

Popular culture as healing: Baile, musica norteña, y muralismo in Las Vegas, Nuevo Mexico

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Mexico's indigenous populations and their descendants experienced over 400 years of historical trauma beginning with the Spanish colonization of Mexico and later as the U.S. expanded and colonized Mexico's northern territories in the 19th century. Embedded in this Westward Expansion were usurpation of Mexican lands, range wars, racism and lynchings, supported by mob violence and Euroamerican style injustice. Today, trauma continues for descendants -- racial profiling, deportations, the banning of our history, and denigration of the culture and language. Las Vegas in el norte de Nuevo Mexico, northern New Mexico, is a Hispano-Chicano cultural place that experienced colonization, so detrimental in its extent, that residents have dubbed this a holocaust. Today colonization continues covertly in the guise of gentrification of cultural places and marginalization of Hispanos-Chicanos from natural resources. With a history of resistance, activism, an insulating culture, and resilience, el norte de Nuevo Mexico has weathered devastation, creating a relatively inter-generational, culturally based, emotionally healing environment. In contemporary Las Vegas, Hispano-Chicano cultural resistance is manifested through *baile*, dance, *musica norteña*, music from the north, underlined by *Español*, the Spanish language, and public art *muralismo*, muralism. Key here is the generating of a strong, spontaneous, grassroots proactive healing to counter a legacy of victimization. [Article copies available for a fee from The Transformative Studies Institute. E-mail address: journal@transformativestudies.org Website: <http://www.transformativestudies.org> ©2013 by The Transformative Studies Institute. All rights reserved.]

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INTRODUCTION

Since the devastation of Mexico in the 16th century, the colonial machine of Spain and later the U.S. overtly and covertly, relentlessly, and systematically attacked the inherited values, culture, history, language, land, and place of its victims and their indigenous and mestizo descendants. Westward Expansion into Mexico's northern territories, now the U.S. southwest, was an extension of this destruction propelling our *antepasados*, ancestors, from communal based social and economic systems to deepening dependency on consumerism, individuation, and, adaptation to the U.S. culture, encouraging the rejection of our own.

The victims of Westward Expansion, their descendants, progressive historians, and activists have perceived this segment of U.S. history as colonization, a time of seizure of lands, displacement, genocide and the destruction of cultures (Aragon y Ulibarri, 1999; Carrigan & Webb, 2003; Drinnon, 1980). It was essentially a holocaust (Zentella, 2006) a term linked to devastation, untold suffering (Said, 1979), and "catastrophic stress situations" (van der Kolk, 1987, p. 156). Such historical events affected populations of *Mexicano*, Mexican descent in the southwest – including Hispanos-Chicanos now living in Las Vegas, *Nuevo Mexico*, New Mexico and its environs. This latter area, popularly referred to as *el norte*, the north, is part of a geographical network of rural towns and villages located north of the tortilla curtain, Santa Fe, Nuevo Mexico (R. Ulibarri, personal communication, November 29, 2012). Consequences of historical catastrophe facing these areas are lingering poverty, disenfranchisement, emotional assault, continued dwindling of ancestral lands and Euroamerican outsider gentrification of Hispano-Chicano traditional spaces (Knowlton, 1986, 1985; Zentella, 2006), at times occurring with the assistance of Hispano-Chicano opportunism.

Among *la gente*, the people of *el norte*, a psychological resiliency developed to cope with a legacy of catastrophe. This resiliency is described in the substantive theory of Hispano relationship to land (Zentella, 2006). Its conceptual framework reflects historical attachment and loss among this population as -- *la tierra es madre*, the land as mother, *el desmadre*, the demothering of a culture, *our culture is imprisoned*, and *resiliency*. These conceptual threads explain social and psychological processes, or the steps that this population has taken to cope with past colonization and their evolution as a cultural group (Zentella, 2006). Such processes reflect the Hispano experience, from

perceiving the land as a giver of life, to sustaining the assault of Western Expansion and colonization, to problem solving loss of land and place.

For this population, one product of coping with catastrophe and practicing resilience is a popular, often spontaneous cultural *resistencia*, resistance that continues to evolve today. This resistance is described in this paper as *baile*, dance, *musica nortena*, music from the north, and *muralismo*, mural art. Such symbolic, ritualistic behaviors serve as *testimonios*, testimonies of our experiences, provide emotional and spiritual healing, restore an injured integrity, impact interpersonal interaction between individuals -- the group, and place -- and reinforce culture and identity (Kirkmayer, 2004; Zentella, 2010, 2012).

A WORD ABOUT ETHNO-CULTURAL IDENTITY LABELS

The term Chicano was adopted during the *Movimiento*, the Chicano Youth Movement, circa late 1960s, by some Hispanos in el norte. Others retained the identity tag of Hispano, or Hispanic. Added to the population of el norte are Chicano interlopers, migrating from the East and West coasts of the U.S. The hyphen signifies that peoples using one or both ethno-cultural identity tags live in el norte. Because of the geo-cultural-generational connection between Las Vegas and surrounding environs, Las Vegas and el norte is used interchangeably. The term *La Raza*, the Race -- after Vasconcelos' (1997) concept of *La Raza Cosmica* -- describes an overarching *mestizo*, mixed race, population, descendants of the Mexican, living throughout the U.S, particularly in the southwest.

A LITTLE HISTORY

The predominantly Hispano-Chicano rural town of Las Vegas sits on a portion of the Las Vegas Grandes Land Grant established in 1835, originally 431,653 acres. Historically land grants in Nuevo Mexico, and in the southwest in general, were given by Spanish and Mexican governments to settlers of the northern Mexican territories. Life on the grants was sustained by collective and individual agriculture and access to natural resources, rock, wood, pasture, water (deBuys, 1985; Ebright, 1994). Generational ties between family and community, spirituality, and *Español*, the Spanish language, backbone of the culture, formed the cultural base of this system. Land grants provided a relative self sufficiency which made collective Hispano resilience to adversity

possible, similar to collective, indigenous landed communities that existed when there were no borders between the native populations of the Americas.

The beginning of the demise of grants and private land ownership came in the form of land grabs, murder and lynchings of *Mexicanos*, Mexicans, supported by Texas Ranger terror during 19th century Westward Expansion. The statement, “the lynching of Mexicans underlines the centrality of class and race in the American colonization of the American West” (Carrington & Webb, 2003, p. 417) describes the era quite well. In the case of Nuevo Mexico, atrocities coincided with military occupation by General Kearney in 1846. Both approaches were part of the colonization process occurring in towns of el norte like Las Vegas, leading to the annexation of Nuevo Mexico into the American Union in 1848. Perhaps as a tourist attraction, the city fathers have seen it appropriate for this legacy of conquered status to be memorialized in a plaque situated in the plaza of the town. The topic of occupation however is rarely absent from contemporary conversations among Hispano-Chicano local residents about land and water (Zentella, 2006, 2009).

Responding to the annexation of the southwest into the American Union, the infamous disregard of Mexican land rights stipulated in the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo of 1848, and to the coming of the railroad that brought capitalism to the region, Nuevo Mexicano communities engaged in various forms of popular protest and cultural resistance; these have not ceased (Aragon y Ulibarri, 1999; Correia, 2010; Ebright, 1994, 2004). Contemporary cordoning off of lands by the Forest Service, environmental restrictions, and fencing off of resources have been challenged by Hispano-Chicano activism and court litigation (Ebright, 1994, 2004; Jordan, 2010; Tijerina, 1978). Popular resistance includes other forms, more cultural and insular in nature, which reinforce the culture and heal the spirit.

HISTORICAL CULTURE

While the Hispano culture of el norte developed in relative isolation for over a century, its connection to Mexico as a northern territory encouraged an influx of music and dance styles from the mother country. *Baile* forms, dance forms, such as the polka and the *vals*, waltz, are remnants of the Austrian influence in Mexico and of German immigration to Nuevo Mexico during the 19th century, the *varsoviana*,

similar to a mazurka, has its origins in Poland. Popular Nuevo Mexicano musica mostly sung in Español has historically been a key part of the culture, evolving into a contemporary proliferation of popular musica norteña bands. Band members are family and friends within the Hispano-Chicano community, their skill having been handed down from generation to generation, their music recorded with CDs sold at the bailes, played on Spanish language radio stations in el norte, and vigorously danced to at community dances. Baile norteño in el norte and music forms connected to Mexico, are culturally entangled and cannot be isolated one from the other. These are at the *corazon*, the heart, of the culture. This tradition has often been incorporated in our murals.

Murals are a large scale variation of codices, indigenous texts that graphically recorded cultural and historic events, before, during, and after the European conquest of the Americas. This legacy continued in the Mexican mural movement which appears to have peaked in the 1940s, with the work of Rivera, Siquieros, and Orozco. It resurfaces during the Movimiento in el norte, reflected in the murals at New Mexico Highlands University in Las Vegas, whitewashed by administrators as a response to student militancy. Still the mural travels, becoming part of our *barrios*, communities, throughout the southwest. While in el norte the legacy appears to have remained relatively dormant for some decades, at times surfacing as adolescent graffiti, in 2011 it resurfaced as public art, in the form of a community mural in Las Vegas, depicting a people's history of Nuevo Mexico (Zentella, 2012).

Embedded in baile, musica, and murals is a collective psychological process, based on an inherent cultural memory of collective and native knowledge. Such cultural forms, maintained through socialization and custom and through initiation and practice are our ancestral legacies.

EMOTIONAL DESMADRE

Human emotion connected to the devastation left by colonization is expressed by contemporary Hispanos-Chicanos in el norte as sadness, anger, hurt, bitterness, resignation, feeling disrespected, frustration, and nostalgia about *como era antes*, the way it was before (Zentella, 2006). Intergenerational loss of land, place, language, and community are dubbed a *madrazo*, a severe, deadly blow, a *desmadre*, demothering (Zentella, 2006). Feelings of victimization and imprisonment within a dominant culture that demeans, denigrates, wounds and does not validate

the culture are linked to the *desmadre* (Zentella, 2006). A Hispano male, descendant of eight generations in el norte de Nuevo Mexico described the loss in this way,

I think it's a sense of loss; loss is a kind of bereavement People that are sensitive have commented about that in northern New Mexico, there's a kind of sadness about all of these events, como *chingaron las propiedades* [how they ruined the properties], it's a kind of *desmadre*, a *desmadre* bringing a kind of disorder to a people, and when I say people, I'm talking about an agrarian culture that existed in New Mexico probably till the 1930s (p. 222).

Coping with the loss for contemporary Hispanos-Chicanos in el norte de Nuevo Mexico has taken various forms, in some instances it has further devastated communities with widespread addiction to heroin (Reichelt, 2001; United States Department of Justice, 1999) and other substances, yet, family, spirituality, and cultural rituals have provided protection and succor (Zentella, 2006).

After the decline of the *Movimiento*, late 1960s, early 1970s, activism in el norte did not die but took a more individual, personal meandering direction that offered healing to the self and the community. Often these directions gravitated toward litigation and community activism (Ebright, 1994, 2004; Martinez, 2013). In Las Vegas, pride in a strong grassroots history, the use of *Español* by older generations, popular *musica y baile*, and graphics hold a central place in the Hispano-Chicano cultural life of the town (Zentella, 2010, 2012).

Individual coping approaches that encourage healing appear to stem from of a deep emotional pain. A *santero*, maker of saints, in Las Vegas explained how he handles thinking of his personal experience with loss of place, experienced as a young boy when the modest family home in Santa Fe, Nuevo Mexico was condemned by the city fathers, demolished, the land used to build a major thoroughfare. The family was evicted with a meager sum as payment, causing great hardship and forced migration. "What I do is to try to forget about it. I just do something else, get busy, I like to carve *santos* [saints] while I'm carving I think of a lot of things that's a way of therapy" (Zentella, 2006, p. 218).

The Hispano-Chicano popular culture of el norte reinforces a sense of self, of cultural roots bringing the community together, creating empowering spaces that re-affirm who we are, reinforcing a collective pride in being among one's own milieu of *Español*, culture, a history of struggle, and *mestizo* ethnicity. In this context, many become one and

together *nuestra historia*, our history, is strengthened and preserved. This is especially true for those whose ancestral place was fragmented, and their identity disjointed when the Treaty of Guadalupe, 1848, created artificial borders where there had once been none (Zentella, 2006). The retelling of grassroots history often recalls painful emotional experiences based on perceived injustices across generations. As issues of historical trauma are exposed and explored within psychological, historical, and activist contexts, it becomes apparent that holocausts and desmadres, while traumatically devastating populations, impact subsequent generations. The descendants, heirs of the trauma, are left to cope with both memories and consequences (van Gelder, n.d.). It is the heirs that also create healing.

Current legislation such as Arizona's House Bill 2281 banning Chicano Studies attempts to separate us from an overarching history (Santa Cruz, 2010) that extends throughout the southwest. Still, our *historia* and traditions envelope us. The numerous Chicano murals on southwest barrio walls attest to the cultural dynamism behind their creation. This same energy resists separation. Popular regional *musica*, *baile* and *salones de baile*, dance halls, are universal throughout the southwest. An appearance by the king of the accordion, Flaco Jimenez, draws cheering, dancing crowds whether in *Tejas*, Texas, or Nuevo Mexico.

POPULAR CULTURE AS ANTIDOTE

In anthropology, culture "takes place at the intersection of local experience and 'larger impersonal systems'" (White, 2008, p. 14). In this sense, culture is associated with beliefs and values, expressed through popular cultural practices, products, and performance. Popular culture can reflect an understanding of the political climate of the time. It can express how safe a population feels within their micro community, in relation to the outer macro society. Cultural artistic expression can either cloud over or expose political undercurrents. In this sense, the present political climate and resistance to it is reflected in Hispano-Chicano popular, cultural expression in *el norte*.

Historically dance is characterized as a universal ritual riddled with symbols. Dancing is a vehicle for social, cultural bonding, and in-group belongingness; sometimes the group is gender specific as in the Middle East where men traditionally dance together. At other times the genders

intermix, depending on cultural protocols. Traditional steps are learned through elder modeling, with other cultural influences woven into the dance as its form evolves across generations. In Las Vegas dancing to our musica represents more than the evolution of a ritual; it symbolizes resistance to those who would have us abandon our culture and identity *a la* Samuel Huntington (2004). The baile is a celebration of who we have been and who we are. For us, the celebration ignites the moment that the body and the music merge, amidst a sea of brown faces. In this context, we are not wounded but empowered. While on the surface dance appears to have little relationship to politics, various forces are at work when we enter the salon de baile.

Dance is recognized as a popular cultural community ritual, and a social psychological process. Dance holds an essential place in general health functioning in traditional cultures, and encourages interaction between individuals, and between the dancers, their ancestors, cultural place, and identity. Dance re-awakens the *volkgeist*, a community's inner life and spirit, promoting healing of personal and historical trauma (Gray, n.d; Leseho & Maxwell, 2010). Populations that have experienced the oppression of colonization or natural disasters have exhibited "a spiritual force that fosters resiliency and the ability to endure" (Gray, n.d., para. 3). While working in Haiti, Gray, a dance therapist, noted that dance and rhythm based rituals and traditions of Haiti served therapeutic functions. Resilience developed as a product of "a creative, collective process that mirrors and honors the roots of the Haitian culture [through dance]" (para. 9). Music evolving from popular culture "tells us something about the complex relationship between culture and politics" (White, 2008, p. 13). In personal conversations, Hispanos-Chicanos have commented on the therapeutic value of attending los bailes in Las Vegas, and the connection of these to culture and politics,

The dances help you to relieve stress. Your body relaxes. At the dances, you meet people that are from your culture. They speak our language we have the same experiences having lived in small ranching communities even though they might have moved to Las Vegas because they lost their land; this has to do with past and present machinations of Anglo [Euroamerican] land speculators. The music is part of our culture, what one grew up with. This helps

you to feel better about yourself (F. Trujillo, personal communication, May 24, 2012).

For Hispanos-Chicanos, annexation into the American Union in 1848 instigated the loss of a Hispano way of life, superimposing an Euroamerican model and encouraging a Hispano self-perception of "a foreigner in my own native land" (Weber, 1973, p. 178). Yet, the former northern Mexican territories continue to be a cultural refuge for Mexicano heritage descendants. Here, resistance was and continues to be expressed in the lament of the *corrido*, ballads echoing the popular spirit and originating at a time when to engage in insurgency against encroachment was a deadly undertaking (Carrigan & Webb, 2003). The *corrido*, developed during the mid 19th century (Lamadrid, 1997) in both Mexico and the southwest, continues to be a repository of nuestra historia and is a popular form of baile. Some contemporary corridos describe the status of land issues in el norte as unresolved and pending. *Nuevo México Hasta Cuàndo*, Until When New Mexico (Mondragon, 2001), asks when will the land be returned? Other corridos are based on the land grants lost to U.S. government and the swindling of lands from Hispano hands by Euroamericans and rich Hispanos. *El Corrido de Rio Arriba*, the Ballad of Rio Arriba (Martinez, Flores, & Martinez, 1993), describes Rio Arriba, an area in el norte where the land grant struggle, spearheaded by Reies Lopez Tijerina (1978), peaked in the late 1960s, coinciding with El Movimiento. Land litigation by land grant heirs continues; corridor lyrics point fingers at unforgotten injustice.

Historically corridos have been represented by two camps, the *colaboracionistas*, collaborators and the *militantes*, militants (Rodriguez-Puertolas, 1975). Those ascribing to the former could have also shown support for the Korean War and the Republican Party. Militant corridos appeal to those perceiving the Hispano-Chicano experience as one of racism and lost territory. Popular music can support the powerful, or express resistance. Corridos have recognized prominent activists, Cesar Chavez, Reies Tijerina and Corky Gonzalez, and folk personalities, outlaws, womanizers and *narcotraficantes*, drug traffickers -- Gavino Barrera, Juan Charrasquedo, Camelia la Tejana. Yet, for the dancer, the colaboracionista and militante corridor perspectives merge as they are vigorously danced to on Sunday afternoons at the Veterans of Foreign Wars lodge in Las Vegas! Wall plaques and banners memorializing veterans of the Vietnam War and Desert Storm blend with corridos about Zapata and the *Revolucion*, the Mexican Revolution, harassment by the *migra*, immigration, and the Mexicano immigrant's experience of

isolation. On the dance floor, we ponder our place as dancers within the uncomfortable relationship of foreign war, our own colonization, loss of land, and our efforts to stop the loss. Our thoughts are quickly distracted by the music.

Murals, whether created by one individual or many, have been used as a group and community level therapeutic intervention to address particular psychological needs, promoting healing and growth (Rockwood Lane & Graham-Pole, 1994). The mural serves as an intra-generational space for expression, education, observation, reflection, and comparison (Fuentes, 2011). Mexican school children tour el *Palacio Nacional*, the National Palace in Mexico City, home of some spectacular Rivera murals, to learn of their turbulent history, to be reminded of colonization, resistance, uprising, and revolution. Their southwestern *primos*, historical cousins, internalize the blended symbols and images of Mexican roots and Chicanismo painted on barrio walls.

Mexican muralists, ancestors of southwest muralists, developed the medium alongside the agrarian Revolution of 1910. Decades later, Diego Rivera captured in his murals Mexican historical and social themes and a *volksgeist* embedded in uprisings and revolts. Rivera's (1945) Market in Tenochtitlan, recounts the rich cultural economy of ancient Mexico, giving a glimpse of *como era antes*. The Liberation of the Peon (1931) is a reminder of the torturous treatment of indentured laborers under the peonage system established by the Spanish. Class Struggle (1935), describes the collusion of capitalism, church, and the military in the suppression of the working class, popular struggle. Reading a recent history of Central America one can see that not much has changed in political partnerships (Booth, Wade & Walker, 2010)!

The barrio mural is an invitation to interact, to compare the images to ourselves. We pass them by on the way to work, to buy milk and tortillas. We intertwine with the symbolic images of Azteca gods, farm worker flags, *pachucos*, zootsuiters, and the *conjunto*, Tejas style band, playing our musica; later we listen to that same music on the radio and in the local salones de baile.

Despite onslaughts on Hispano-Chicano culture by the dominant society, the youth of Las Vegas, adult mentors, and Casa de Cultura, a cultural community organization, created together a form of resistance, a grassroots social justice that counters historical denigration of who we are (Zentella, 2006). They created a mural, A People's History of El Norte, a collective effort that acknowledges *nuestra historia*. This mural is not themed to reflect the southwest fantasy that the mainstream media has created. It is not parallel in content to the advertising once promoted

by the Topeka and Santa Fe Railroad in the late 19th century, advertising that attracted tourists and artists, contributing to the evolution of the art colony in Nuevo Mexico, and the romanticizing of Westward Expansion (Rodriguez, 1989; Waters, 1970). The mural is also not a reflection of the territorial fantasies living in the minds of the current business community, used to entice tourists to contemporary Las Vegas. Instead, the mural makes it clear that el norte de Nuevo Mexico and southern Colorado, once part of Nuevo Mexico, is *not* rooted in the images of Teddy Roosevelt, and the Rough Riders, among which were Hispanos, who, unfortunately, along with Teddy, contributed to the colonization of other brown peoples! While Roosevelt and the Rough Riders are icons used to promote tourism, the mural tells that la gente have their own dynamic story that speaks of *orgullo*, pride, resistance, resiliency, and proactivity in the face of past and present encroachment of place (Zentella, 2012).

The mural tells nuestra historia. In light of the opposition and the banning of ethnic studies and the placement of our literature on the banned books list -- which although taking place in Arizona schools is a slap in the face to La Raza -- la gente continue to create outlets for their stories, recording them for posterity in writing, song, dance, oral tradition, and art (Biggers, 2012). These forms describe how we see the world, very different from the Eurocentric, official version that rationalizes our colonization because of our backward, subaltern status, because of our “weaker race” (Roosevelt, 1899, p. 157).

There is a strong relationship between the People’s History of El Norte and our fast disappearing land and gentrification of place. The mural incorporates Nuevo Mexicano grassroots, land rights activist leaders, members of Las Gorras Blancas and Reies Lopez Tijerina, often denigrated and seldom mentioned if not absent, from the average American history school textbook. The connection between past land loss and our current efforts to counter gentrification and keep existing Hispano-Chicano land holdings prompts us to ponder, “How did we lose our land and how have we kept the land we have?” “What patterns are being repeated?” “If you have no sense of your history then you can’t recognize when things are happening again” “With no sense of self or place there is no cultural clarity” (Zentella, 2010, p. 10). Embedded in these musings is a pride that encourages youth, our next generation of leaders, to carry the torch, to continue the struggle for justice that our antepasados initiated in Nuevo Mexico during the land grab era. This is evident in the large number of community youth that contributed to the mural.

A secure sense of self, of historical place, and pride held by the Hispano-Chicano community is evident in the mural. It is part of a healing process created by la gente. The mural is a healing balm for our souls because it is *not* a product mandated by the dominant culture's liberal institutional policies, or facilitated by the paternalistic gentry. Rather this proactive grassroots healing enterprise is linked to collective memory, a memory heavy with artifacts, symbols, place, land, faces and language, given to us by our antepasados to continue and preserve our history and culture.

SNAPSHOTS OF THE BAILE DE DOMINGO

We are at the salon de baile on a Sunday afternoon to *tirar chancla*, to dance to the best local bands in el norte. Here, we become one dancer, Hispanos-Chicanos and the small Mexicano immigrant community. Some of us are related, are colleagues, neighbors, or are acquainted through regular attendance at the bailes. Couples, family members, single friends walk in, greet those already there, shake hands, kisses on the cheek, abrazos, hugs, jokes, laughter, radiant smiles. Some sit at their usual places others go straight to the dance floor; it does not matter if the song is almost over, the instinctive need to be enmeshed with the cultural beat coming from the band beckons us. The first time you are seen on the dance floor you are acknowledged by the group and the band members. You are recognized; you are part of the collective. If you are absent one Sunday, people notice.

On the floor, a kaleidoscopic pattern -- of light, dark brown faces, light/dark eyes, brown, light, gray hair, older, younger couples -- is created. A mixture of types, each representing a segment of our diverse community -- the smartly dressed, the *cholo*-like, wanna-be gangbangers wearing bandanas and sporting a bop to their step, and the once pachucos, with sunglasses and fedoras -- all part of our cultural mosaic. Then there are the older men with elegant black norteno hats, younger men wearing sneakers and baseball caps worn backwards, some dressed in biker gear, others sporting pointed boots from northern Mexico and oversized silver belt buckles. Each couple has a unique style of dancing -- constantly turning like tops, sidewinding. Hands held in various positions can be indicative of cultural roots, Mexicanos sometimes hold the woman's hand against the waist or back.

The music is vibrant, intensely emotional, strong norteno style, as strong as the mountains and soil of el norte. Mostly male voices sing in

melodious Español, of the pain of *traicion*, betrayal, the satisfaction of *venganza*, revenge, of *perdicion*, damnation, historical sketches of *hombres valientes*, brave men, of *tristeza*, the sadness of immigration, of separation from one's family and lover, of coyotes, of the stigma of being illegal. We dance a fast-paced corrido, circling, stepping, turning (Zentella, 2010), a vals, a *cumbia*, a salsa derivative, the two step, a polka, reminder of German immigration to el norte, then the varsoviana, an old timer's dance; not many couples get up for this one!

We are instruments, without the human element the music is incomplete. In this context, the dancers preserve the culture, musica, language, our mestizo ancestry, our links to one other. While dancing, friends stop to say hello, shake hands, give more hugs, then resume their smooth, stylish steps, singing along with the band, songs that our ancestors sang, songs we learned as children. The lyrics tell of the land, of agriculture, horse races, town fairs, revolutions, and love at first sight. They echo our popular history.

The electricity, the hypnotic energy between the dancers, the musica and the band, between the dancers themselves, prompts some of us to reflect momentarily, to hypothesize about our lives and the lives of those around us. The dancers on the floor, what are their stories, their futures? How do political agendas impact them, us, today, tomorrow? Arizona's State Bill 1070 upholding random immigration status checks of Mexican looking individuals looms very near; Arizona is our neighbor to the west (Valdez 2010). Will one of us get stopped as we drive close to the border? *Show me your papers!* Will we have to carry identity cards as Black South Africans once did, as Palestinians do now? What are the possibilities of our dances being raided by the migra in the near future, of our being deported like in the 1930s? Will we be repatriated? Will our musica be prohibited one day? There are too many of us in the southwest anyway! Cheech's Hollywood comedy, *Born in East L.A.* (Coleman & Marin, 1987) is not so funny anymore, *where were you born?* A change in tempo disrupts this line of thinking; we concentrate on the fancy, intricate turns instead. The music draws us into the rhythm, the beat, the words protect us conceptually from victimization within the aura of the baile.

As we dance, we step over injustice - over efforts to belittle us, to make us feel inferior and ignorant, to take away our language, to silence our history, our spirit. Through dance we create our own justice, superimposing it on the desmadre that occurred in the past and has not been forgotten. The lead singer gives a *grito*, a cry that comes from the soul, that lingering collective echo of our painful birth product of the

rape of our ancestral indigenous mother by the Spanish. It is a cry of pain that the enterprise of colonization made universal.

Our bailes are a joyful bonding of people, creating community, affirming culture and our Español, experiencing collective memory, reinforcing tradition, continuing ritual, practicing resistance toward unwanted total acculturation. We use language, musica, and our bodies to convey our emotions, worries, fears and hopes. Our musica affirms, acknowledges, mirrors who we are; the images in the songs are in our likeness. We do not need benevolent state sponsored mental health programs to teach us to use dance therapeutically!

Hispanos, Chicanos, Mexicanos from town or the little pueblitos surrounding Las Vegas: we are all here to de-stress, to take our minds off pressing community issues of lack of water and shrinking dollars. We are here to celebrate our *dia libre*, our day off. We have been dispersed, separated by historical events, systematically abused, but at this moment we are together, blending through the music; we are part of one long connected story that began in 16th century indigenous Mexico and continues to unfold today. On the dance floor, we are not separated by artificial, Manifest Destiny borders and treaty demarcations. On the dance floor the collectivity we form connects the threads of our antepasados to our own, it connects both sides of the Mexico – U.S. border, our cities, towns and villages. Our collectivity grasps at a cultural future and heals our spirits. We are conjurers; we practice the healing magic of our baile, our musica, our Español, our muralismo. We are our strength.

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