is her way of showing and saying, “I love you”. The phrase of the blessing is, “In name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit,” and is completed with an “Amen,” by the recipient of the blessing. It can be done to you or by you. The phrase is performed with the accompaniment of hand that marks the forehead, the chest, the right shoulder, the left shoulder and sealed with a kiss to the hand. Through the Danza practice, spiritual faith is performed.

Hair Braiding

Braiding hair is both a physical and metaphorical act of love, care, and patience. Its practice has been passed down from great grandmother to grandmother to mother to child forming a, “intergenerational family bond” (Montoya Christine Grant 179). Through a practice as simple as hair braiding, a generational tie exists between the people who carry on the practice. Often time during hair braiding the hair braider who is usually older, would talk about a story they like, or give advice on something currently going on in their lives or something that has passed and during the braiding time, there’s a debrief and reflection practice. The content of these interactions that happen over hair braiding are passed along too.

From the American Indian Law Review Journal authors Margaret Montoya, Christine Zuni Cruz, and Gene Grant wrote an essay in interview format on the relationship of performance and testimony sharing, “we are intertwining stories much like when you weave a braid; we are
intertwining stories and experiences,” (Montoya Christine Grant 176). And leaning on this idea, of how strands of people and their lived experiences exist on their own, they can also encounter one another and have a relationship of commonality and co-existence. Working to tell stories where there are intersections where they met with common interests and then go to telling their individual narratives that deserve their own space and time for.

**Reflection**

**Rehearsal Process**

I lead the rehearsal processes both in the fall and spring semester with care and sensitively because the piece was covering difficult conversations that I was struggling with. I wanted to be conscious of how my thoughts and ideas may impact the members of my cast. So, I practiced opening the rehearsal space with a check-in question and questions related to the piece. They were to help guide conversation that informed the themes and emotions that would be channeled for the sections of the dance. Some examples of the questions were:

How do you define your origin story and how does it contribute to the formation of your present-day identity?

How do you grapple with identity crises?

What significance, if any, do your ancestors have to you?

What is a song that resonates with a significant moment in your life?

These questions helped the dancers find a way to connect to the themes or emotions they were going to be channeling on stage. With the topics of immigration, conformity, violence, rejection, healing, and celebration, I talked about where I was coming from in the movement and
encouraged dancers to pull from their own lived experiences to imagine what the piece is trying to convey through their own lens.

Costuming

Most of the costumes that were worn on stage by the dancers were apart of my wardrobe. The clothing was tops, skirts, pants, and dresses that I had bought or gifted prior to the making of the piece. Many of the items I used in my weekly rotation of outfits. When my mom came to see the piece performed, she immediately asked me about the clothing and if they were mine. Telling me that she had picked it up quickly, remembering the times she had seen the clothes on me. Using the clothes that I wore was a way in which I affirmed that I was not performing a made-up narrative or a lived experience I was not personally connected to. It was also to assert that this was not a story about the past. The Danzante and the mother are present in us still and we are living Mexi’ca and Nahua people. Our clothes are not the past and neither are we. The use of my clothes was a testimony and a statement of pride and visibility.

The folklorico skirts were generously borrowed to me from mothers I know in my home city, Pomona. Their daughters were folklorico dancers and when I asked if they knew anyone who had skirts I could use for my project, they offered their own to me. Using skirts from my community was intentional as well. It is a demonstration of community care that is taught to me by my elders from my community, which also informs the care and love I have for this piece and the stories that are being told. Their skirts carry their presence to the stage and the presence of their daughters.

Every piece the Danzante wore went through a process of earning. One of my good friends and maestro, Alejandro Juarez shared with me. That my ayyotes, my bandana, the
copalli I burn, and the fan and rattle I carry are sacred items I was gifted or encouraged to buy after dedicating time to practice. After my first full completion of the beginners Danza classes Alejandro gifted me a red bandana, a weaved fan and a bag of copalli, the palo santo incense. After learning and performing four Danzas in practice I bought my ayoyotes from the elder, Sergio Ruiz. Danzante and maestro in East Los Angeles. My rattle was something I purchased to commemorate my first pow wow in Pomona that took place at Tony Cerda Park.

Braiding Wounds, Wearing Pride

This piece was formed for my own healing purposes. To confront the themes in my life that have been significant in how I viewed the world and how I viewed myself. But it was also supposed to be a piece where my fellow Latine peers and indigenous relatives could seek understanding and representation. I carried a lot of fear, doubt, and anxiety that my piece would not be well received or understood. I questioned the place it should be performed, the dancers who should be involved and the movement that should create the piece. Much of this tug-of-war was a conversation with myself and mentors on when I should ask for permission and when I could give myself permission. Knowing that I was doing what I could to represent the dance styles with care and the story with sensitivity. Professor Kevin Williamson reassured me that I can give myself permission too. And for the fear that the audience would not understand the message of my piece he said, in other words, the audience does not need to be an expert on your piece to appreciate it. My piece was intentionally made to make visible the silent narratives of trauma, and to simultaneously erase the narrative that indigenous people and marginalized communities only live in a medium of grief. By incorporating celebration to the end of the piece gave the audience a chance to feel compassion for the themes of harm and struggle and then feeling excited for the growth and perseverance of the ways the struggle is surpassed.
Conclusion

Care and sensitivity are not conditional practices or perspectives. I believe all communities and their traditions deserve to be regarded in research, practice, observation, and commentary, with respect and integrity. Honoring the knowledge they encompass, knowing that histories are stored in movement, music, and the generations of people they are passed down through. Honoring dance practices is protecting histories of communities, villages, and civilizations even. This thesis is about the people as much as it is about the movement of some of the dance practices used in the piece “Braiding Wounds, Wearing Pride”. Thinking of the people who suffered discrimination and an impediment on their human rights, taking precautions with bringing Danza into the institutional space of a college campus was essential to the choreographing process. The introspective work was just as important as the historical background research because the nature of the Danza practice is about the spiritual and personal relationship with the self, and the elements of the natural and spiritual world. Without conversation, gaps would have occurred, and harm could have prevailed in the practice of bringing Danza, baile folklorico and American dance together on a stage. But in these paths of work silence should not be tolerated, and in every space of dance conversations should be taking place, questions should be asked, and unlearning should be a consistent practice to uplift the silent narratives that exist in dance knowledge in the United States. Especially regarding ceremonial dance practices that are used for prayer and are sacred to a people. Danza is not a disposable art form or a practice with no significant meaning behind the movement. It has a rich history and deep connection to a way of life of the Mexica people including several other native american and indigenous communities who partake in the practice and prayers of Danza. Those
who choose to pick it up for life or for practice should take the time to learn its sacred history and understand it in its spiritual context.
Bibliography


