Dancing Mi Cultura: The Production of Ethnic and National Identity in Midwestern Mexican-Americans Through the Performance of Ballet Méxicano Folklórico

Katrina J. Frank

University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee

Follow this and additional works at: https://dc.uwm.edu/etd

Part of the Dance Commons, Latin American Studies Commons, and the Social and Cultural Anthropology Commons

Recommended Citation
https://dc.uwm.edu/etd/3404

This Thesis is brought to you for free and open access by UWM Digital Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in Theses and Dissertations by an authorized administrator of UWM Digital Commons. For more information, please contact scholarlycommunicationteam-group@uwm.edu.
DANCING MI CULTURA: THE PRODUCTION OF ETHNIC AND NATIONAL IDENTITY IN MIDWESTERN MEXICAN-AMERICANS THROUGH THE PERFORMANCE OF BALLET MÉXICANO FOLKLÓRICO

by

Katrina J. Frank

A Thesis Submitted in Partial Fulfilment of the Requirements for the Degree of Master of Science in Anthropology at The University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee

December 2023
ABSTRACT

DANCING MI CULTURA: THE PRODUCTION OF ETHNIC AND NATIONAL IDENTITY IN MIDWESTERN MEXICAN-AMERICANS THROUGH THE PERFORMANCE OF BALLET MÉXICANO FOLKLÓRICO

by

Katrina J. Frank

The University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee, 2023
Under the Supervision of Professor Thomas Malaby

This thesis studies how Mexican Americans living in the northwest suburbs of Chicago produce connections to their Mexican heritage and culture through the performance of ballet Mexicano folklórico. Through ethnographic interviews of current and former folklórico dancers, as well as participant observation of adult folklórico dance practices, I contextualize the experiences of the interviewees using the anthropological theories of habitus, continuous and discontinuous selves, double-consciousness, liminality, and collective effervescence, as well as the works of Simone de Beauvoir, Michel Foucault, and Frantz Fanon, with the discussion of folklórico as an art, and the concept of institutional use of dance as a form of soft power. Diasporic populations can frequently feel disconnected from the traditions and culture of their homelands, and may look to recreate those experiences in the places that they now call home. In this paper, I will be exploring how Mexican American use ballet folklórico and the studio they have enrolled in to create a space where they are free to learn and experience their ethnic culture, and in the case of several students, how they explore aspects of their own gendered lives within the context of Mexican culture. By analyzing the ways in which these students retain, construct, and maintain various parts of their identities through folk dance, a better understanding of Mexican culture and other ethnic minority cultures in the United States can be reached.
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to thank the Anthropology Department of the University of Wisconsin – Milwaukee for allowing me to pursue my degree with them, with a special thanks to my advisor, Dr. Thomas Malaby, for being an extraordinary mentor and never giving up on me, and the rest of my thesis committee, Drs. Gregory Carter and Bill Wood, for being excellent teachers and agreeing to go on this journey with me. I would also like to thank Dr. Bettina Arnold and her Spring 2022 section of the Professionalism in Anthropology course, for helping me to first develop my thesis idea and giving me a road map for my research. A massive thanks also needs to be extended to the members of the Sidequesters Discord sever, Dr. Malaby’s advisees, and my peers Wren Dalton, Ati Gürçay, Matthew Keracher, Luke Konkol, Joey Lara, Robin Little Jackson, Bobby Penner, Erica Phillips, Alannah Ray, Kelsey Roberts, and Brian Thomas for being my sounding board, safe space, and peer mentors. I also need to extend a “thank you” to Dr. Liv Stone for helping me to solidify my concept for this thesis and starting me out on my path, Dr. Gina Hunter for introducing me to ethnographic literature, and the rest of the Anthropology Department at Illinois State University for helping me to fall in love with the discipline of anthropology. The next person I need to thank is Alexis Lange, for being the most amazing best friend I could ever ask for and always being there as a shoulder to cry on, a space to vent frustrations, and most ardent cheerleader. I now need to thank La Escuela de Ballet Folklórico – Chicago, Olga Guerrero, all of my interviewees, and my entire dance class for agreeing to be a part of my project and welcoming into their space with both open arms and hearts – ¡los quiero a todos ustedes! I will also thank my sister, Bianca Frank, for never letting me give up on myself and supporting me along every step of the way and our small army of parakeets for keeping a smile on my face even during the hardest of times. Finally, I need to thank my mom, Juanita Frank, for being my guiding light, backbone of my support system, and the literal best mother in the world. This is for the both of us, Mom. I love you!
# TABLE OF CONTENTS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Abstract</td>
<td>ii</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Copyright</td>
<td>iii</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Acknowledgements</td>
<td>iv</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Table of Contents</td>
<td>v</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>List of Figures</td>
<td>vii</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>List of Tables</td>
<td>viii</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>CHAPTERS</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Introduction</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Folklórico in Chicago</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>⬢ La Escuela de Ballet Folklórico – Chicago</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>⬢ Latinx Populations in Chicago</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>⬢ Midwestern Latinx Populations in Literature</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Power of Dance in Other Diasporas</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>⬢ Filipino Folk Dance</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>⬢ Emergence of Irish Riverdance</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>⬢ Dance and the Nationalist Project</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Literature Review</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>⬢ Constructions of Self</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>⬢ Liminality and Place Making</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>⬢ The Art of Folklórico</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>⬢ Soft Power</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Key Terms</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>⬢ Latino/a/e/x Usage</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>⬢ Folklórico Dance Terms</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>My Background</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Paper Overview</td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Research Questions/Goals</td>
<td>19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Chapter One</strong></td>
<td>21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>History of Ballet Folklórico</td>
<td>21</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
# LIST OF FIGURES

| Figure 0.1: Block Party Guerrero Performance | 4 |
| Figure 1.1: Jalisco Performance | 35 |
| Figure 2.1: Colima Performance | 49 |
| Figure 2.2: Hidalgo Performance | 49 |
| Figure 2.3: Map of Mexican States | 49 |
| Figure 2.4: Baja California Performance | 54 |
| Figure 2.5: El Payaso del Rodeo Performance | 55 |
| Figure 2.6: Chicago Bulls Halftime Show | 56 |
| Figure 2.7: La Escuela Parade | 57 |
| Figure 2.8: Field Museum Performance | 59 |
| Figure 3.1: Block Party Group Photo | 60 |
| Figure 3.2: Guerrero Blouse | 60 |
| Figure 3.3: La Escuela Practice 1 | 76 |
| Figure 3.4: La Escuela Practice 2 | 76 |
| Figure 3.5: Ballet Folklórico Shoes Tops | 85 |
| Figure 3.6: Ballet Folklórico Shoe Bottoms | 85 |
### LIST OF TABLES

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table</th>
<th>Description</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Table 2.1</td>
<td>Mexican States, Locations, Styles of Dance, and Vestuarios</td>
<td>50</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
INTRODUCTION

-JULY 2023-

The afternoon air was thick and muggy with moisture from the rain that had been sprinkling on and off the entire day. While the much needed turn in the weather had taken the edge off of the summer heat, I couldn’t help but sigh to myself and think, “Why does it always rain whenever something important happens?” The already narrow Chicago streets felt even tighter packed with the cars of the residents who had opted to stay home instead of going out and braving the weather for their weekend errands and the thick canopy of leaves from the trees scattered down the street as my mother drove us towards our final destination. Despite neither of us ever having been in this area before, it was easy enough to find. The street was barricaded from the rest of the local traffic with wooden horses and a giant inflatable bouncy house. The din of people trying to enjoy themselves despite the rainy Saturday afternoon and the sound of music blaring from the speaker trees set up outside one resident’s home echoed down the block.

My mom and I quickly found a place to park on a nearby street and made our way towards the party. The second we were on the other side of the barricade, the whole scene felt oddly familiar. I didn’t know these people, I had never been on this street before, I had never even lived within the limits of the city proper a day in my life, and yet it was a scene I’d seen many times before. Young children were riding their bikes in figure eights up and down the street or drawing with chalk on the dry patches on the sidewalks, while the older children, most likely forced to keep an eye on the younger ones, lingered at the edges of the street, playing on their phones while trying their best to keep the smaller children from being underfoot. Adults and parents kept themselves to the scattered lawn chairs, covered porches, and house steps as they drank, laughed, and kept a third eye on the playing children. The air was filled with the scent of cooking meat and tortillas that reminded me of every family backyard party I’d ever
been too, making my mouth water. My mom followed my lead as I made my way down the block, looking for a familiar face.

We finally came to a stop beside one of the many single-family houses on the street. A middle-aged woman instantly approached me with a bright smile. “Thank you so much for coming!” Jocelyn Montez was the mother of two dancers at ballet folklórico, one was enrolled in one of the children’s classes while the other was in the young adult’s class that I was a part of. Jocelyn quickly took on the role of hostess, offering food and drinks to both of us, and directing me to where her daughter was still working on her makeup for the performance. A handful of other dancers from my class began showing up, most of whom came with family members or significant others, and we were quickly ushered into the Montez’s home to get dressed. The dance studio had lent her enough blouses, decorated with beaded blue, red, and yellow flowers around the collars, for us to use during the performance.

During a normal performance, our maestro, Cesar, would have been with us, communicating with the event organizers and us to make sure everything was prepared for us, while we got ourselves ready. However, this day, the majority of the studio was either performing at an event for a major amusement park an hour and a half away or watching them perform, including our maestro. While Jocelyn had scheduled for a dance group from the studio, La Escuela de Ballet Folklórico – Chicago, over six months prior, since it was a volunteer performance, the studio had accidentally over scheduled itself with the amusement park performance and the block party, and the only class available to perform at the block party would be our class, the beginner adult class that had only been learning this dance for eight weeks. Thankfully, Jocelyn had been completely understanding about the mix-up and was just happy to have any folklórico group performing, especially since she had told everyone in attendance that a ballet folklórico dance group would be there.

Of course, there were a few hiccups along the way. The dancers who could make it to the performance, which was about two-thirds of our class (eight women and one man), wanted to
practice beforehand, since we had only just learned the end of the dance, a son de tarima from Guerrero, the week prior. We had to sneak off to a side alley and blast the song on someone’s phone so that we could go over the steps and rewatch our practice video until we gained enough confidence to head back to the party. Once Jocelyn and her husband got the green light from us, almost an hour behind schedule, they began running around, clearing a space in the center of the street for us to perform, and giving the block’s DJ the signal to get ready to play our song, “El Pato.” (Figure 0.1).

The dance itself went by in a blur of skirts and papeles picados flapping in time together in the breeze, as we spun and smiled for the crowd. With the final notes of the song, we let out a loud “Hey!” and the audience began to clap enthusiastically. We could tell they were waiting for another song, but we had only learned the one, so we had to quickly thank them for watching us, indicating that the performance was over. While the adults looked a little disappointed, the smaller children instantly began running up to us, asking for pictures with us like we were the costumed characters at Disney. Pictures did seem to soothe the disappointment from the adults, who were happily snapping photos of us with their children. Even Jocelyn got in on the action and took a group shot of all of us who performed. Later in the week, she would give us all a framed copy of that photo at our weekly dance class as a “thank you.” In total, the performance had only taken about two and a half hours of our day, and yet it had brought joy to a small block of people in the same community the dance studio was located in. It didn’t matter that the block was a mix of people from almost every ethnicity, for that moment, we were all neighbors, enjoying the beauty of a cultural performance without worrying about all the labels that keep us apart.
Figure 0.1: Block Party Guerrero Performance. August 6, 2023.

Folklórico in Chicago

La Escuela de Ballet Folklórico - Chicago

La Escuela de Ballet Folklórico – Chicago, or La Escuela¹, is a ballet folklórico company and studio located in the far northwest neighborhood of Chicago called Parish Hills. It is a relatively young company, as it was established in 2018, by three Latinx professionals; Olga Guerrero, her sister, Marisol, and their friend Adrian Oritz; and while none of them had any extensive experience, if any, with folklórico dancing, they saw that there was a huge vacuum of Latinx cultural programming in their neighborhood, so they created their own (“About Us” 2023). But another issue they noticed with the programs that were available was that there seemed to be a paywall for access. (“About Us” 2023, Guerrero 2023). La Escuela is a non-profit organization with maestro/as that work on a volunteer basis, and although they do charge dues for their classes, which helps to pay the rent and the costumes they use, but these dues are much cheaper than other groups, landing around forty dollars (for adults) depending on the number of classes they take, with discounts for those in multiple classes (“About Us” 2023; Gomez 2023). La

¹ All names of people, places, and institutions will be pseudonyms to protect the identities of the interviewees.
Escuela offers classes based on both age and experience level that are scheduled on the weekends and after work/school hours (“About Us” 2023). Specifically for the adults (students over eighteen years of age), there are two classes they can sign-up for, beginner or intermediate, although several students are enrolled in both – even with minimal dance experience (“About Us” 2023).

Latinx Populations in Chicago

As with all metropolitan areas, individuals from every corner of the world have flocked to Chicago over the centuries for various reasons, and it is these mass movements of people, coupled with legal, economical, and social influences and barriers that have impacted the demographics of each of Chicago’s 77 community areas and 200 neighborhoods. This is no different for the Latinx population. Historically, Latinx Chicagoans have been confined to the south side of the city, with the first large movement of Latinx, specifically Mexican, migrants moving into the Back of the Yards neighborhood in the early part of the 20th century to work in Chicago’s infamous stockyards and slaughterhouses (Amezcua 2023). However, the existing European migrants only allowed the incoming Mexican migrants to live within a select set of city blocks in that neighborhood (Amezcua 2023). While the most prolific real estate and racial violence affected Black Chicagoans, Mexican Chicagoans were also targeted by their white neighbors and they quickly learned that they would not be allowed to live outside of their designated neighborhood (Amezcua 2023). Throughout the 1950s and 60s, Black and Latinx Chicagoans began speaking out against racist housing policies and systemic racial violence in the city, but the slow pace of the Civil Rights Movement meant that many Latinx people opted to work within the constraints of a segregated system to lay the foundations for “politics and placemaking – an effort to build a social infrastructure of inclusion, familiarity, and relevance – with the hope that successful business and political power would gradually erode housing restrictions” (Amezcua 2023). This resulted in many of Chicago’s Latinx social, political, and economic institutions being centered along the Ashland Avenue colorline, such as the Mexican
Chamber of Commerce and the Mexican American Democratic Organization, which worked more with then-mayor Richard J. Daley as opposed to the Civil Rights Movement (Amezcua 2023).

To this day, the legacy of early Mexican and Latinx Chicagoans has changed the landscape of the South Side and the city as a whole, but there are Latinx people living in every community and neighborhood of the city, as well as the outlying suburbs, yet the majority of resources for the community are still centered in the South Side. Some of these institutions include dance groups that focus on cultural dances from various Caribbean, Central, and South American countries, like ballet folklórico. In my own research, I have looked at the demographics of the southern community areas where the majority of Latinx and Mexican American institutions are located as well as the community areas around my research site, La Escuela de Ballet Folklórico – Chicago, which shows that in both areas, Latinx people make up the majority of the population, with 66.4% of residents identifying as Hispanic/Latino of any race on the South Side and 46% of residents identifying as Hispanic/Latino of any race on the Northwest side (CMAP 2023, Statistical Atlas 2023). This shows that a large portion of the Latinx Chicagoan population is isolated from access to these programs, mainly by geographical distance, since crossing the city can take up to two hours both ways.

**Midwestern Latinx Populations in Literature**

Much of the current research on the use and performance of folklórico in both the United States and Mexico, making use of the work of anthropological theorists, do not specifically study this art form through an anthropological lens. They also tend to focus on Latinx populations in states along the U.S.-Mexico border (i.e. California, Texas, and Arizona), or New York, with little attention paid to groups living in the Midwest. While areas of the East coast and southern border have historically large Latinx populations, the Midwest also has a rich Latinx culture. In Chicago, there are many significant Latinx landmarks that are hallmarks of the city, such as the statue of Benito Juárez on the Magnificent Mile, the National Museum of Mexican Art in Pilsen,
the Chicago Latino Theater Alliance, Cruz Blanca Brewery, and Paseo Boricua in Humbolt Park, just to name a few. As described above, Chicago has a long history with Latinx migrants moving into the city and influencing the city’s culture itself. But Chicago is not unique in this regard, in several of the largest cities in the Midwest, the Latinx populations may not be large, but they are significant. 28.7% of Chicago’s population, 17% of Milwaukee’s population, 6.5% of Columbus, and 13% of Indianapolis’ populations are Hispanic/Latinx (United States Census Bureau 1, United States Census Bureau 2, Drenon 2022, Health Compass Milwaukee 2023). And these numbers do not take into account all of the 12,000 plus Latinx immigrants who have been bussed into Chicago while they wait for their asylum cases to move through the courts (Hernandez 2023). A massive portion of the Latinx population in the United States has been ignored from the literature, and their unique experiences in this part of the country has been left unexplored.

The Power of Dance in Other Diasporas

The embodied production of ethnic and national identity in diasporic populations is not something that is unique to the Mexican diaspora in the United States. Two cases, Filipino folk dancing and Irish step-dancing, show how cultural groups throughout the globe have used folk dances to embody, preserve, express, and reconnect with their ethnic heritages; particularly those who belong to diasporic populations. These communities and art forms have also encountered similar pitfalls throughout the years; such as institutionalization of indigenous dances, influence from outside dance forms, and nationalist projects dictating what is considered “authentic”. By focusing on folklórico dancing, this research adds to the growing body of work within diasporic communities and their use of folk dancing in cultural expression.

Filipino Folk Dancing

Gilmore (2000) studied three different social settings while researching the negotiation of tradition and authenticity in Filipino folk dancing. He studied non-professional community
organizations, student ethnic organizations at universities, and semi/professional dance companies. In community organizations, Gilmore notes that despite dancing being secondary to social and political work – i.e. building infrastructure in the Philippines – traditional dancing is used to bring in less active members of the community by appealing to their nostalgia for the homeland (Gilmore 2000, S26-S27). Music and dancing were a common part of everyday life in the rural areas of the Philippines; this creates an emotional link to the past with the members of the community organization, especially older members who can reconnect with their ethnic heritage and childhood memories (Gilmore 2000, S27). Authentication in this context happens casually through older members who teach dance techniques to younger members as “tradition keepers” (Gilmore 2000, S27).

In student organizations, dancers had to rely on more institutionalized forms of learning, especially since many were first- or second-generation Americans who had little connection with their ethnic heritage (Gilmore 2000, S30). While in college, many of these students used the multicultural environment to reconnect with their ethnic heritages through organizations, like the Pinoy-Organization² at a southern California university (Gilmore 2000, S30). This organization, like many others like it, relied on the work of a traditional folk dancing group called Bayanihan, which was founded in the 1950s, similar to Amalia Hernandez’s ballet folklórico group in Mexico, which presented traditional dances on stage but were considered to be “one step removed from ‘original’ sources”, creating a debate about legitimacy (Gilmore 2000, S31-S32). However, students in these organizations lacked alternative cultural resources to balance out the institutionalized resources they primarily relied on, since they had no first-hand participatory experiences (Gilmore 2000, S33).

The final group Gilmore studied were the semi-professional and professional dance companies in southern California. These groups were typically unpaid yet performed throughout

² Pseudonym
the year, at small community performances once or twice a week and larger productions four to five times a year (Gilmore 2000, S33-S34). Like the student organizations, these groups focused on promoting Filipino cultural heritage through the use of folk dance to educate the community (Gilmore 2000, S34). Unlike the student organizations, however, these groups focused more on doing their own research into traditional dance styles instead of relying on the work done by other groups (Gilmore 2000, S34). These performances of cultural representation “create(d) a standard of negotiated public display as a standard of authenticity that other traditional displays (could) be measured against” (Gilmore 2000, S34).

Emergence of Irish Riverdance

The main focus of Masero’s work was to show how Irish step dance, and the show Riverdance, have helped shape the global image of Ireland and Irish culture globally. Just like Mexico after their 1920 Revolution, Ireland was struggling to find an identity after the end of British rule in 1921 (Masero 2010, 5). The Gaelic League, founded in 1893, began to promote Irish step-dancing as a national art form, standardizing the dance style and controlling who could teach the dance form (Masero 2010, 6). In 1929, the Gaelic League created An Coimisiún le Rinci Gaelacha (The Irish Dancing Commission) to regulate dance rules and performance standards (Masero 2010, 7). However, the popularity and performance of Irish step-dancing stayed insular to both the homeland and diasporic Irish populations until the mid-1990s (Masero 2010, 8).

In 1995, a theater performance of step-dancing was launched in Ireland called Riverdance, which quickly became a global phenomenon (Masero 2010, 10). Riverdance helped to brand Irish culture and identity to the rest of the world, promoting an image of the country that showed it to be a prosperous place with plenty to offer the rest of the world culturally and economically (Masero 2010, 10). This performance helped to solidify the modern image of Ireland as the “Emerald Isle” and formulate a modern Irish identity (Masero 2010, 11). This popularity translated to diasporic Irish populations, who used step-dancing and Riverdance as a way to reconnect with their cultural heritage, especially those who were immigrants and one to
two generations removed from Ireland (Masero 2010, 12-13). But one unique aspect of this
dance is the popularity with those without Irish ancestry (Masero 2010, 14). Irish dance schools
doubled in size all over the world, global championships lengthened in duration, and countries
without large Irish diasporas began opening schools (Masero 2010, 14).

*Dance and the Nationalist Project*

As these two examples have shown, Mexico is not unique in its post-colonialist project of using
dance to create a new global image for itself. In fact, countries and cultures on every continent,
sans Antarctica, have multiple examples of the same phenomenon occurring, and it would be
impossible to include all of them here. I have chosen to focus here on Filipino folk dance since
they were also colonized by Spain and on Irish step-dance since it is one of most prolific forms of
folk dance in the world and because it indicates that even Anglo ethnic groups participate in this
kind of nationalist project. All three examples of folk dance – ballet folklórico, Filipino folk
dancing, and Irish step-dancing – have developed along similar veins and have been used by
diasporic populations in the United States in mirrored ways. Both Irish step-dance and
folklórico originate from the early 1900s, when Ireland and Mexico had broken away from the
colonial powers that had ruled them for centuries, in an attempt to create a national identity
separate from the colonial culture they had just left. It was their national governments that
facilitated the collection of dance practices, decontextualized and simplified for Western
audiences, and used the history of the indigenous peoples and cultures of their respective
countries to legitimize their rule as being centered in that country, unlike England and Spain
which had ruled from afar. And both Filipino and Mexican diaspora communities use their folk
dances as counterhegemonic narratives, to reconnect their community members with memories
of childhood in their countries of origin, and to educate the youth on their culture, which they
did not have as much exposure to in the United States. These dances gave marginalized peoples
the chance to come together and celebrate themselves in a way that was non-threatening to the
Anglo-majority that runs the United States.
Literature Review

In this section, I will go into detail about several of the social theories, social theorists, and topics I will be addressing later in this paper.

Constructions of Self

One of the main theorists I will pull from is Pierre Bourdieu. His work on habitus is central to how I have analyzed my own data. Habitus can be seen as the embodied set of expectations society puts on its members that shape how they act throughout their lives (Bourdieu 1977, 76). Every society has its own collective habitus, but within a specific society there are also different types of habituses based on an individual’s social class (Bourdieu 1977, 76). For example, in the United States a wealthy white woman will have a different bodily attitude that guides her action, as opposed to another white woman living in poverty. Bourdieu also claims that while an individual’s habitus can, and will, change over the course of their lives, depending on how their life circumstances changed, the most powerful habitus set will be the ones that they have formed during childhood (Bourdieu 1977, 77-78).

Bourdieu develops further this idea that society has influence over the bodies of its agents and that those bodily categories shape the experiences of that individual through his concept of tempo. Throughout his work, he emphasizes that habitus is a set of inculcated dispositions that a society puts on their members, guiding the physical and social actions they take throughout the course of their lives. In other words, habitus allows individuals to embody a feel for the game of life, but this feeling is very rarely a conscious choice that they are making, it is an unconscious choice influenced by “the earliest years of life and constantly reinforced by calls to order from the group, that is to say, from the aggregate of the individuals endowed with the same dispositions, to whom each is linked by his dispositions and interests” (Bourdieu 1977, 14-15). It is these dispositions and “schemes of perception and mental thought” that allow an individual to organize the world around them, but also to organize the world within them “in the
form of bodily postures and stances, ways of standing, sitting, looking, speaking, or walking” (Bourdieu 1977, 15). This organization can be further realized through the manipulation of the timing of one’s actions; that is, one’s bodily tempo. Tempo is the “generative, organizing scheme” of daily interaction actors use within a given society in relation to the flow of time – the pace of when they act or do not act (Bourdieu 1977, 8). With tempo as a part of the inculcated dispositions of habitus, an actor can wield a lot of societal power through the performance of a specific action, consciously or otherwise, especially when they choose to perform it.

Bourdieu’s work with habitus will be coupled with the works done by Simone De Beauvoir and Michel Foucault. In regard to De Beauvoir’s work, she focuses mainly on the history and embodiment of female sexuality, one of the main arguments she makes throughout her work, The Second Sex, is that gender is not a biological construct (De Beauvoir 2010, 39). She claims that it is society that places specific expectations onto individuals based on the bodies that they were born into, and it is these expectations that shapes how an individual moves through the world (De Beauvoir 2010, 49, 236). This will be taken in tandem with Foucault’s A History of Sexuality: An Introduction. In this work, he also states that sexuality is a “historical construct” and not a natural phenomenon that must be controlled (Foucault 1990, 105).

I will also be using the work of Michael Lambek and his idea of the continuous and discontinuous self. This theory argues that in ritual contexts, such as the African spiritual possession that he studies, individuals develop two types of personhood. The first kind is the “forensic personage”, which is an individual’s main ego. This person is held ethically accountable for their actions and must rely on their past actions to determine what they will do in a new situation (Lambek 2013, 838). The second type of personhood is the “mimetic personage”, which is not held ethically accountable for their actions in ritual. In Lambek’s case, this would be the personality a shaman takes up during a spirit possession ritual (Lambek 2013, 837).
The final scholar I will address in this section is W.E.B. Du Bois and his concept of double-consciousness. He coined this term in his work *The Souls of Black Folk* in 1903, which is a collection of essays about the histories and experiences of African Americans around the turn of the twentieth century. This concept illustrates the experience of Black Americans, who must always see themselves through the lens of the dominate, white society (Du Bois 2014, 5). This term describes the feelings people of color, in Du Bois’ case, African Americans, have in which they have the same desires and ideals in life as their white counterparts but due to their skin color and heritage they are unable to be accepted by the mainstream Caucasian society (Du Bois 2014, 5). He explains that Black Americans do not want to forget their African heritage or roots, but many feel like they must in order to succeed in life, and all they want is a way to succeed in American society while still celebrating their African roots (Du Bois 2014, 5).

*Liminality and Place Making*

The two main scholars who developed the concept of liminality were Arnold van Gennep and Victor Turner. Van Gennep was the first to theorize that there is a place in the middle of any ritual process, like a rite of passage, where an individual shifts from one social status to another (Turner 2018, 237; Wels et al. 2011, 1). As Turner describes it, an individual is “betwixt and between” roles in their society (Turner 2018, 237). While in this liminal space, an individual may be able to see that the things within their society that they imagined be immovable is not as solid as they thought they were (Turner 2018, 239, 242).

I will then connect this to the work Frantz Fanon in his book, *The Wretched of the Earth*. Fanon was a psychiatrist who wrote about how traditional knowledge can be used as a tool for decolonization of marginalized people in colonized countries. He believes that the traditions, “myths and magic” of an ethnic group can be used to help colonized bodies express themselves in ways in which they are unable to do in mainstream society (Fanon 2021, 18-19). These rituals and spaces allow colonized people to physically relax their bodies and channel unhealthy, aggressive emotions into something more productive and less dangerous (Fanon 2021, 19).
The final scholar in this section is Emile Durkheim and his theory of collective effervescence. His work on *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life* is his attempt to create a universal system for understanding world religions. According to Durkheim, he believes that it is society that creates religion to facilitate the feeling of unity in group rituals (Durkheim 1995, 220-223). It is through this group ritual that social consciousness is created which results in collective effervescence (Durkheim 1995, 226-227). In his work, he also discusses the sacred and profane, in which the “sacred” is everything that is connected to a religious experience while the “profane” are the everyday items that are not associated with a religious experience. An example of this would be wine in church is sacred while the wine in a wine fridge at home is profane.

*The Art of Folklórico*

In the West, art can be seen as a category of exclusion; more focused on what is *not* “art” as opposed to what is “art.” And much of this relies on the idea that “art” follows a straight path from the traditions of the ancient Greeks and Romans through to works done by Western Europeans (Errington 1998, 51). Typically, this means that art is created for and/or by affluent white heterosexual men. So, works from outside of this group are categorized as niche, kitschy, or craftwork (Svašek 2007, 160). In the case of folklórico and its vestuario creation, which is a mix of indigenous and European traditions typically made by women, it falls into the category of craftwork. As Svašek explains in her work, craftwork done by women and minorities have been systemically excluded from traditional Western art venues (Svašek 2007, 160). She uses the example of Judy Chicago’s “The Dinner Party” exhibit, which displayed traditional feminine arts; needlework, pottery, and china; on a table with “butterfly/vagina” designs to celebrate historical (white) female figures, but many critics saw the exhibit as too “pornographic” (Svašek 2007, 160-161). This distinction between “craft” and traditional “art” is important to understand because much people, art objects and whole genres of art (such as dance) are influenced by the contexts in which they appear, so art theory can provide a deeper understanding of the dance, since it’s costuming, which can be considered craft art, is so tied to the physical act of dancing.
itself, especially in folklórico. In the anthropology of art, objects and genres of art are typically understood through the lens of an “art world,” which Becker defines as the joint activity of a group of people that shows the cooperation and production of patterns in a collective activity (Becker 2008, 1).

*Soft Power*

The final topic I will reference throughout my paper is soft power. Joseph Nye developed the concept of “soft power” as the phenomenon of a country or government promoting a cultural product – such as music, art, dance, film, etc. – to the global stage (Chua 2012, 120). He sees soft power as a way of attracting a target audience and getting them to accept external influence from another group of people (Chua 2012, 120). While there is never any guarantee that a target audience will be receptive to this external influence, if they are accepting of the influence, soft power can be just as compelling, and less frowned upon as military power (Chua 2012, 121). It is important to note that it is typically more influential countries, such as the United States, that have the highest amount of soft power influence amongst other countries, but smaller countries are still able to use soft power to promote their interests in larger nations (Chua 2012, 121).

**Key Terms**

*Latino/a/e/x Usage*

Due to the diversity of those who fall under the umbrella of Latin America, which includes both Mexico and Caribbean countries with Spanish ties, it becomes hard to isolate on ubiquitous term that applies to everyone. Intersectionalities between gender, sexuality, age, race, religion, language, and country of origin (and their associated histories) lead individuals to prefer one or a handful of descriptors over the others. On most documents when an individual identifies themselves as “Hispanic” or “Latino” (already there are two different terms used interchangeably), there are follow-up options for them to be even more descriptive, which are usually split by gendered ends, such as “Latino/a,” “Chicano/a,” “Mexican,” “Cuban,” “Puerto Rican,” “Dominican,” “Guatemalan,” etc. Some marginalized communities, especially those who
belong to the LGBTQIA+ community opt for gender neutral terms, such as “Latinx” or “Latine,” but even those can be argued to be gentrification of language due to the fact that Spanish does not typically use words that end with those letters. Everyone’s individual histories influence the terms they lean towards, and terms that they use at one point in their lives may not fit them at another point. So, throughout this paper, I will be using the terms “Hispanic,” “Latinx,” or “Latin American” when referring to the community in general, and “Mexican” or “Mexican American” when referring to the group I am studying as a whole, since they all identify themselves as having Mexican heritage. I will be using the terms “white,” “Anglo,” “Anglo-American,” “West/ern” and “Caucasian” when referring to white American people and culture. For individuals, I will use the terms they use to identify themselves, such as “Latina/e/o,” “Mexicano/a,” or “Mexican American.”

**Folklórico Dance Terms**

The use of Spanish is a crucial part of the study of ballet folklórico. This means that many of the terms used to describe the dance are also in Spanish and can be hard to translate directly into English. It is common in English print media to use italics for words and phrases in another language, however many can see it as othering that language, so when a Spanish term is used for the first time I will italicize it, but I will not for any subsequent appearances. I will also not be italicized conversational Spanish. I will add footnotes to any Spanish words, phrases, or terms with the English translation, and if I translate a conversation from Spanish to English, I will add a footnote indicating that occurrence. Here is a brief list of some of the most common phrases that I will use throughout the body of my paper when referencing the dance, or “baile.” The “zapateado” is the general term for footwork in ballet folklórico, and while each of the thirty-two regions of folklórico has their own unique steps, when a “maestro/a,” or teacher, is explaining the step sequence they are trying to teach, they will use the phrase “zapateado” in those cases. One thing that makes folklórico so unique is that the entire foot is utilized. The foot can be split into categories such as the heel (“tacon”) and toes (“metatarsals”), where the nails are located.
on the bottom of the shoe, and the sole, or “planta” (Friscia 2019). The nails on the shoe function much like the plates on tap shoes, to accent the steps and make the zapateado louder, especially in a “golpe,” which is a step that uses a flat foot to stomp onto the ground making a loud, percussive sound. When a dancer, or “bailarina/o” completes a sequence of steps, it is called a “remate.” The final term that it is crucial to know is that the costumes that the dancers wear, the skirt outfits (“faldas”) for the women and the charro suits for the men, no matter the region they originate from are called “vestuario,” which can be used for both clothing, shoes, and associated accessories that dancers where when they perform.

**My Background**
A researcher’s background heavily influences the topics they choose to study, the areas they have access too, and the lens through which they view the data they collect. I was born and raised in the northwestern suburbs of Chicago in a town that had a Latinx majority. This meant that I grew up surrounded by Latinx culture, particularly Mexican culture, as that was the dominant Latinx nationality. And just like my hometown, my family was also mixed. My mother is a third-generation-plus (parents born in the United States but immigration status of grandparents is unknown) Mexican American. Her parents were born in Texas and moved to the United States in the 1950s so that her father, my grandfather, could get a job in the steel mills. Raising children in the 60s and 70s meant that they had to assimilate to survive, so while Spanish was my grandparents first language, they chose to stop speaking Spanish at home so that their children would not speak in accented English and have a better chance in the Anglo-American job market, especially since they were white passing. My father is an Anglo-American of German heritage, whose family has been in the states since the late 1800s. His family has been in the Chicagoland area since the 1900s, and he was raised in the northwest suburbs his entire life.

Personally, I identify as a biracial Mexican American, or Latina, but since I grew up in an English-only household and am white-passing, I have always struggled with feeling like I was never “Mexican enough,” and feeling like I was hiding my heritage when I was in majority-white
spaces. As a child, I often found myself at odds with my homelife, where I would be making tamales with my aunts and cousins with rancheros playing on the radio, and my school-life where my Anglo and Latinx classmates accused me of lying about my heritage. So, like many other biracial and multiracial youth in the United States, I grew up with a foot in both worlds, never really feeling like I completely belonged to either one and answering the age old question of “What are you?” with exasperated but understanding sighs. It was only when I started college that I began exploring more about my Mexican heritage on my own. I enrolled in course about the history of Latin America, Spanish classes, going to meetings for various Latinx student organizations, and even getting an undergraduate minor in Latino/a Studies. That is why I choose to focus my research on young to mid-adults. While it is amazing the children and teens have access to cultural programming, their parents have an enormous say over what their children can do based on their own work schedules and financial contributions. Once these children are adults, the onus of learning about their culture, being involved in classes and programs like folklórico dance classes, falls on them alone, and that is what intrigues me the most.

**Paper Overview**

Chapter One of this paper will delve into the history of ballet folklórico – when it originated, how it evolved with the colonization of Mexico, and how the histories of the United States and Mexico has changed how the dance has been used by different political institutions. It will also explain the history of La Escuela de Ballet Folklórico – Chicago – why it formed, what goals it set for itself, and its place in the Northwest Chicago community. This chapter will also feature descriptions about each of my one-on-one interviewees and their backgrounds, to make it easier to keep track of each one throughout the paper and illustrate the diversity of students at La Escuela. Following that, there will be an explanation of the methodology used in the collection of
data for this paper. This chapter will end with a discussion about “craft” versus “art” and how the vestuario of ballet folklórico can be considered an artform.

Chapter Two will focus on La Escuela’s impact on the community and how they have achieved the mission goals they have established for themselves when they were first founded. This will occur through a discussion of how the education of marginalized peoples by members of their own community can empower them and help them rebuild connections to their ethnic identities. It will also show how the studio’s deep involvement in the community and their focus on education positively reflects on the studio, creating a liminal space that has made it a place where students of all ages and backgrounds feel welcome to learn and explore their identities. This chapter will conclude with an exploration of how the studio uses soft power, and how their well-respected and open image in the community attracts both Mexican Americans and non-Latinx community members to form relationships with them.

Chapter Three is where I will address how the dancers use La Escuela use the study of ballet folklórico to construct aspects of their internal identities in a way that honors their ethnic heritage. The first part of the chapter will focus on how the bailarines build and rebuild their ethnic identities as Mexican Americans by recognizing their double-consciousness and using folklórico to reconnect or recreate the habitus of Mexican culture. The second part of this chapter will center on how the LGBTQIA+ students at La Escuela also explore their gender and sexual identities through the performance of folklórico. While ballet folklórico is synonymous with strict gender roles, modern attitudes towards gender, sexuality, and their expressions have allowed the dancers to both explore traditional heteronormative roles in a more positive light and push the boundaries of folklórico in a way that still respects the culture.

**Research Questions/Goals**

One of the main research questions that I set out to answer was, why? Why did these young Latinx people choose to start dancing folklórico? The majority of the students I spoke with have
minimal dance and performance experience prior to joining La Escuela. Also, many of them are either full-time university students, full-time workers, or even both, yet they have chosen to spend their hard-earned money and precious little free-time dancing folklórico. I also wanted to know, what did they get out of dancing folklórico? Were they here, like I was, to reconnect with a lost heritage? Did they just want to challenge themselves physically and mentally? Or was there another reason? I also wanted to know how ballet folklórico influenced their perception of themselves. How did adding “folklórico dancing” to the intersections of their internal identities change the way they viewed themselves? How did it affect other parts of their identities? This could be by dancing within the confines of strict gender roles, as well as adhering to the immovable dance steps and costuming associated with each individual dance and region within the giant umbrella of folklórico as a genre.
Chapter One

The goal of this chapter is to provide the background information as to how ballet folklórico has evolved from unrelated indigenous dances into the global phenomenon that it is today. I will also go over the demographics for the studio that I worked with, the studio’s personal history, and the background information for each of my informants. While listing all of my informants is not traditional in this type of work, I believe that it serves several important purposes – not only does it show the diversity of the studio and the adults who enroll in its classes, but it also functions as a way to keep track of the backgrounds of who I spoke when I use my interview data as well as why they may harbor the opinions that they do. I will end this chapter by answering the question “Is ballet folklórico an art form?” Throughout this paper, I will refer to ballet folklórico as an “art”, but it is imperative to understand what art is and what it means in both a Western and non-Western context, especially since folklórico is considered a folk art.

History of Ballet Folklórico

Spanish Conquest to the Porfiriato

Since the early days of colonization in Mexico, Spanish scholars have documented the importance of dance within indigenous communities, specifically within the contexts of rituals and festivals (Nájera Ramírez 1989, 17). As a result of the process of colonization, Spanish and European influences began merging with indigenous dance forms, creating new styles of dance (Nájera Ramírez 1989, 17). During the Porfiriato, an era of “progressive dictatorship” in Mexico under President Porfirio Díaz (1876-1880; 1884-1911), modernization was prioritized over political and civil liberties, and indigenous peoples were forced into rural areas to make space for the burgeoning railroad. As a result of this socio-political climate, Mexicans of every class began imitating European art forms and styles in their home country, including in their dance styles (Nájera Ramírez 1989, 17). Ballroom dance styles, particularly those popular in Spain,
such as the polka, waltz, shottishe, habanera, became more popular and began influencing the mestizo folk dances throughout the country, especially norteño (northern) dances (Nájera Ramírez 1989, 17).

*The New Republic of Mexico*

The Porfiriato did not end until 1920 when revolutionary forces compelled Díaz to resign and declared Francisco Madero the true president. The establishment of a new constitutional republic created a new era of romantic nationalism, as the country searched for a “unique Mexican character” (Nájera Ramírez 1989, 18). As a response, the new government decided to launch a project in which various scholars would be sent out to collect information on folk knowledge throughout the country (Nájera Ramírez 1989, 18). While the non-indigenous Mexican community saw “folk” or indigenous knowledge as a “precious resource of (their) past that could be a foundation to build a unique identity for the future”, folk arts were seen as relatively “harmless” aspects of culture which could be allowed to survive, unlike medical and agricultural folk knowledge which contradicts Western knowledge (Nájera Ramírez 1989, 18). Dancing was an easy art form to incorporate into the dominant hegemonic order, while also displaying the richness and uniqueness of Mexican culture to the rest of the world (Nájera Ramírez 1989, 19).

In 1921, the Mexican government sponsored several cultural missions through the Secretaría de Educación Pública (SEP) (the Secretary of Public Education), led by the Minister of Education, Jose Vasconcelos, to collect folk dances and teach them in Mexican public schools (Nájera Ramírez 1989, 19; Saldaña 2022, 4). This knowledge was seen through the performance done by folk dancing groups called “carpas” performed “tandas de variedad”3 which traveled throughout Mexico and the southwest of the United States (Nájera Ramírez 1989, 20; Saldaña 2022, 5). *Carpas* were theater and variety shows for the common people which perpetuated

---

3 Variety batches
nationalist sentiment after the revolution (Nájera Ramírez 1989, 20). In 1939, SEP invited various groups of indigenous dancers and musicians to perform their dances in their “original form” in Mexico City, which led to the creation of FONADAN, the Fondo Nacional Para El Desarrollo de la Danza Popular Mexicana (the National Fund for the Development of Mexican Popular Dance), to continue the collection, study, and promotion of Mexican folk dance (Nájera Ramírez 1989, 20; Saldaña 2022, 4-5). So, while the main goals the Mexican government set for themselves were reached, with a symbolic representation of the country’s diversity and students learning the dances through the 1940s, this collection of folk art led to the decontextualization, simplification, and stereotyping of dance steps, music, and craftwork (Nájera Ramírez 1989, 19).

The next big wave of folk dancing occurred during the 1950s due to the work of Amalia Hernandez (Nájera Ramírez 1989, 21; Ocegueda 2010, 7; Saldaña 2022, 5). She used anthropological and historical research approaches to study and preserve both ancient and contemporary Mexican culture through dance and music (Nájera Ramírez 1989, 21). Hernandez focused on the ways in which indigenous groups lived, their rituals, ceremonies, and beliefs in tandem with the physical steps, which provided the cultural essence for stage performances (Nájera Ramírez 1989, 22). She would use costumes and music in her company’s performances inspired by the ones used in the rural villages where the dances had originated (Nájera Ramírez 1989, 22). Due to all of her research and performance experience, Hernandez became a major authority on what was considered “authentic” Mexican folk dancing, since she added creative and modern elements to a base of historically accurate techniques, even as similar troupes became to appear (Nájera Ramírez 1989, 21). Eventually, Hernandez would found the dance company El Ballet Folklórico de Mexico whose dance programs came to be aired on Mexican national television and in live performances throughout the country (Nájera Ramírez 1989, 21; Saldaña 2022, 5). In 1954 alone, the company performed 67 programs, which were sponsored by the Department of Tourism, and the company was made the official cultural representatives of the Mexican government (Nájera Ramírez 1989, 21). When Adolfo Lopez Mateos became
president in 1958, Hernandez’s company was made part of *Bellas Artes*, the National Institution of Fine Arts (Nájera Ramírez 1989, 21). Even to this day, Ballet Folklórico de México de Amalia Hernández is arguably the most popular and well respected ballet folklórico company in the country.

**Folklórico and the United States**

In the United States, folklórico dancing became popular through two different pathways, through interpersonal learning or through books (Nájera Ramírez 1989, 24). In regard to interpersonal learning, students could learn dances while they attended public schools, although these were vary simplistic versions of the dances, or they could learn in private companies, which would typically perform at community events (Nájera Ramírez 1989, 24). The second pathway in the 1930s-1950s for learning folklórico was through “cookbooks” (Nájera Ramírez 1989, 24; Saldaña 2022, 5). These books would contain descriptions of costumes, music, and cultural backgrounds, however there was no record of how these dance were collected, by whom, or for what purpose (Nájera Ramírez 1989, 24). While these books did encourage cross-cultural learning between the United States and Mexico, they also reified the idea that Mexican culture was a foreign “other” that was backwards and colorful (Nájera Ramírez 1989, 24).

During the 1960s, with the rise of the Civil Rights Movement, the Chicano community reclaimed folklórico dancing as a way to oppose hegemonic assimilation as well as reaffirm, promote, and preserve their cultural identities (Nájera Ramírez 1989, 26; Ocegueda 2010, 10-11; Saldaña 2022, 6). Typically, folklórico dance companies were found at various colleges and universities in the American southwest, and they would perform at various community events, such as ceremonies, festivals, and schools to both promote pride in Mexican culture and encourage brown youth to attend institutions of higher education (Nájera Ramírez 1989, 26-28; Ocegueda 2010, 11). There were three ways Mexican Americans could learn folklórico: 1) researching it for themselves, 2) workshops taught by those who had done the research
themselves, 3) going to Mexico to learn from more established companies (Nájera Ramírez 1989, 28).

**Folklórico Today**

Today folklórico companies can still be found throughout Mexico and the United States. Folklórico dancing is still commonly taught in Mexican schools, although it has mostly died out in US schools. This means that individuals must rely on private groups and entities if they want to learn the dance form. Typically these groups are either associated with a college/university or they are independent ventures, which means that individuals must have a certain socio-economic level to participate, much like the warnings of my sample group that I previously referenced. There are monetary constraints, free time restrictions, transportation issues, and costume/gear purchasing (Vich 2020, 6). There is also a debate over what is considered “authentic” folklórico. Groups in Mexico consider American folklórico to be less authentic since it is not based in Mexico, and with some groups refusing to use the term “ballet” as Hernandez did – due to how much influence the Mexican government had over these performances and the Western connotations associated with “ballet” and stage performances (Nájera Ramírez 1989, 23; Ocegueda 2010, 8, 11-12; Saldaña 2022, 5).

**Interviewee Demographics**

**Class Observations and Survey Demographics**

At the time of this paper, La Escuela had three adult classes, two beginner classes on Saturday morning and Tuesday evening, and one intermediate adult class after the beginners class on Saturday morning. Olga has mentioned in our interview and in personal conversations that the company has been working on adding more adult classes and older child/teen classes. The majority of adult classes tend to be women and female presenting people, with only a handful of men and male presenting people in those classes. Since the adults tend to have busier schedules, even on the weekends, the number of people present at any given class can vary, with some
students being forced to drop out due to work, school, and/or personal conflicts. On average, there tends to be between eight and fifteen students per class, with one to three of those students being men/male presenting. The majority, if not all, students who take classes at the studio identify as having some sort of Mexican or Latinx heritage, but since the studio does have classes at various CPS schools, there are many students under the age of 18 that have no Mexican or Latinx heritage that participate in those classes. La Escuela does not discriminate against anyone who wants to learn, allowing students of all ages (toddler to adult) and of any ethnic background to sign up for classes, the only criteria is a positive attitude and a desire to learn about Mexican culture. Based on survey data and classroom observations, while the majority of adult students tend to be younger adults (18-30), there is always at least one older middle aged adult (31-50) in every adult class. The class I have spent the majority of my time with, the Tuesday night beginners class, was originally meant to be a young adult specific class, with students between the ages of 18 and 30, however, one middle-aged adult woman from the other class recently joined us since she could no longer do the weekend morning classes. While La Escuela is a small ballet folklórico company, compared to the older, more established ones in the city, and is relatively more catered to children then adults, with the majority of their classes being targeted towards those under the age of 18, it is one of the few studios that allows adult beginners to take classes, and has seen consistent growth in adult applications since they were established. So, while this data poll might be small, the continued growth of La Escuela, and their adult programming, shows that there is a demand in the community that they are meeting, a demand which other programs are not focusing on.

One-on-One Interviewees

For this paper I did one-on-one interviews with nine members of La Escuela. Three dancers are from the Saturday morning adult beginners class, with two of them also dancing in the Saturday morning adult intermediate class, one is an owner of La Escuela, and five are from the Tuesday night adult beginners class. The majority of my dancers have only danced folklórico for more
than a year (12 months), but several of them do have dance or performance experience outside of ballet folklórico. My interviewees all identify as Mexican or Mexican American, although some of them have heritage from other Latin American countries as well. While all of them have lived in Chicago for at least the past five years, one is originally from Texas, one lived in Texas for several years as a child, and another lived on the East Coast until they went off to college. The ages of my interviewees range from 19 to 49, and three of them identified themselves are part of the LGBTQIA+ community, and two of them have biological children. All of them have gotten an undergraduate degree or are working towards completing an undergraduate degree, and two of them have Ph.D.’s in S.T.E.M. fields. Here are some brief descriptions of each interviewee.

Luz Cabrera is a 23 year old woman of Mexican and Guatemalan heritage, she loves both sides of her heritage but finds it easier to learn more about her Mexican culture than her Guatemalan culture, most likely because of the large Mexican community in Chicago and the United States. Her parents are immigrants from both of these countries, with her father coming from Mexico and her mother coming from Guatemala, and she is the first generation American on both sides of her family. She is currently working full time while getting a degree in Social Work from Neeman-Edwards University. She has lived on the Northwest Side of Chicago for the majority of her life and has always had a love of dancing. She danced for several years as a child, doing various Latin-style dances, such as salsa, Marange, and bachata, but had no experience with ballet folklórico until she joined La Escuela in June 2023.

Jesus Díaz Morillo is also 23 years old, is originally from the East Coast, and feels comfortable using all pronouns, but especially they/he/él pronouns and identifies as gay. They are of Mexican heritage but prefers to use the term Latine, which is a non-gendered form of Latino/a, and is the first generation American in their family. Jesus works for the Chicago Public School (CPS) system as a freelance theater teacher. They have a Bachelor of Fine Arts (BFA) in Theater and Latin American Studies and a minor in Education from DuSable University. They
had no experience in ballet folklórico dancing prior to joining La Escuela in January 2023, but has extensive performance experience and even performs drag on the side.

Belen Gomez is a 22 year old Mexican American woman who is the daughter of Mexican immigrants. She identifies as queer, is finishing a degree in Public Policy from Hyde University, and works in both a university office and as at a non-profit case worker. She started dancing ballet folklórico at the age of 11 at a class run by a local woman from her living room, took a break from dancing between the ages of 13 and 15, then began dancing with a group on the South Side until the start of the Covid pandemic in 2019-2020, and finally began dancing ballet folklórico again in 2021 at La Escuela, since it was closer to her house. She also performs with a Latin dance group at her university and choreographs ballet folklórico routines for them.

Milagros Gonzalez is a 27 year old Mexican American, with parents of Mexican heritage born in the United States. She has a PhD is Psychology from Lazaro University and currently works in a university hospital in downtown Chicago. She joined La Escuela in September 2022, so she has been dancing with the group for about a year. She has had no previous dancing experience but has always had a deep love of ballet folklórico, so after she finished her degree she promised herself that she would dedicate her new-found free time to learning something fun, and she chose folklórico.

Olga Guerrero is the one interviewee who is not a dancer, but she is one of the co-founders of La Escuela. Olga is a 45 year old woman with Mexican and Cuban heritage with both of her parents immigrating to the United States from their respective countries. She has a bachelor’s degree in finance from DuSable University, works for a global bank chain, is married, and the mother of two children. While she has no dance experience, her father was a musician who traveled between Mexico, Puerto Rico, and the United States performing various genres of Latin music, so she and her sister grew up in a household full of music. She did take an adult class for a year when La Escuela first started as a way to encourage more adults to enroll themselves in classes as well as their children.
Vicente Huerta is a 24 year old who uses he/they pronouns. He is a second generation Mexican American and identifies as queer. He has a bachelor’s in fine arts in theater design and technology from Upper Illinois University and currently works as a theater manager. He has no prior dance experience but started dancing with La Escuela in November of 2022. Since then, he has enrolled in multiple folklórico classes at the company and has even gone to their educational courses for future teachers.

Santana Maldonado is a 25 year old woman who immigrated to the States from Mexico with her family when she was a young child. She is currently working on a nursing degree at Westview College as well as working full-time at a federal health center. She danced for a year and a half when she was about 6 or 7 years old but didn’t have the opportunity to continue dancing until she joined La Escuela in June 2023.

Ximena Montez is the youngest interviewee at the age of 19. She is currently attending Lazaro University, majoring in psychology and minoring in dance. She is of Mexican heritage, although both of her parents were born in the States. Even though she has only been going to La Escuela since January 2023, she has been dancing for the majority of her life, although they were mostly in Western styles of dance such as ballet, jazz, modern, and hip hop. She always wanted to dance folklórico, but her family could not afford the price and drive time to enroll her in classes, until they moved to the same neighborhood as La Escuela.

Carolina Trujillo is a 45 year old woman who is the granddaughter of Mexican immigrants. She is originally from Texas but is raising her family in Chicago, where she earned her PhD and where she works as a registered nurse. She has danced folklórico since she was 5 years old, although she took a break from it until 2016-2017 to pursue other interests. As an adult, she found her way back to folklórico with a different company in Chicago but had to leave that group after a few years due to the Covid pandemic and taking care of her children. In September of 2022, she enrolled in the adult classes at La Escuela while her children were enrolled in the respective youth classes.
Methodology

For this paper, I worked with current members of the ballet folklórico company, La Escuela, in the city of Chicago, all of whom identified as Mexican American. Individuals were not excluded from this project based on their age, gender, sexual orientation, or immigration status. I gathered my pool of participants through creating my own personal connections as well as the snowball method of the personal connections of the participants. I sat through several adult beginner and intermediate classes on Saturday mornings, enrolled in weekly Tuesday night classes for four months, wrote fieldnotes of my experiences, and interviewed La Escuela dancers and administrators outside of scheduled classes.

Data for this project was primarily gathered through semi-structured interviews. I used a set of pre-written questions throughout all the interviews in order to correlate, quantitatively and qualitatively, the unique experiences of each of my interviewees. However, each interview was tailored to the experiences of the individual interviewee during our session. While the identities of each interviewee has been kept confidential, through the use of pseudonyms for the company, the dancers, all placenames, and other personal information (i.e. hometowns, places of work, universities, etc.), demographic information such as age, gender, sexuality, and ethnicity will not be altered or omitted (unless specifically requested by the participant). My interviews were all about an hour long and held exclusively on Zoom, since that was the easiest method that fit with each individual’s schedule. All audio from the interviews was recorded on a separate, personal device for transcription purposes, and were deleted at the completion of this project. Audio consent for participating in the project and being recorded were obtained during the interview sessions and recorded in the transcripts, which document only the pseudonyms for the protection of the interviewees. All images used in this paper were obtained with verbal consent from those in the image prior to it’s being taken. Participants were also informed that they could withdraw from the project entirely at any time, or have any information omitted after the fact from this project. My field research was conducted between January 2023 and
September 2023, with the majority of my observation hours and interviews occurring between June and September 2023. This allowed for the least amount of personal conflicts for the interviewees since many did not choose to take summer courses at the collegiate level and workplaces had summer hours that allowed their employees to leave work early.

This leads to some important factors about my sample group that I would like to address. In order to participate in folklórico dancing, recreationally, students must have access to specific resources. The main resource being transportation to class. Many of the students live about 30 minutes away from the studio and must rely on public transportation services (CTA and Metra) which costs a one-time fee or annual pass, personal vehicles, or rideshare programs and carpooling. Only a handful of students lived close enough to the studio to walk, and since our class was held late at night, walking was not always the preferred option. They must also have the financial resources to afford the proper gear to dance. Folklórico shoes range in price from $60 to $100, when purchased individually or $40 when purchased through the studio, dancers may also have to have various types of shoes based on the region they are dancing and the costume they are wearing, practice skirts for adults range from $80 to $150 dollars when purchased individually or $50 when purchased through the studio, and dancers may also have to purchase their own accessories (make-up, hair pins, jewelry, etc.). They must also have enough free time to participate in the class itself, meaning they work a job that does not interfere with the class and performance schedule or they do not have collegiate level classes at that time. This means that those of lower-economic status may not be able to participate in this dance company, even though the company does try its best to be as affordable as possible. Those who participate in folklórico must also be physically able to perform the moves, learn them at the pace the maestro/a sets (typically two months or eight classes), and they must feel like they are welcomed into this space, since it is so tied to the Mexican community. Future studies could focus on more marginalized Mexican-American communities or dancers with physical disabilities.
Is Folklórico an Art Form?

The distinction between “craft” and traditional “art” is important to understand because people, art objects, and whole genres of art (such as dance) are influenced by the contexts in which they appear, so art theory can provide a deeper understanding of the dance, since its costuming, which can be considered craft art, is so tied to the physical act of dancing itself, especially in folklórico. In the anthropology of art, objects and genres of art are typically understood through the lens of an “art world”, which Becker defines as the joint activity of a group of people that shows the cooperation and production of patterns in a collective activity (Becker 2008, 1). I interpret this to mean that an art world constructs which bets and actions are correct and incorrect in a specific genre of art, much like Bourdieu’s habitus, which is the “subjective but not individual system of internalized structures, schemes or perception, conception, and action common to all members of the same group or class” (Bourdieu 1977, 86; Becker 2008, 1). In folklórico, every aspect of the performance, from the costuming to the dance steps itself, must be accurate to the image and remembrance of the dance that the audience already holds. If there is any extreme deviation from those standards, then the performance loses legitimacy. So, if we assume that folklórico can be defined as a type of non-Western craft, then we can turn to the works of Cant to understand the power of craft knowledge in folklórico.

Cant’s research focuses specifically on the industry of alebrijes (wooden spirit animal carvings) in Oaxaca, Mexico. In this work, she argues that the craftwork of an object must both be unique enough to stand out yet not unique enough to no longer fit into the stereotypical image of how that craft should aesthetically appear (Cant 2019, 39, 43). So, there is a fine line in maintaining the legitimacy of the craft while also making it uniquely your own. And these standards of what is considered legitimate or not is determined by the everyday experiences an individual has with said art form and art object (Cant 2014, 8). This what she calls a “community of practice”, which is defined as how the production of objects (this this case the vestuario and
dance of folklórico) must be understood through the “social, cultural and spatial geography”
history of said object that emerges from everyday experiences (Cant 2014, 7). In the context of
folklórico, this everyday context that is created by and for the Mexican community, both in and
out of Mexico, through folklórico’s ties to specific states, specific vestuarios, and events in which
it is performed. In Pérez’s work, Ozzy explained that he grew up in Mexico, and that he “first
started dancing folklórico because (he) missed seeing it danced on a regular basis. . . . Then
moving to the U.S. (He) missed that. It was like, now (he’s) here. . . . (He) need(ed) to keep
everything in tact about (his) culture” (Pérez 2016, 39). This relates back to folklóricos deep
historical ties to the nationalistic images of Mexican culture.

When the dancers are first learning a new style of dance, Magdelena would make a point
of going over the specific history tied to that dance: i.e. what state it is from, where did originate,
what peoples and cultures contributed to the steps and costuming they were, etc. (Gonzalez
2023). Milagros explained to me that Magdalena teaches them to dance with “emotion” and
“passion”, which she considers more important than technical skill (Gonzalez 2023). “If you
don’t understand the histories, it’s hard to understand the dance and connect to it” (Gonzalez
2023). I witnessed this first hand at my observation. Magdelena was speaking with her beginner
adult students, explaining that they should not be hard on themselves if they aren’t as polished
as the intermediate adult and adolescent groups (Frank 2023). She explained, “There are
professional groups out there that are technically perfect. Every move, every step, flawless. But
they have no emotion, no passion. It is the story, the feeling behind the dance that makes it
enjoyable for the audience. If they don’t believe in your passion, they won’t like the dance”
(Frank 2023). Vicente also believes that it is the histories behind the dances that motivate what
is being performed, “You need to understand why you’re doing the moves!” (Huerta 2023). And
Olga argues that without the histories and traditions, then the culture will die out (Guerrero
2023). She sees folklórico as teaching performers about their own ancestry, about how mixed
Mexico is with its European, African, and indigenous roots (Guerrero 2023). This was echoed by
Belen, who, as both a dancer and a teacher herself, tries hard to maintain those indigenous ties to the dance because she understands that it is those indigenous roots that gives that power and legitimacy to the dance itself (Gomez 2023).

Let’s look at a brief example of the historical ties which create a sense of legitimacy that the cultural craftwork of folklórico vestuario can create in just one type of costume – the Jalisco ribbon dress. The Jalisco ribbon dress (Figure 1.1), which is also known as the “ranchera” or “escaramuza” dress, is the main female vestuario featured in the Jalisco ribbon dress. The region of Jalisco is a unique one in Mexico, in of itself, since it is considered to be the birthplace of mariachi music and the Mexican Hat Dance, both of which are seen as national cultural symbols of Mexico as a whole (Gashette and Gashette 2022). While the exact origins of the dress are unknown, there are many theories and believes of the historical formation of this dress style which are strictly adhered too. This deep history has made the ribbon dress the pride of Mexican mestizo culture (Gashette and Gashette 2022). While there have been many incarnations of the dress throughout the centuries, the style that is used today was perfected by Amalia Hernandez and her national Ballet Méxicano Folklórico troupe in the 1940s and 1950s (Gashette and Gashette 2022). She used the history of the jarabe tapatío (Mexican Hat Dance), through archaeological artifacts as well as ethnographic studies, to create a style that continued the tradition of using indigenous-based color fabrics, European lace/ribbon work and blouse, but she added the now emblematic style of a double skirt to the ribbon dress (Gashette and Gashette 2022). The double skirt allows for the accentuation of the ballet-based steps in the performances as well as added theatrical flourishes to the traditional steps (Gashette and Gashette 2022). The colonial history of Mexico has erased much of the original context of how the dress was formed and how it and its predecessors were used in the indigenous communities of Mexico, but it is those indigenous roots that make this dress so special to the Mexican government. It is the reconstructed history of the “noble savage” that Mexico uses to sperate itself from other colonized Latin American and Caribbean countries, but also from European countries as well. It
is Amalia Hernandez’s dress that has become tied, not only to the image the state of Jalisco has of itself, but that the entire country has of itself since Jalisco is considered to be the indigenous cultural capital of the country. So when bailarinas first learn about the Mexican Hat Dance, both through observation and performing it themselves, they also learn the history behind the state, the dance, and the vestuario that they wear, recreating that image of themselves and Mexico that the state has perpetuated for the past century.

Figure 1.1: Jalisco Performance. September 6, 2023.

All of this relates back to our earlier discussion of gender and folklórico because these vestuarios help construct those embodied experiences of gender for the dancers. When the dancers rehearse their moves, not only do they practice in their regular athleisure or work-out gear – typically dark colored but light weight gym shorts and moisture-wicking t-shirts – but they also have practice skirts and sombreros so that they can understand how their actual costumes will move in performances without ruining them (Frank 2023). Even when they do not have the practice skirts and hats, both Magdelena and the students are hyper aware of the fact
that they will be wearing those costumes at some point. Magdelena would chastise the men for not keeping their knees and legs far enough apart, “Remember, your partner is going to be wearing a skirt, if you’re standing the wrong way then you’ll get all caught up in the skirts” (Frank 2023). She would also explain the best way to hold their bodies in relation to the skirts. In some dances, the skirt work can be very relaxed and floaty, which requires a bent elbow and fluid arm motions to get the billowy effect, while others required very sharp skirt movements, meaning that the women would have to keep perfectly straight arms (Frank 2023). And due to the weight of the skirt, it can place strain on the dancers’ backs, so she recommends leaning forward slightly, to put the weight on the hips and legs, and not the back (Frank 2023). The men, on the other hand, must lean forward to make room for the sombreros that they hold behind their backs (Frank 2023). All of this advice and choreography has been crafted over generations of study and performance to create the best experience for both the dancers and the audience. This becomes interesting when connecting the costuming to gender identity. In order to properly identify with the history and tradition of that dance and the region from which it originates, not only must the vestuario for performances be historically and culturally accurate, but the practice wear must also be accurate, which I will delve into more in chapter 3.

In this chapter I have gone through the long history of ballet folklórico’s development over the past one hundred years. This art form originated as unrelated tribal ritual dances which were almost lost to history during the colonization of Mexico. It was only when Mexico needed to create a unique national character, that the newly established government sent out scholars to document these dances and incorporate them into the fabric of Mexican society and culture. In the United States, it was the Chicanos of the 1960s that turned the nationalist project into a tool of counterhegemony. I have also gone through the history of the studio and the background of my informants to showcase the character of La Escuela through those who have enrolled in its classes. And I have shown how folklórico can and should be considered an art form, through its vestuario tradition.
Chapter Two

- January 2023 -

The first time I went to La Escuela I was so nervous that my mother had to drive me, although I like to believe that she volunteered to be my chauffer for the day, just to get a feel for the group I would be spending so much time with over the next few months. The same thoughts that have been plaguing me since I learned that being both Mexican and German was “weird” began bouncing around the inside of my head again: “What if I don’t belong?”, “What if I’m not enough for them?”, “What if they think I’m lying?”, “What if they look at me and go ‘What is that skinny little gringa (white girl - derogatory) doing here? This isn’t for her!’”. As we parked the car and searched for the studio, I prepared myself to walk in and for some ominous figure to kick me to the curb and I would be left at square one for my thesis. But my nervous energy was in complete contrast with what I was about to encounter.

Despite the frigidness of January in the Midwest, the chill could not penetrate the bubbly of energy that emanated from La Escuela’s repurposed storefront. Even though the studio had no large street signs, like their neighbors, their front windows were packed with sombreros, community stickers, and prints of their yearly anniversary performances. I couldn’t help but be surprised at how busy the studio was on a Saturday morning. A children’s class was already in progress when I walked in, so parents and siblings, young and old, who were dragged along were scattered throughout the small lobby. Moms sat in clumps, along the row of folding chairs, laughing with each other in English and Spanish about how their children never wanted to get up in the mornings while guarding the discarded piles of bags, shoes, and water bottles around them – whether they belonged to their own children or not. Every now and then, loud music would play from the dance studio, and they would quickly pull out their phones to record the latest run-through. The other children looked like they were still at home as they fought for the best seat on the overstuffed sectional sofa on the other side of the room. Older teens were buried
in their phones while the toddlers occupied themselves with the array of books and toys that littered the coffee tables. The center of the lobby was occupied with large black wall and desk. The name of the studio was embossed on the wall while the computer and receptionist were hidden from the street from the tall front of the desk. The entire lobby was decorated with more prints of their performances, motivational phrases in English and Spanish, community flyers, and a giant canvas of Día de los Muertos folklórico dancers. It was so overwhelming that I just stood there for a moment, trying to take everything in. Luckily, the woman I was there to meet, noticed the two lost-looking woman in the middle of her studio and figured out who we were.

In an instant, the woman was in front of me, a warm smile on her face and a friendly hand extended. “You must be Katrina! I’m Olga, one of the owners. I was so excited to get your email the other day. Welcome to La Escuela!” Suddenly, all of the tension that had been weighing me down evaporated.

In this chapter I will be discussing how La Escuela de Ballet Folklórico – Chicago achieves its mission of spreading cultural knowledge to the community by developing a liminal space that allows students to learn in a space between the sacred and profane in order reconnect with their cultural heritage. It is this knowledge and education of people of color that provides a foundation for students to rebuild the connection to their ethnic identity, gives them the confidence to pursue their goals outside of the studio, and reflect positively on the studio. Finally, I will also be exploring how the studio uses its soft power to reach out to the community and promote a positive self-image and attract prospective students into its ranks.

**The Dance Studio as a Space of Liminality**

Dance studios all over the world tend to look the same. They are large, empty spaces with flat floors, minimally decorated walls, fluorescent lights, and at least one wall of mirrors. La Escuela was no different. Even though there were no external windows, the weight of years of curious stares and critical gazes seemed to fill the air and make my stomach clench with nervousness –
but that could have been due to some re-emerging trauma from a lifetime of dabbling with
dance, which left me with a bruised ego more than anything else. Still, I was determined to enjoy
myself, even if I had to actively remind myself, “It’s okay to not be perfect. You shouldn’t be
perfect! It’s your first day and everyone else started three weeks ago!” But there is something
about a dance studio that makes it completely different to anywhere else. Steps just seemed to
make a little more sense. Mistakes felt a little less detrimental. Unlike when I attempted to
practice in my living room, when every misstep was an insurmountable obstacle. This made me
wonder, what was so special about the dance studio atmosphere? Why was it so easy to dance
for almost an hour straight without thinking while practicing for five minutes anywhere else felt
interminable?

“Liminality” was originally coined by Arnold van Gennep in his discussion of “rites de
passage” (Turner 2018, 131; Wels et al. 2011, 1). This concept can be defined as the “middle
phase of any ritual process . . . during which an individual undergoes a transition from one
social status to another”, as an individual is experiencing this process, they enter a state where
they are both “‘no longer’ and simultaneously also ‘not yet’ . . . ‘they are betwixt and between the
positions’” (Turner 2018, 237; Wels et al. 2011, 1). While Turner uses liminality to describe the
performative rituals and tribal religions in Africa, many scholars have expanded its use to
various aspects of the study of performance and culture, “a ‘liminal phase’ could thus refer to
almost anything in which there was a normally short lived period of upending of a prior
hierarchy and during which power reversals occurred, or at least appeared to have occurred”
(Wels et al. 2011, 2). Turner argues that everyday life is essentially the same, and it is only
through these liminal periods that individuals are allowed to view the heterodoxy of their
everyday lives, to see how contingent and constructed everything is and the “ways in which their
own wisest predecessors have sought to order, explain, explain away, cloak, or mask these
mysteries and difficulties” (Turner 2018, 239, 242). But can this be applied to dance?
Frantz Fanon claims that the traditional knowledge of the colonized, i.e., “myths and magic” help to embody “the traditions and history of (his) land and ethnic group” (Fanon 2021, 18). One of these traditions is dance. While Fanon uses dance and possession as an example of how colonized bodies relax and channel violent urges that they cannot act upon, his description of dance is an interesting one (Fanon 2021, 19). “The dance circle is a permissive circle. It protects and empowers. . . . under the solemn gaze if the tribe launch themselves into a seemingly disarticulated, but in fact extremely ritualized, pantomiming . . . Everything is permitted in the dance circle” (Fanon 2021, 19-20). I interpret this as indicating that the spaces in which the dances of ethnic minorities are performed create a sense of liminality in the dancers through which they can actively and consciously take up their minority culture, which can be applied to the dance studio of La Escuela.

Of course, all this brings up Durkheim’s concept of collective effervescence. While Durkheim’s work centers on creating a unified theory to understand all societies, particularly through the lens of religion, his conclusions can be applied to a wide range of societal phenomenon outside of religion. “(T)here is an aspect of every religion that transcends the realm of specifically religious ideas . . . religion is an eminently social thing . . . religion is broader than the idea of gods or spirits and so cannot be defined exclusively in those terms” (Durkheim 1995, 8-9). He believed that religion was a way of society worshipping itself, or, in other words, a way for society to worship an aspect of the social experience, which he refers to as “collective effervescence” (Durkheim 1995, 220-223). Collective effervescence is a term used to describe the feeling an individual experiences when they participate in a group ritual shared by other members of their society, and it is this feeling that creates a sense of unity between society members who share the same values and experiences (Durkheim 1995, 226-227). So, in a way, society creates religion to make spaces where social consciousness can be produced and reproduced through the collective effervescence found in ritual (Durkheim 1995, 226-227). However, Durkheim fails to acknowledge that it is not only religious spaces that can
create this feeling, other large social spaces, such as sporting events, concerts, dances, and community events can create feelings of collective effervescence amongst participants. One way a society creates this religious space is by defining the sacred versus the profane. Durkheim defines the “sacred” as those spaces, artifacts, and even times that are connected to the context of a given religious experience, while everything that is connected to the everyday, outside of religious contexts, is considered the “profane” (Durkheim 1995, 36-38).

However, all these ideas can be applied to the experiences of the dancers at La Escuela when they are learning ballet folklórico. Since Durheim sees religion as an extension of society, it’s possible to take his work and apply it to other extensions of society, such as folk dance. By combining collective effervescence and liminality, we can see how La Escuela as a community hub creates a space where dancers can transcend their everyday lives and facilitate the learning of cultural heritage. On La Escuela’s website, they list the studio’s goals for community engagement, “Our goal is to provide the most affordable cultural and artistic programming for our community. We aim to preserve traditions for future generations and improve our community’s involvement in the arts” (La Escuela, “About Us” 2023). One way in which La Escuela accomplishes this is by providing a space where adults have the opportunity to learn. Throughout my interviews, one thing that every student mentioned was that there was a severe lack of cultural programming for adults. Vicente, the 24 year old theater manager, had a friend who was enrolled in La Escuela and had gone to several of their community performances, “after they performed, they’re always like, ‘We’re offering adult classes’”, and Carolina, the 45 year old healthcare worker with a Ph.D., mentioned that she had found the studio by Googling it, “I was with Ballet Folklórico de Dahlia before . . . and I was gonna go back . . . but they’ve kind of transitioned and they don’t really have an adult group now, so then I just kind of looked it up to see if there was something I could find” (Huerta 2023, Trujillo 2023). La Escuela also achieves this goal by creating a welcoming environment for their students, which every student praised them for, and which I experienced first-hand from the anecdote at the start of the chapter.
“(T)hey’re so welcoming and supportive which I appreciate,” Vicente admitted as he described first joining the class (Huerta 2023). Santana, the 25 year old healthcare worker, explained that “they aren’t as big as a lot of other folklórico groups but they still have an impact because they make sure a lot of stuff is open to everybody . . . it’s a very welcoming environment whether you’re Mexican or not” (Maldonado 2023). Luz, the 23 year old social work student, when asked how she would describe La Escuela to someone who had never heard of it stated that “I guess I would say that it felt like a pretty welcoming environment. I feel like it’s pretty open to anyone who wants to learn, because if it wasn’t like that, then I wouldn’t want to go” (Cabrera 2023).

All of this becomes even more important in the context that La Escuela is the only institution of its kind on the Northwest side of Chicago, since one of their primary goals is to provide artistic programming. Throughout my research, one of the main reasons for La Escuela being founded in the first place was because of a lack of Latinx cultural programing, specifically in folklórico, on the northwest side of Chicago. “There was nothing here for us,” Olga explained. “If I wanted my kids to dance folklórico, I’d have to drive forty minutes across the city, one way just to get them to class . . . We wanted our kids to be able to dance closer to home” (Guerrero 2023). Santana admitted that when she moved to the North Side as an adult, she felt disconnected from her Mexican heritage, as opposed to when she was living in her native South Side. “When I was living on the South Side, I would see Mexican culture everywhere, right? Everywhere I turned, there would be somebody Hispanic . . . But when I moved to the North Side, it was tough to find somebody Hispanic, to find somebody else who was speaking Spanish, to find stuff that was Spanish . . . it was so distant from what I grew up with” (Maldonado 2023).

This connects back to Fanon, because the institution of La Escuela provided their over two-hundred students a brick-and-mortar space where they could feel empowered to relearn about their culture and gain specific cultural knowledge – through the history and indigeneity tied to the dances – to legitimize the internalization of mexicanidad and Otherness imposed on them by both their families and US Anglo culture. As Milagros so succinctly put when asked
what she thought La Escuela provided for the community, “It allows us to take up space. During the festivals and parades we’re finally seen . . . We don’t just a seat at the table, we want to the whole table!” (Gonzalez 2023). Vicente Huerta also agreed with Milagros, “It’s about taking up space, showing everyone that we’re here, we’re part of the community and that our culture is beautiful” (Huerta 2023). The legitimation of La Escuela as a non-profit organization, run by Latinx people to educate the community about our culture, and the cultural knowledge associated so closely with the nationalist image promoted by the Mexican government (to this day), provides the protection and empowerment discussed by Fanon. This taking up and experimentation with embodying this minority identity is what is permitted within the liminal space of the folklórico studio and performance. The act of starting to learn folklórico or return to dancing folklórico provides that rite of passage into Mexican culture for the bailarines. It allows them to use this unquestionably Mexican artform to enter a liminal phase through which they can reconstruct their connections to their history, ancestry, and culture in a space that is sacred enough to build cultural capital in and yet profane, or mundane, enough in which they do not feel threatened when they make mistakes or need to ask questions.

It is this balance between sacred and profane that the dance studio rides that leads me to comment of a flaw within Durkheim’s work. He sees the sacred and profane as two binaries that can never interact, however, he admits that there are times in which they do interact, “this prohibition cannot go so far as to make all communication between the two worlds impossible, for if the profane could in no way enter into relations with the sacred, the sacred would be of no use . . . (t)he two genera cannot, at the same time, both come close to one another and remain what they were” (Durkheim 1995, 38). Durkheim is so focused on the extraordinary occasions, the sacred rituals of religion and rites of passage that he completely ignores the everyday experiences, the paying of dues, as it were, into a society. Many of my interviewees spent the majority of their lives in the United States, and have had to distance themselves from the community in order to pursue their goals, such as employment or education, which has left
them feeling a sense of disconnect with their culture. While every interviewee claimed they started dancing folklórico as a fun activity to do in their free time, there are so many other activities in a city like Chicago where they can go to enjoy themselves, and yet they all chose folklórico. I believe this is because folklórico is more than just a creative outlet, but it gives them a secondary sense of purpose and pride as they rebuild lost connections with a part of their identity. However, constantly being in a sacred place, where the pressure to perform perfectly and possess some prior cultural knowledge already can interfere with the connection to collective effervescence. That is why it is necessary to include Fanon and Turner in the discussion with Durkheim’s collective effervescence because Fanon’s dance circle shows how minority groups in Anglo society can fight back against the colonization of their history and culture through the use of dance, and how the liminal space created in arenas of ethnic dance can create a betwixt and between space where dancers can leave behind their daily lives and enter into a new space where they can reconnect with a section of their identity that they may not normally be able to express. However, the dance studio, unlike the auditoriums and community events where La Escuela performs provides a safe space that is not public enough for the dancers to feel judged in their journeys but public enough where they can learn from others in their community and build relationships with them that they can use to foster a more positive self-image.

**The Importance of Education**

It is the fact that La Escuela sees itself first and foremost as an educational facility that allows this phenomenon to occur. Education is deeply engrained in their mission statement, and is listed as their primary goal of operation, to “(e)nrich knowledge of cultural heritage and preserve traditions” as well as providing opportunities for some of their students to pursue higher education “by awarding college scholarships and maximizing leadership opportunities” (La Escuela, “About Us” 2023). This focus on both cultural knowledge as well as institutional
educational success is extremely important to the success of a program like La Escuela since there is historical systemic exclusion of students of color from educational institutions. As W.E.B. Du Bois’ notes in his work, the American government and its people tried to keep African Americans down through “the shadow prejudice,” but that “out of the evil came something of good, - the more careful adjustment of education to real life . . . The training of the schools we need to-day more than ever. . .” (Du Bois 2014, 6). Du Bois sees “(t)he knowledge in the race” being tied to institutions of higher learning, i.e., colleges and universities, where Black teachers may be educated in order to teach the next generation of Black Americans the knowledge they need to succeed in this country; “it must help in the solution of the problems of the race contact and cooperation. And finally, beyond all this, it must develop men” (Du Bois 2014, 52). He sees schools as the most important place, outside of individual homes, where “self-respecting citizens” are created through the everyday “little actions which go to make up life” which form the basis of life in a community (Du Bois 2014, 85).

The importance of education can also be seen in the members of the dance studio. Not only are all three of the founders college-educated, but the majority of the adult members are in the process of getting degrees or already have them, amongst my interviewees along, three of them have a bachelor’s degree, two have Ph.D.’s, and four are in the process of getting their bachelor’s degrees. La Escuela also works with over 100 CPS (Chicago Public Schools) schools to facilitate after-school programming for folklórico dancing (La Escuela, “About Us” 2023). But why would a dance company have such strong ties with propagating higher education? When the knowledge of indigenous dances was first being collected by Mexican scholars at the behest of the new Mexican government in the 1920s, the use of artforms such as music, dance, and craftwork were seen as “relatively ‘harmless’ aspects of culture which could be allowed to survive” and would not conflict with prestigious Western knowledge, like medicine and agriculture (Nájera Ramírez 1989, 18). In the context of the United States, folklórico was kept insulated in the Mexican migrant communities of the 1930s through to the 1950s, until it was
reclaimed by Chicanos during the Civil Rights movement to promote their cultural identities against the hegemonic narratives of white America (Nájera Ramírez 1989, 26). This led to a history of folklórico companies being associated with institutions of higher learning and encouraging brown youth to continue their education (Nájera Ramírez 1989, 26-28).

Education is fundamentally tied to the art of folklórico. Every one of my informants, and my own observations, have shown how important the histories behind the dances that are performed are to the bailarines. They have all expressed gratitude for the maestra of the adult classes, Magdalena, who had been trained in folklórico while living in Mexico, for taking the time to go through those histories with the students as they learn the dance. “You need to understand why you’re doing the moves! You can’t just do the moves without context” (Huerta 2023). One of my informants, Belen Gomez, is a senior at a prestigious university in Chicago who not only dances with La Escuela, but also helps run a folklórico group at her university (Gomez 2023). She explained that when both learning and teaching folklórico, understanding the history behind each dance and the states they came from is vital for the dancers who perform them (Gomez 2023). This is especially true since many of the dances have indigenous origins, which have been obscured through decades of alteration and assimilation by the non-indigenous Mexican government. She states that she does her best to research the indigenous histories, not only in the steps she choreographs but the vestuarios (costumes) she creates and uses (Gomez 2023). “Sometimes, during festivals and parades, we need to get food in our vestuarios, and that gets a lot of attention. . . . I use it as an excuse to educate others, especially Anglos about folklórico and about our culture” (Gomez 2023). She even specifically refuses to use the word “costume” when describing the clothing she wears during performances, because “it’s not a ‘costume,’ it’s more than that. It’s part of our culture, our history, and it’s important to know its name” (Gomez 2023). As Du Bois argues, it is through education that people of color in the United States can gain the resources to advocate for themselves against mainstream Anglo
society, to promote their own interests, and teach the next generation how to not only embrace their ethnic heritage but function as the Other in more positive ways.

Due to the rapid growth of La Escuela over the past few years, they have been in the process of adding more classes and thus more staff. Just in the year that I have been involved with the group, they have added the adult class I am currently enrolled in, one focused on younger adults – aged 18 to 25, as well as several other youth classes, with one focuses solely on transitioning older teenagers, 15 to 18, into the adult level classes. They are also trying to increase the number of CPS schools that they serve, and so they have been hosting teaching lectures for their adult members, to train them to become maestros/as themselves. About once a month, La Escuela will post on their social media accounts that they will have a free introductory class for becoming a teacher at the studio. Prospective attendees can email the studio to attend, where they will be shown a PowerPoint presentation by one of the staff members, either Cesar or Magdelena, who describe the basic history of ballet folklórico and how important the role of a maestro/a is in the education of students in this artform. The class I attended was led by Cesar, and had about 8 women, one which was Ximena, the 19 year old attending Lazaro University, and one man, who was Vicente. Out of the other women who attended, 6 of them had heard about the class through the studio’s social media, while the last woman was told of it through a colleague at work. Outside of Vicente, all of the other prospective teachers, including Ximena, had decades of pervious dance experience, and two of the women were teachers at their day jobs, so they were used to interacting with young students.

As the class continued, Cesar expressed several key skills all La Escuela teachers needed to know in order to do their jobs properly. The first major point he expressed was being able to use both English and Spanish. “In CPS classes,” he explained, “you’re going to get a mix of Spanish-speaking and English-speaking students, and while not every student will have the same level of Spanish, it’s important to incorporate Spanish into your classes. Spanish is a fundamental part of folklórico, it’s the original language it’s taught in and many of the técnica
terms are Spanish, and really can’t be translated. So, being bilingual is fundamental to helping your students understand folklórico and to understand its history⁴” (Frank 2023). The knowledge of this history of folklórico was another key skill they would have to learn. While he couldn’t go into depth, in the hour we had, about all aspects of folklórico, he addressed the history of several of the vestuarios. “The northern regions are every influenced by Anglo culture, which is why they wear cowboy boots, jean pants and skirts, frilly tops, and cowboy hats but even regions these outfits change . . . And when you go further south, like in Jalisco, that’s where you get the full lace skirts and charro suits . . . Then, to the southwest, in states like Michoacan, you are in indigenous peasant clothing and sandals (translated from Spanish)” (Frank 2023, Figure 2.3, Table 2.1). Knowing which clothing goes with which region and dance is fundamental to accurately portraying the culture of that region. Which leads into the third key skill future teachers would need to know, all the different styles of folklórico dance. As Cesar explained, “Many teachers only teach the most popular styles from the most popular states, like the Jarabe Tapatío from Jalisco. But there are so many others: danzas, jarabes, sons (Guerrero), chotises (northern states), redovas (Chihuahua), polkas (northern states), chilenas (Oaxaca), jaranas (Yucatan). It’s the teacher’s job to make sure their students are exposed to every culture, not just the popular ones⁵” (Frank 2023, Figure 2.1, Figure 2.2). This sentiment was even echoed by Ximena, after we attended the teacher’s class. Ximena explained how she had never thought to educate herself about the history of folklórico dancing, “Of course, you should know the history, but I never thought that it was as important as the steps until I went to that teacher’s class” (Montez 2023).

---

⁴ Translated from Spanish.
⁵ Translated from Spanish.
Figure 2.1: Colima Performance (left) and Figure 2.2: Hildago Performance (right). September 17, 2023.

**MAP KEY**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>State</th>
<th>Star Color</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Baja California</td>
<td>Red</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chihuahua</td>
<td>Orange</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Guerrero</td>
<td>Gold</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jalisco</td>
<td>Green</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Michoacan</td>
<td>Pink</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Oaxaca</td>
<td>Blue</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Yucatan</td>
<td>Purple</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
All of this just goes to illustrate just how influential La Escuela’s educational program is on both the students and the staff. Ximena is still in college, earning her bachelor’s degree in psychology, and yet Olga, one of the owners, encouraged her to participate in the teacher’s workshop. She admitted to me that she was in the process of trying to figure out what she wanted to do with the rest of her life, and that the only thing she was certain of was that she still wanted to be involved with La Escuela in the future. “I know one possible thing I could do would be a dance teacher . . . and it would be cool if I could also do folklórico dance teaching, because that’s closer to my culture and I love it” (Montez 2023). Not only does this prove that La Escuela is reaching its goals of providing “cultural and artistic programming for our community” as well as preserving “traditions for future generations” but it also relates back to Du Bois’ ideas of the importance of educating people of color. Du Bois was writing at a time when people of color did not even having voting rights in the United States, and so without a voice in government to protect them, they would have to protect themselves, and the best way they could do that was through higher education. Educating people of color, however, was not enough for Du Bois. He believed that marginalized people should not just be educated by white or Anglo people, but they
should be educated by themselves. He believed Black Americans would benefit the most by learning from Black educators, on all levels, since only educators who have shared their life experiences would be able to fully understand their minority students and the struggles they face on a daily basis. Another scholar, Victor Torres has also described this phenomenon in his own research, stating that the learning of traditional cultural knowledge, like ballet folklórico can provide a space where minority students can decolonize their own educational journeys (Torres 2022, 43). He turns to the history of how Chicano activists in the sixties used folklórico performances to “protest (the) invading hegemony found within their social world, particularly their schooling spaces, that disregarded their heritage practices and its ability to empower disadvantaged youth” and it was through these performances that Latinx communities could find “joy and resistance through collective remembering and engagement” (Torres 2022, 42).

La Escuela exemplifies how educational programs by marginalized people, for marginalized people can facilitate a lifelong love of learning, which they can take with them outside of the dance studio. Couple this with the college scholarships that the studio provides for some of its high school students entering college, this fund allows them to continue their education while still maintaining their cultural connections, and becoming inspirations to the younger students who will be more encouraged to follow in their footsteps. Outside of the studio context, La Escuela’s promotion of higher education provides opportunities for more women of color to get higher level jobs and make space for the Latinx men, women, and folks after them to reach for their own personal goals while still feeling connected to their ethnic background.

**Soft Power in the Community**

As stated earlier in this chapter, folk knowledge, such as folk dance, are seen as less threatening to members of the majority populace since it does not conflict with their own knowledge sets like other types of knowledge, such as mathematics or medicine, may (Nájera Ramírez 1989, 18). This leaves an opening for institutions like La Escuela to us soft power to achieve their mission
on the Northwest Side community, which involves being an active presence in the community at large events like Chicago’s 26th Street Mexican Independence Day Parade or Arts in the Dark Halloween Parade – where Mexican/Latinx heritage groups dress in traditional regalia, indigenous vestuario, and Día de los Muertos costumes – but also in smaller events such as quinceañeras or at local libraries. The busiest time for the studio are the months of September and October, which is when the United States celebrates Hispanic Heritage Month. This celebratory month occurs every year between September 15th and October 15th, which is unique from other ethnic heritage months in that it does not fall from the marked first and last days of a calendar month. The main reason for this set of dates is to correspond with the dates of independence for many Latinx countries: Costa Rica, Nicaragua, El Salvador, Honduras, and Guatemala all celebrate on September 15th, Mexico celebrates on September 16th, Belize celebrates on September 18th, and Chile celebrates on September 21st. Once Hispanic Heritage Month is over, the Halloween and Día de los Muertos celebrations happen until November 1st and 2nd. During this time of year, La Escuela has at least one or two events a week.

It is these events that allows La Escuela to achieve their goal of spreading cultural heritage and educating the next generation about Mexican culture, and the main way accomplish this is through the use of soft power. According to Joseph Nye, who coined the term “soft power”, the way that soft power functions on the global stage is through “attraction”, or “making one’s culture attractive to the target audience” (Chua 2012, 120). However, there are never any guarantees that the culture a nation’s soft power is promoting will be accepted by a given target audience, and this acceptance of external influence is entirely contextual (Chua 2012, 120). One scholar, Beng Huat Chua, views soft power in Weberian terms, or “the ability to get other to do things that they may not be willing to do,” and this idea of power is reflected in Nye’s ideas of soft power (Chua 2012, 119). In order for soft power to be successful, the exported cultural product “must be able to shift its audience’s perceptions, preferences, interpretive frameworks and emotions . . . towards a generally positive disposition and attraction to the
exporting country” (Chua 2012, 121). This kind of power can be incredibly important for less economically or militarily powerful countries and their respective cultures. While the United States has used soft power to promote a positive image of itself worldwide, it is America’s mainstream Anglo culture that benefits the most from this soft power. Yet, I believe that marginalized communities can use soft power against the mainstream population to boost a better image of themselves, especially when that culture is tied to a national identity. Both Chicanos and the Mexican government have used the soft power from ballet folklórico to facilitate the creation of their own unique identities.

A great example of this occurring took place during the Hispanic Heritage Month programming La Escuela was involved in. One major part of its community programming was that the studio would perform at several libraries throughout the Chicagoland area, one of which was in the Northwest suburb of Northcreek, right on the outskirts of the city. The small library was decorated with the traditional paper streamers, papel picados, flags from every Latinx country, and a variety of other paper decorations in a multitude of colors. The event was entirely free and library staff had set up tables at the front of the library where they served chicharrones wheels, churros with strawberry and chocolate dipping sauces, and hot coffee. Dancers from La Escuela trickled into the library in small groups for about an hour before the performance was set to start, while Olga, dressed in traditional vestuario and several other parents of folklórico dancers set up the Bluetooth speaker system they would be using. Once the performance was set to start, Olga called the large crowd that had gathered into the main atrium where several groups of dancers of all ages would perform dances from about seven different states, such as Baja California (Figure 2.4). At the halfway point amongst the performances, Olga announced that the next dance would be “The Mexican Hat Dance”, and that the audience was highly encouraged to participate. Several of the dancers made their way through the crowd, convincing

---

6 Small wagon-wheel-shaped pieces of fried pork rinds.
nervous children and reluctant friends and family to join them out on the dance floor. Children of all ages and ethnic background hopped, spun, and clapped with the La Escuela dancers with embarrassed smiles while their parents excitedly recorded them. Once the performances were finally coming to a close, Olga made another announcement, that the last dance of the day would be another group dance. “We at La Escuela love ending our shows with group dances because we believe that dance is meant for everyone. So, if you know this one, and I’m sure if you’ve ever attended a quinceañera then you do know it, please join us!” Then, a familiar tune blasted from the speakers, and all of the La Escuela dancers began performing “El Payaso de Rodeo” (The Rodeo Clown). “El Payaso de Rodeo” is the Mexican version of “The Electric Slide”, with basically the same steps. As with “The Mexican Hat Dance”, the kids were the first ones to rush out, even if they didn’t know all the steps. Slowly a few adults began to join them, and everyone laughed at the spun in time together (Figure 2.5). Of course, Olga was sure to make everyone aware that La Escuela did offer children, teen, and adult class for everyone interested in learning more.

Figure 2.4: Baja California Performance. September 17, 2023.
While the smaller events provide the most interpersonal connection with the audience for the ballet folklórico dancers, participation in the larger events, like being the halftime show for the Chicago Bulls, performing for former Mayor Lori Lightfoot and her wife at an event to award more groups with grants for cultural programming, or appearing on the local news when they had their Hispanic Heritage Month celebrations, shows a different type of soft power that the studio holds. Milagros explained that these types of events “. . . allow us to be seen, to take up space” (Gonzalez 2023). They become a way of “symbolically being here” and showcasing the “culture of this city” (Gonzalez 2023). Vincente agreed, explaining that folklórico gave them the “space to do the things I’ve always wanted”, that it shows the “humanity” and “diversity” of one of the most prominent populations in the city – “it lets us take up space” (Huerta 2023). It is these larger performances that reach the majority of prospective students. La Escuela posts photographs and videos of all of these performance, to not only share their accomplishments with the families and individuals currently supporting them, but as a way to advertise the opportunities a future student could experience if they join the studio (Figure 2.6, Figure 2.7). All of my interviewees used social media to find the studio, and it is this social media presence that encouraged them to join. Milagros even admitted that dancing folklórico was a childhood dream for her, “I've always enjoyed really watching them (folklórico groups), like, watching
groups dance and I’ve always had dreams about moving my dress and learning all of those things, and so, I’m currently living my childhood dreams, you know?” (Gonzalez 2023). Another interviewee, Jesus, who is originally from the East Coast even noted the unique characteristic of Chicago Mexicans as opposed to other Mexican Americans in our conversations. “I think Mexican Americans in Chicago are also Chicagoans, and they are proud of being Mexican American in Chicago! Where as opposed to my home state, it’s like, ‘We’re Mexican Americans . . . but whatever’ . . . but here, I feel like it’s more like, ‘I’m Mexican American but I’m also Chicagoan!’ . . . Mexicans here are so different than Mexicans over there” (Díaz Morillo 2023).

Figure 2.6: Chicago Bulls Halftime Show. March 16, 2023.
This shows that La Escuela is a representative of not only Mexican culture in the United States, and, more specifically, the Midwest, but representative of Chicago mexicanidad. When Carolina was asked if she felt that folklórico accurately portrays Mexican history and experiences, she said, “I think so . . . we just have a rich, colorful, joyful history . . . (and) I’ve moved all over the country . . . and I just always feel like when I’m around Latinos – when there’s areas – I feel like there’ just that sense of community, and happiness, and joy, and I think our folklórico really portrays that” (Trujillo 2023). Olga also argues that the representation that the studio provides can act as a counterhegemonic narrative to what many Latinx people are exposed to on a daily basis. “(A)ny time where you can expand somebody else’s horizons is a win, because you are exposing them to all the positive stuff from our culture, which they might not be aware of, especially because the media always covers all the bad stuff . . . once we keep presenting it in a positive light, and you see all these other Latino professionals supporting it and participating in it, I think we’ll make a lot more progress” (Guerrero 2023). Looking at this
information through the lens of soft power, La Escuela can be seen as using its standing within
the community to promote a positive image of Mexican culture as well as Chicago Mexican
culture to other members of the Mexican American community as well as those from outside of
the community. In a personal conversation, Olga informed me that La Escuela took part in the
Polish Constitution Day Parade in Chicago, even though they are a Mexican folk dance group.
She explained that many of the students at La Escuela came from mixed-ethnic backgrounds,
and many were both Polish and Mexican, so they had all of their Polish-Mexican students march
in the parade, so they could celebrate both sides of their ethnic identities (Guerrero 2023).

This is the influence they have using soft power. They have been able to make both the
image of their studio and the wider Mexican American community attractive to several different
target audiences. The first audience being other Mexican and Latinx people in the Chicagoland
area, especially those of the Northwest side who want to connect and celebrate their culture. The
second audience being non-Latinx people who live, work, and love beside Latinx Chicagoans
that want to know more about the culture of their friends and neighbors. By appearing in some
of the city’s largest parades, even some that are geared for non-Mexican American communities,
advertising their program on the local news, and dancing in some of Chicago’s biggest venues –
i.e. the United Center and the Field Museum (Figure 2.8) – they have been able to be seen by
eyes that never would have sought them out on their own, and make space for themselves in the
wider context of Chicago’s culture.
In this chapter, I have discussed how La Escuela fosters a space where students feel welcome to learn about their own heritage as Mexican Americans that is between the everyday, profane, and the extraordinary, the sacred. They also promote the pursuit of education for all of their students by offering scholarship programs and encouraging the learning of history of the dances and vestuario that each class performs. It is this knowledge that allows students to rebuild connections with a culture that they may feel isolated from, whether in the neighborhood in which they live, the schools they attend, or the places where they work. I have also addressed how La Escuela’s use of soft power has allowed them to achieve their mission of spreading cultural knowledge by attracting positive attention from the Mexican American community in Chicago as well as the non-Latinx community members they live with through the development of a positive relationship with the community.
Chapter Three

- July 2023 -

The day of the block party, my phone was buzzing almost non-stop (Figure 3.1). Everyone was double-checking the block party’s address, parking availability, and how we were supposed to dress. In a more formal performance, we would have been given the proper vestuario for the state of Guerrero, which was the state of origin for the dance we would be performing, but since this party was so last minute and the majority of the vestuario were already being used for the amusement park performance, it was decided that those of us dancing the feminine part would wear the traditional beaded blouses from Guerrero with the colored practice skirts we wore during class (Figure 3.2). The one person dancing the male part, Jesus, would be wearing a white peasant-style shirt and pants with a red neckerchief and tan sombrero. Cesar also sent us photographs for how to do our make-up and hair for the performance, which included a red lip, golden eyeshadow with winged eyeliner, and a set of twin braids.

Figure 3.1: Block Party Group Photo (left) and Figure 3.2: Guerrero Blouse (right). August 6, 2023.
About an hour before the performance, I came down the stairs with my hair and make-up fully done, ready to head out. My mom, who was going to come with me to watch the performance was sitting in the living room waiting for me. Always needing a second opinion on my sub-par make-up skills, I asked her if I looked alright. She gave me a quick once over before saying, “You look Mexican.” I couldn’t help but feel a little proud at that. In our family, like many other Mexican families (of mixed ethnic background or not), there was a wide array of skin tones, and since many of my cousins were half-Caucasian, like me, the majority of us appeared to be white passing. As a small child, this never bothered me. My mother, who is entirely of Mexican descent, is extremely white passing, so I never associated phenotypical traits with being Mexican, even though I was aware of the stereotypically common traits from my neighbors, media, and family members. Still, it wasn’t until I started elementary school that I realized we were different. I would try to connect with my Mexican and Latinx classmates, which made up about half of every class I would be in through high school, but I was always rebuffed with the same statement, “You’re not Mexican enough.”

In some ways, this was true. I didn’t speak Spanish, I was not Catholic, I didn’t have a Spanish last name, and I looked different. Yet, when I would be with my Anglo classmates, I felt disconnected from them, like I was hiding part of myself. Then, when the question of family background would come up, which is a common occurrence in American schools, especially when learning about history, and I would explain how my father’s family mainly identified as German and my mother’s family came from Mexico via Texas, my classmates would give me funny looks or claim that I was lying about my heritage. Even one of my friends, who was also white passing first generation Mexican American, would joke with me about only being a quarter Mexican because of how white I looked. Like many other people of mixed heritage in the United States, I felt torn. I never seemed to be “Mexican enough” for other Mexican Americans of only Latinx descent, and yet I also felt like I was rejecting my heritage whenever I was in Anglo spaces. So, to hear that I was visibly representing my heritage from the woman who
connected me to that culture in the first place was an incredibly moving experience for me – especially since I was terrified of walking out of the house and some accusing me of appropriating my own culture.

Many of the of the dancers at La Escuela had similar experiences to me, whether or not they were of mixed heritage or not. They would feel that pull between their Mexican heritage and their American upbringing, which may be why we all identify with the scene from Selena (1997) in which one character exclaims, “We gotta be twice as perfect as anybody else . . . And we gotta prove to the Mexicans how Mexican we are, and we gotta prove to the Americans how American we are. We gotta be more Mexican than the Mexicans and more American than the Americans, both at the same time. It’s exhausting!” (Movieclips 2017). Vicente, the 24 year old theater manager, admitted to me that when he was younger, he fell into the temptation to believe in the stigma that there was a specific look someone of Mexican heritage needed to have (Huerta 2023). “It’s something that bothers me now because I have so many friends that are Latino or Mexican that happen to be white passing, and I know when talking to them, it was a struggle – of, like, literally giving up Latinidad7 because of other people telling them that they were not Mexican enough. But then learning that it was when they started embracing it that they felt more whole and connected, which I think is really beautiful” (Huerta 2023). That feeling of wanting to reconnect with culture is what inspired many of the students I have worked with at La Escuela to enroll, to give them that feeling of being part of the community that they may not have outside of the dance studio.

As I have addressed in the previous chapter, La Escuela creates a liminal space where dancers are able to feel safe in exploring their heritage and building connections to their community, which provides both the dancer and the institution with the cultural capital to survive and thrive. In this chapter, I will be exploring how the dancers at La Escuela use this

---

7 The attributes and experiences shared by those of Latinx descent.
space to create connections and reconcile their internal images of self as Mexican Americans and, in the case of three of my informants, as members of the LGBTQIA+ community. I will do this by focusing on how the wearing of traditional garb can facilitate an embodied connection to their ethnic background and ancestry in conjunction with habitus and double-consciousness, as well as how gender is expressed and explored through the traditional performance clothing and during every day practice.

La Escuela has created a liminal space where dancers are able to feel safe in exploring their heritage and building connections to their community, which provides both the dancer and the institution with the cultural capital to survive and thrive. In this chapter, I will be exploring how the dancers at La Escuela use this space to create connections and reconcile their internal images of self as Mexican Americans and, in the case of three of my informants, as members of the LGBTQIA+ community. I will do this by address how the dancers may feel a sense of double-conscious as they try to understand what being both “Mexican” and “American” means to them, how they use the knowledge they have gained from membership at the studio to rebuild and internalize the connection to their ethnic background through the use of habitus and personages, and how the use of vestuario and choreography is used by the LGBTQIA+ members of the studio to explore their gender and sexuality in a way that still correlates with their Mexican heritage.

**The Double-Consciousness of Mexican Americans**

The term “double-consciousness” was first coined by W.E.B. Du Bois in 1903 and illustrates the experience of Black Americans, who must always see themselves through the lens of the dominate, white society (Du Bois 2014, 5). “One ever feels this twoness – an American, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body, whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder” (Du Bois 2014, 5). Du Bois continues, stating that it is the struggle of African Americans to find a balance between these two selves,
without losing any of the experiences of either identity, claiming that they “would not Africanize America” nor “bleach” their own blood, since both have valuable lessons to teach the world (Du Bois 2014, 5). “He simply wishes to make it possible for a man to be both a Negro and an American, without being cursed and spit upon by his fellows, without having the doors of Opportunity closed roughly in his face” (Du Bois 2014, 5). This double-consciousness has led to a sort of double knowledge; the knowledge perpetuated by the white society that is foreign to the life experiences of people of color, and the knowledge learned within the Black community that is rejected and strange to anyone outside the community (Du Bois 2014, 5-6). “This waste of double aims, this seeking to satisfy two unreconciled ideals . . . and at times has even seemed about to make them ashamed of themselves” (Du Bois 2014, 5-6).

While Du Bois focuses his work on African Americans and the Black community, his work can easily be applied to every racial and ethnic group in the United States to this day. Throughout my research with the dancers of La Escuela, and from my own personal experience as a biracial white and Mexican American, this double-consciousness is an ever present theme. Milagros Gonzalez, who has only been dancing folklórico for half a year, explained her own thought process for joining the group as an adult. After completing her master’s degree in a predominantly white medical field, she wanted to spend her newly acquired free time doing something fun, doing something that was important to her (Gonzalez 2023). “When I’m at work, I’m the only Mexican surrounded by white people . . . I just wanted to find a space where I could be myself, without having to explain anything to anyone. I wanted to be with people who would just get it” (Gonzalez 2023). This sentiment perfectly encapsulates Du Bois’ concept of double-consciousness. While in a professional setting that is dominated by the rules and experiences of white society, which Milagros feels comfortable navigating through her experiences as a second generation Mexican American and within the educational world (i.e. primary education and higher education), she becomes keenly aware that her experiences as an ethnic minority are not common amongst her peers and must be explained. So, by participating in a dance form, like
folklórico, which is not only part of a nationalist project to perpetuate a specific image of Mexican culture but also a group activity with heavy ties to the Mexican American community on the northwest side of Chicago, she is able to satiate that internal struggle of the “two irreconcilable ideals”, as mentioned by Du Bois, by surrounding herself with others in a liminal space where each side of her identity will not be questioned or misunderstood. Many of the other bailarines at La Escuela also have undergraduate and graduate degrees, and work in fields where they are the token ethnic person in the room, and La Escuela provides them with both the physical and psychological space to embrace all aspects of themselves and appease the stress of the double-consciousness without feeling like they are betraying some part of themselves.

Jesus, the 23 year old CPS teacher, also explained that something folklórico has taught them that they have taken with them to life outside the studio is that it helps them in “just remembering who (they are) and where (they) come from, and being in touch with it” (Díaz-Morillo 2023). They continue to say, “It’s made me curious about history, life, my family, and I don’t want to lose that because I think that’s what make me, me,” (Díaz-Morillo 2023). Vicente echoed that feeling, “I think (folklórico) has made me prouder to be Mexican . . . it’s made me more curious about my ancestors, the people who came before me, the people in my family and in my lineage” (Huerta 2023). He then went on to explain how the first time he performed in full vestuario, “there was something about wearing it for the first time and feeling so Mexican! Like, feeling like this was something I could never rock because I didn’t feel Mexican enough, but I feel like I realized that it’s all in my head. I’m the one who’s been making myself less Mexican, and I decide that for myself” (Huerta 2023).

And yet, there is also a deeper layer to this double-consciousness than just the dichotomy between being Mexican and American. It is important to remember that ballet folklórico has stemmed from a nationalist project to take indigenous art and culture and use it to create a unique identity for the entire country by removing it from its traditional contexts. Many of the dances that fall under the umbrella of ballet folklórico, especially those in the southern most
regions, have long histories of being performed by the indigenous peoples of Mexico as well as the enslaved peoples of the African Diaspora. One of the dances that the studio teaches is a “son de tarima”\(^8\) – a variant of the Afro-Mexican dance style “son de artesa”\(^9\) – which originates from Tixtla, Guerrero (Rodriguez 2018). This style of dance originated from the colonial area and could be found in both Oaxaca and Guerrero, the lore behind this dance claims that Afro-Mexicans started dancing on their canoes to celebrate their freedom from the Spanish, and those canoes eventually turned into small wooden stages made from the same wood (Rodriguez 2018). Son de artesas can still be found today in the municipalities of Pinotepa Nacional and San Nicolás, which are primarily home to Afro-Mexicans who have worked hard to reclaim this part of their heritage after it was almost entirely lost in the 1980s (Rodriguez 2018). This creates a sense of double-consciousness in the dances since no one in my class identifies as Afro-Mexican or as indigenous, yet those cultures are so woven into the dance that it would be impossible to dance it without those influences.

Belen, the one dancer who has choreographed for other groups, explains, “I think it’s very important that we recognize, especially if they have indigenous elements, that these are things that have been shared with us and that we have the privilege to be displaying. Because, in a way, we’re telling their story – we don’t have to be the one’s telling it, but they have to share it with us, and now we get to perform that and kind of represent that on stage to the people who may not have ever seen this before . . . I can’t go out misrepresenting a region” (Gomez 2023). She also expressed worry about cultural appropriation while performing dances with heavy indigenous and Afro-Mexican influence because she does not want to erase their voices, but the way she combats this feeling is through the use of knowledge, “as long as I’m properly educated, that I understand what I’m doing, that’s how I reconcile with that” (Gomez 2023). One way she does this is by learning about the vestuario she wears. “In Oaxaca, have a very large Zapotec

---

\(^8\) Sound of the platform (English translation).
\(^9\) A dance on a wooden platform shaped like an animal.
culture, and their weaving – like, their vestuario is more intricate with how it looks with the weaving, like it’s not just hand-sewn, it’s actually weave. In San Luis de Potosi, their shawls are cross-stitched and embroidered by indigenous people, and they often, from what Magdelena has told us, they actually include stories into their cross-stitch that have to do with their indigenous culture” (Gomez 2023). She continued on to explain that knowledge like that was not something that was easily discovered by someone out of context, “it’s a word of mouth thing . . . you would actually have to go down there and speak with someone, see if they are willing to share, because it’s their culture and they don’t have to share it with us” (Gomez 2023). So, as previously discussed in chapter 2, the use of knowledge and the power of education is influential in the ways in which students at La Escuela shape the images of themselves through what they have learned by dancing folklórico, which, in turn, fosters a sense of habitus with other Mexicans and Mexican Americans.

The Habitus of Ethnicity

Bourdieu’s concept of habitus can be applied to how society influences and internalizes gendered expectations onto bodies. As Bourdieu defines it, habitus is the “socially constituted system of cognitive and motivating structures, and the socially structured situation in which the agents’ interests are defined, and with the objective functions and subjective motivations of their practices” (Bourdieu 1977, 76). In other words, Bourdieu believes that classes within a single society, such as the United States, create internalized strategies on how the individuals within that class should act and react in everyday life (Bourdieu 1977, 76). These structures allow said individuals to make good bets in their lives to achieve whatever goals they set for themselves. He states that evaluations of everyday actions requires not only the societal “wisdom, sayings, commonplaces, ethical percepts (‘that’s not for the likes of us’)” but also the “unconscious principles of the ethos”, which is determined by lived experiences (Bourdieu 1977, 77-78). One
important thing to note about Bourdieu’s habitus is that the main experiences that hold the most influence over its formation are the ones from early childhood (Bourdieu 1977, 78).

With folklórico dancing, the majority of my informants stated that they grew up watching folklórico groups perform for various community events in both the United States and Mexico. Milagros even admitted, a little sheepishly, that she always loved watching the bailarinas of folklórico, with the brightly colored skirts and ribbons in their hair, dance in different showcases (Gonzalez 2023). The same can be said for Belen, who grew up dancing with various folklórico troupes throughout Chicago, until the pandemic hit (Gomez 2023). Once the pandemic was over, Belen realized that she really missed dancing and being part of a group, so she actively looked for a new group to join and found La Escuela (Gomez 2023). In a similar vein, Ximena, the 19 year old college student, said that when she was in elementary school, a folklórico group came in and taught everyone a few steps, which is what made her fall in love with the dance (Montez 2023). However, she didn’t remember the name of the group that came in and could not find another group where she could take classes, so she had to wait until she was an adult to find a group, La Escuela, where she could learn (Montez 2023). Carolina, the registered nurse with a Ph.D., also had a similar experience. She is one of the older members of the class, in her early forties, and she has two daughters who have folklórico experience (Trujillo 2023). She had some experience with dancing folklórico as a child, but when she reached high school, she stopped dancing in order to pursue other interests (Trujillo 2023). And just like with the founders of La Escuela, when she had her own children, she wanted them to get involved with a program centered around their Latinx heritage (Trujillo 2023). “I chose folklórico because I wanted my daughters to have the same experience with dancing that I had at their age. It was something we could share” (Trujillo 2023). The whole reason why Carolina chose La Escuela was because it offered both child and adult classes, so that they could take up dancing as a family (Trujillo 2023). However, her eldest daughter, who is in her early teens, has decided to no longer participate in folklórico (Trujillo 2023). When I asked her whether she would
encourage her to keep participating, she replied with, “I’m disappointed she doesn’t want to
dance anymore, but she does cheerleading and other things at her school. I did the same thing at
her age. I do hope that one day she’ll come back to it, but at least she already has that foundation
for later in life if she returns to folklórico,” (Trujillo 2023). So, while not everyone had the
opportunity to dance folklórico as a child to work that skill into their sense of habitus, the fact
that folklórico is such a prolific part of the community, allows them to reconnect to the
childhood experience of observing the performance, just as their parents, grandparents, and
great-grandparents did before them.

One thing I want to note about Bourdieu’s work is that it heavily centers around class,
and much like Du Bois, Bourdieu sees education as the main way of lifting an individual through
the class hierarchy. So, Bourdieu’s work can be tied into my earlier discussion about the ties that
La Escuela and folklórico, in general, have with the institution of education and teaching young,
brown bodies how to embody their culture and history within the United States. However, this
leads to one main issue I have with Bourdieu’s work, the one discourse that he does not explore
is race. People of Mexican and other Latinx heritages are diasporic populations and are
permanently seen as immigrant populations even when they have been in this country for
several generations. But the immigrant experience is not reducible to class, meaning the
habituses they create are also not reducible to class. The reasons why individuals become
immigrants varies as much as the individuals themselves, and these unique histories influence
the habitus internalized by those who experience those histories (Bourdieu 1977, 87).

Despite this, there is an opening for how habitus can be applied to the experiences and
embodiment of race within the United States. The “homogenization of group or class habitus
which results from the homogeneity of the conditions of existence is what enables practices to be
objectively harmonized without any intentional calculation or conscious reference to a norm and
mutually adjusted in the absence of any direct interaction” (Bourdieu 1977, 80). Folklórico is
being used by these adult bailarines to either recreate or create for the first time the basic
knowledge that many people believe Mexicans and Mexican Americans share. Dancers must be knowledgeable about the history of the dance they are doing, and La Escuela even brings in outside maestros and maestrás from Mexico for special lessons. As Luz, the 23 year old who is both Mexican and Guatemalan, explains, “it’s nice to learn as much as I can about being Mexican, because I can look everything up but it’s hard to feel authentically Mexican, as much as its part of my identity . . . it’s nice to know the dances but it’s also nice to know the history” (Cabrera 2023). She also admitted that she enjoyed performing for young children because it gave them the chance to learn about the dance and try it for themselves (Cabrera 2023). “If I’d had the ability to learn it as a kid, I would have. It’s a lot of work that foes into it, so if I’d learned it as a kid it would’ve been easier and I would know a lot more” (Cabrera 2023). The liminality of dance class, where students are allow to ask questions, to not know things, and to learn from one another no matter their age can recreate those early life experiences that Bourdieu advocates for in his habitus discussion.

**Gender and Folklórico**

Dancing folklórico does not just affect the way the bailarines at La Escuela view their connection to their ethnic backgrounds, but, for the dancers who are part of the LGBTQIA+ community, it can affect the way the feel about expressing their gender in relation to their Mexican heritage as well. One of the most fundamental aspects about folklórico is that dancers are split into masculine parts (men) and feminine roles (women) in accordance with the gender they were assigned at birth (Hansen 2006, 171). We can turn to the work done by De Beauvoir and Foucault to understand how sexuality and gender are internalized. One of De Beauvoir’s main arguments she makes throughout her work, *The Second Sex*, is an important one to address in the study of folklórico. She argues that “(i)t is not nature that defines woman, it is she who defines herself by dealing with nature on her own account in her emotional life” (De Beauvoir 2010, 39). In other words, womanhood is not something that is biologically natural, it is
something that society imposes onto our bodies, which shapes how those who are categorized as female at birth move through and experience the world (De Beauvoir 2010, 39, 49, 236).

Foucault’s arguments in *A History of Sexuality: An Introduction* also agree with the claims made by De Beauvoir. “Sexuality must not be thought of as a kind of natural given which power tries to hold in check, or as an obscure domain which knowledge tries gradually to uncover. It is the name that can be given to a historical construct . . .” (Foucault 1990, 105).

Both De Beauvoir and Foucault agree that the institutions of government and society influence what an individual sees as “normal” and “abnormal”, but Foucault places a bit more emphasis on language; i.e., what is allowed to be discussed, where and when topics can be discussed, and the categorization of sexualities that both bring them out of the realm of invisibility as it constricts them (Foucault 1990, 83-85, 136-137). De Beauvoir agrees to some extend that “(i)t is not as a body but as a body subjected to taboos and laws that the subject gains consciousness of and accomplishes himself”, but she relies more on psychoanalysis and psychophysiology (De Beauvoir 2010, 47). This provides a great lens through which to understand how the bailarines I have worked with internalize their sense of ethnic identity. Just as with sex and sexuality, ethnicity is not something that is inherent based on the biology of an individual, it is learned and relearned through the society in which an individual is exposed too. “Sexuality must not be taken as an irreducible given . . .” and neither can the ethnicity an individual identifies as (De Beauvoir 2010, 55). De Beauvoir continues, stating that women do not define their conscious femininity by the fact that they are simply “female”, since that term has no gender correlations in of itself, it is “within the society of which she is a member” that places these gender expectations onto female bodies (De Beauvoir 2010, 58). As Jesus notes when they were asked about how influential the Spanish language can be on gendered binaries in folklórico, “I think the language does have influence but it also depends on the educators. There are probably educators who want to embrace the culture but also an intersectional lens — like race, gender, sexualities, all the other things. But it also depends a lot on educators and
what point-of-views they come in with and how they chose to incorporate that” (Díaz-Morillo 2023). As we can see here, ethnicity is not something that can be determined by a set of biological markers or phenotypical traits. It becomes clear that De Beauvoir’s theory that statuses, such as sexuality, are not natural but defined by society’s influence on our bodies and our bodily experiences shapes our inner images of ourselves.

In the case of the bailarines from La Escuela and the play of gender and sexuality within the dance studio, tempo and the habitus are vital to the learning and performing processes. Bourdieu argues that time only gains its power in a situation by the “structure of relations within which it comes into play”, which allows for strategies and improvisation to be embodied in daily situations, and the relationships that influence time in the dance studio are heavily gendered (Bourdieu 1977, 7). Ballet folklórico is a highly gendered dance, with specific choreography based on the assigned gender of each performer, with fem-presenting people dancing the “female” role in a skirt while the masc.-presenting dancers learn the “male” role in pants. This means that students dancing the female role must wear practice faldas in order to learn the proper movements of the dance – or, if the dance calls for it, a sombrero for the dancers of the male role. The students mimic the body movements and positions of their teacher, regardless of gender, but the teacher will tell each role to move in specific ways depending on the gendered choreography they are teaching. Women will be asked to move their hips and hold their bodies in a way that alleviates the weight of their skirts, while men will be asked to use force behind their steps and puff out their chests – although these instructions vary based on region and vestuario. One aspect of the dance that my own maestro, Cesar, would be eagle-eyed on was the way those who wore the skirts would hold them in our hands. “When you swing the skirt in front of you, your palm needs to be facing downward, but when you swing the skirt away, your palm needs to face upwards, otherwise the fabric will not move the way it needs to (Frank 2023)”. Even something as small as which fingers hold the skirt, the first finger and thumb, and how we were to hold our handkerchiefs, with the top corner tucked around our middle fingers, were
intensely scrutinized. Bailarines must use a lifetime of experience watching the way men and women move in the world and recreate it on the stage, so dancers who do not subscribe to traditional gender binaries are more conscious of these movements since they can conflict with how they move on a daily basis outside the studio.

In folklórico, one of the main ways stereotypes about heteronormative gender presentation and relationships is seen is through the use of costuming and choreography. While there are many variations based on the region a dance originates from, the majority of folklórico costuming for those performing the feminine part include the wearing of a skirt (of varying lengths and intricacy), complex hair styles adorned with ribbons, flowers, bows, or hats, and heavily made-up faces. Those dancing the masculine part tend to wear charro outfits (the suits typically worn by mariachi performers) or other vestuarios made up of peasant-style shirts and pants, with the occasional addition of sombreros, handkerchiefs, or even machetes. Not only are these vestuarios integral parts of the choreography, with many dances including skirt work or the specific placement of accessories, such as handkerchiefs and sombreros, during specific sections of the dance, but they are a visual representation history from which they originate. The influence of these vestuarios cannot be understated when looking at how dancers connect to their sexual and gendered identities in context with their ethnic heritage.

A somewhat less visible representation of this gender binary would be in the choreography itself. During my observations of folklórico classes, Magdelena, one of the maestras, would constantly explain the importance of how these steps should be performed (Frank 1 2023). When the class was first learning a dance, she would explain how the story behind this dance was a romantic one, it was meant to show how the man is seducing the woman he is dancing with (Frank 1 2023). The woman was meant to be looking, rather bashfully, at the ground, indicating her passive role in the courting process, as the object to be won. The man is meant to take the assertive, dominant role in the dance and the courting process, which is performed through strong eye-contact with the woman (even if it is not
returned) and sharp, powerful zapateado – a repetitive, percussive set of footwork (Frank 1 2023). When students were first starting to learn the dance, Magdelena would make jokes about the men looking more at their own feet that the beautiful women they were dancing with (Frank 1 2023). Later in the season, when the students were more comfortable with the dance and with each other, Magdalena would push the men to be more powerful with their moves, “You’re being too gentle. You’re men! You need to show how strong you are, put some more force into it! I want the next door neighbors to be able to feel it (the steps) through the floor!¹⁰” (Frank 1 2023). And as an observer, I will admit that there was something visceral in being able to feel the vibrations traveling through the floor and into the soles of my feet, even though the three-inch platform sneakers I was wearing.

Despite these strict roles, however, the artistic form of dance provides a liminal space in which dancers may express or perform gender in alternative ways. One way is due to the uneven number of men and women. In the advanced class, eleven of the dancers were feminine presenting while two were masculine presenting (Frank 1 2023). So, when the dancers had to do partner work, ideally one man and one woman, nine women were left without a male partner (Frank 1 2023). To combat this, Magdelena had the women pair up with one another, and they would trade masculine and feminine roles throughout the practice (Frank 1 2023). Two of the women dancing the closest to me seemed to be having a great time, laughing with one another and exaggerating the moves when they had time to practice the steps between themselves (Frank 1 2023). Even when the maestra would analyze their forms, they were still fighting back smiles and giggles when they danced together (Frank 1 2023). In Cesar’s class, there were many times when it would just be women at practice. Since we were unable to practice the parts of our dance that included the masculine dancers, Cesar would don one of the practice skirts himself to teach us how to properly move the fabric to make the proper shapes (Frank 2 2023). He was

¹⁰ Translated from Spanish.
never shy about moving his body in more feminine ways to demonstrate the proper posture we needed, or how we would need to isolate our upper bodies from our lower bodies so that we were not bouncing around during the fast zapateados (Frank 2023). Three of my informants even discussed how folklórico helped them to explore their masculine and feminine identities as queer folk.

As Vicente, who identifies as queer, explained, he enjoyed the way the dances made him feel in his own body, how they made him stand, and the comradery he gained from the other men in the class as they practiced moves together (Huerta 2023, Figure 3.3, Figure 3.4). For someone who had struggled with expressing and embodying his own masculinity, the liminal inhabitation of this character through the vestuario and bodily experiences provided the heterodoxic space for him to expand who masculinity meant to him and how he could express that through his unique body. He is enrolled in both the beginner and experienced level adult folklórico classes, despite only having danced folklórico for half a year (Huerta 2023). One of his close friends, who has danced folklórico for many years, joined La Escuela a few years ago and recommended the company to him when he expressed an interest in learning the dance, and he even admitted that although he joined the program in the middle of their season, he was accepted because they always needed more men to join (Huerta 2023). During the course of our interview, Vicente admits that growing up, he struggled with embracing the masculine side of himself, especially since masculinity in the Mexican, and Mexican American context, is so heavily tied to machismo\textsuperscript{11} – which is a type of toxic masculinity associated with violence and degradation of women (Huerta 2023; Figures 3.3 and 3.4). Despite leaning towards more masculine presentations, he has struggled with feeling “masculine enough,” but folklórico has been instrumental in building his confidence in expressing both masculine and feminine aspects of himself (Huerta 2023). Since dance is typically considered to be a feminine art form,

\textsuperscript{11} Negative masculine pride associated with men of Latinx descent.
especially in the Western contexts (which does extend to Mexico), to see it used as a tool to express the positive aspects of masculinity is incredibly powerful. Vicente explained that he felt more “empowered” in his own personal expressions of masculinity after doing male-female partner work, since it gives him the space to take up that role and connect with his partner in this new way that contrasts negative, machismo stereotypes (Huerta 2023).

Belen, who has choreographed dances and created vestuarios for her dancers, also has unique experiences with gendered vestuario as a feminine presenting person who identifies as queer. She stated that in her everyday life, she tends to express herself in more masculine ways, such as through her style of dress, but that when she performs folklórico, she feels very feminine (Gomez 2023). As someone who creates choreography for her college group to before, and who has extensive experience with creating appropriate costuming for their dances, she saw that there was some room to play with gender in folklórico (Gomez 2023). She admitted that she was not the biggest fan of the strict gender roles found in folklórico, and that she did her best to challenges those trends by having all of her dancers, no matter their gender, wear skirts during practices (Gomez 2023). “Personally, when I teach choreography, I tend to refer to – like if you

Figure 3.3: La Escuela Practice 1 (left) and Figure 3.4: La Escuela Practice 2 (right). January 14, 2023.
want to wear the ‘lead’ (male) costume, then you can, or if you want to ‘follow’ and wear the skirt, that’s fine. And I typically refer to, ‘If you want to wear the skirt, that’s fine by me,’ because I don’t know peoples identities and I’m not gonna be questioning it, so if you wanna wear the skirt, you just gotta let me know” (Gomez 2023). She also notes, much like what I discussed above, that there are often more women in folklórico then men, so women are often forced to dance with each other to learn the steps properly, but this doesn’t typically translate to actual performances (Gomez 2023).

Jesus is a CPS theater teacher and drag performer who has only been dancing folklórico for about a year. They use every pronoun and a very comfortable switching between masculine and feminine presentations or any mix therein. While learning their first region with La Escuela, Jesus remembered the maestro, Cesar, who is in his mid-twenties, asked them one day after class whether or not they would prefer to learn the masculine part, and wear the vestuario with pants, or if they wanted to learn the feminine part, and wear the vestuario with the skirt (Díaz-Morillo 2023). “I really appreciate him porque¹² . . . I didn’t even initiate it, he did. I mean, maybe it’s because I’m gay, but it was sweet from him. But I was the only masculine presenting one in class, and it was all fems, so, I was appreciative that he approached me and asked me which one I wanted to do, which I loved and appreciated” (Díaz-Morillo 2023). So, for that region Jesus actually learned the feminine part and would perform in a skirt with the rest of their classmates (Díaz-Morillo 2023). When I asked them why there decided to wear pants for the region we were currently working on, they just shrugged and said they felt like wearing the pants this time, and for the next they were going to switch back to a skirt, and so on (Díaz-Morillo 2023). Although, they did admit to struggle with the traditional binary of the dance. “I love dancing folklórico, me gusta la cultura, es la verdad¹³ . . . there is some beautifulness sticking to the roots of it, but there’s also some things we can grow on, right? Like, even the way

¹² “but”
¹³ “I like my culture, that’s the truth”
we say some things, like, “Mujeres aquí, y hombres para allá” – you know, just language stuff, like ‘Skirts over there, pants over there,’ right? Like, allowing the students to choose what they want . . . It might not be traditional, but we’re still doing the dance and that’s what’s most important” (Díaz-Morillo 2023).

All three of my informants expressed that folklórico helped them to connect with the side of their queer identity that was most tied to the gender they were assigned at birth. While Vicente did admit that he appreciated the historical significance behind the strict gender roles, he too felt like there was room for folklórico to play with gender performance (Huerta 2023). He said that he had even seen a folklórico performance where two women performed a dance together that is typically done with a man and a woman; one of the women was even in a charro outfit (Huerta 2023). This brings me to the idea of continuous and discontinuous self in this particular space. Within the special context of folklórico practice and performance, dancers are allowed to transgress gender boundaries that they may not normally feel comfortable crossing. Michael Lambek’s work theorizes that individuals have a dual senses of personhood that determines what they are and are not ethnically accountable for in everyday life (Lambek 2013, 837). He labels these two aspects of personhood as “forensic personage” and the “mimetic personage” (Lambek 2013, 838). His “forensic” person is the continuous self, the personage that is held ethically responsible for the previous actions of everyday life in which they have engaged in (Lambek 2013, 838). The “mimetic” person is the discontinuous self of an individual (Lambek 2013, 838). It is the aspect of an individual that shifts and changes based on a specific experience, and when an individual enacts this aspect of personhood, they are not considered ethically responsible for their actions since it is separate from their other self (Lambek 2013, 838). According to Lambek, the mimetic person is formed through a set of named personages that an individual can pull from, using the past experiences of those personages to build the

---

14 “Women here and men over there”
mimetic personage (Lambek 2013, 838). Folklórico provides those mimetic personages to the dancers through the vestuario they wear, the steps they must learn, and the unique histories of the stories they must learn. The liminality of the studio space gives the dancers permission to drop their forensic selves and take up a new identity for a short period of time. On the one hand, Vicente and Belen were able to embody and embrace parts of their gender identities that they were not able to in their everyday lives, outside of the studio. The dance allowed them to redefine what it meant to be a person in this world who was identified as either male or female at birth in a way that did not reject their culture, which is highly patriarchal. As De Beauvoir states, sexuality is not something that is inherently natural or biological, it is something that is defined through the society an individual lives in, based on the bodies that they own (De Beauvoir 2010, 39). The simple virtue of having a feminine or masculine body, as determined by society and its institutions, does not mean that the individual automatically understands what it means to be the gender, it is something that must be learned (De Beauvoir 2010, 58). By dancing in folklórico, these queer individuals have created a space for themselves where they can both learn to embrace their assigned genders in alternative ways that are not available in everyday life, while also embracing their opposite genders as well – since cultural arts are seen as more feminine and Gomez believes the male aspects of the dance “seem more fun” (Gomez 2023).

This argument can also be seen in the work of Pérez through the “testimonios” of three LGBTQIA+ bailarines who have participated in ballet folklórico. Testimonios, or testimonies, is a methodology used in the humanities to collect data from the life experiences of interlocutors by having them tell their life stories in their own voices; it is “a way for the mind, the body and the spirit to be sources of knowledge and transformation” (Pérez 2016, 35-36). The three dancers; Luis, Dasa, and Ozzy; all had experience with dancing folklórico, although one of them, at the time of the study, was not currently dancing with any group (Pérez 2016, 36-37). Despite all of them coming from different backgrounds, being born in either the United States or Mexico, and have different lengths of experience with folklórico, all of the share how folklórico
has impacted their lives outside of the dance (Pérez 2016, 37-41). They discussed how the folklórico community provided them a space where they could see other Mexican Americans going through the same life experiences as they were, such as going to college and dealing with relationships, and how it gave them confidence to live openly when they each decided to come out (Pérez 2016, 42). “I saw young guys, my colleagues, my peers, in the same situation as me and living the same experiences I had, and who were openly gay and were still surrounded by other people who were completely ok with it . . . ‘If they did it then I guess I’m going to be ok’” (Pérez 2016, 42). Pérez concludes that “folklórico then provided additional foundations through which to practice bringing their cultural capital into other environments” (Pérez 2016, 47).

While his research focuses on how experiences with folklórico can be used by the dancers in other physical spaces, such as within their biological families, at places of employment, or places of education, I believe that this concept can be applied to internal “places” as well.

A theory is type of anthropological psychoanalysis that can aid in this discussion is Hollan’s idea of the “selfscape” (Bock and Leavitt 2019, 224). This concept argues that an individual’s internal image of themselves is changed from moment to moment as they map together past experiences with the present moment (Bock and Leavitt 2019, 224). Bock and Leavitt continue to say that in this type of methodological study, researchers must remember that every informant has a unique way of encountering their own culture based on their bodily experiences, which links back to our earlier discussion of De Beauvoir, because those meanings are constructed by the cultural symbology they are exposed too, which is never automatically inherent (Bock and Leavitt 2019, 225). So, when looking at both Pérez’s and my own research through this lens of selfscapes, it allows for the theories of De Beauvoir and Lambek to be applied to the internalizations of institutionalized cultural work. The fact that Vicente, Belen, and Jesus as well as Dasa, Luis, and Ozzy, can use an artform whose inherent qualities reifies the hegemonic narrative of heteronormative romance and gender roles as a support for their own journeys through their experiences as LGBTQIA+ members, illustrates perfectly that there
is nothing inherent about the sexualities promoted by a society. Today, mainstream Western culture in the United States has become more open to experiences of the LGBTQIA+ community members, which shows how even seemingly inflexible cultural and nationalist tool can be used to break open those narratives and give light to the counterhegemonic experiences that were left in the shadows.

Folklórico is known to have strict gender roles and regulations, and yet students of the LGBTQIA+ community continue to feel safe enough to express and play with their gender expressions within the context of the art form. Dance has always been a medium where gender becomes more fluid than in the rest of society. It is seen as a feminine art and yet male dancers are required in almost every style, included the Western ballet, of which ballet folklórico is partially derived, in order to tell the stories they perform. While dancers of folklórico are never explicitly taught the heteronormative, stereotypical nature of the dance, it is implied through the choreography, vestuario, and stories told with the dance. Despite this, maestras and maestros must play with gender expression by improvising choreography based on the number and gender of the students who apply, who show up for performances, and for which section of choreography they must teach. Female-identifying teachers must know masculine choreography so they can teach their male students proper form, and male-identifying teachers must be comfortable wearing practice skirts and performing the feminine choreography to teach their female students. Combined with the changing social habitus of Gen Z (the majority of my classmates except for one who is Gen X) around sexuality as a fluid spectrum and the acceptance of non-heteronormative relationships and non-binary gender identities, it is unsurprising to see this attitude changing the structure of ballet folklórico in emerging companies like La Escuela.

While my informants do adhere to traditional gender roles during performances, they can recognize how those roles are part of the tradition of the dance and do not have to be inherently negative. It is something they can embody temporarily, to pick up and discard during a practice or performance, without any conflict to their gender and sexual identities outside of
the dance space. In fact, they can even feel comfortable enough to joke about the disjunction between their gender identity and the embodiment of traditional roles they use during performances. When my class was learning a different variation of El Pato, there were eight fem-presenting people and one masc.-presenting person, Jesus, in class that day. We learned a move where the partner wearing the skirt would squat down and flap the fabric of their skirt like a duck’s wings while left-to-right then right-to-left, while the partner wearing the pants would lean over them and flap their elbows in the opposite direction in a playful, flirtatious manner. Jesus made a joke about “not being used to being on top”, which made the entire class laugh. And when we were learning the feminine part of that move, several of the women in class, along with Jesus, began trying to do a vogue move called “Duck Walking”, where the performer squats down and proceeds to bounce-walk in that position, kicking out their feet and waving their arms artistically. Even in this brief example of an average class, the fact that everyone had the knowledge of and the social safety to perform a dance move associated with drag with a traditional Mexican folk dance, even if it was just a playful moment in practice, it illustrates, as Bourdieu states, that “most practices, including those seemingly most ritualized, can be abandoned to the orchestrated improvisation of common dispositions: rule is never, in this case, more than a second-best intended to make good the occasional misfirings of the collective enterprise of inculcation tending to produce habitus that are capable of generating practices regulated without express regulated or any institutionalized call to order” (Bourdieu 1977, 17).

Throughout this chapter, I have addressed how the bailarines at La Escuela de Ballet Folklórico – Chicago have used the knowledge they have learned by studying the traditional dance of ballet folklórico to rebuild and connect the disparate parts of their internal selves with one another, such as their ethnic identities with their gender identities and sexualities. The application of double-consciousness shows how many ethnic minorities in the United States have struggled to balance their identities as people of color, in this case as Mexicans, with the culture and ideals that they have been raised in while in the United States. They walk a fine line
in understanding that just because they were born on one side of the border, that does not make them any less Mexican than their native-born Mexican counterparts. They have learned to rebuild, or build for the first time, their cultural knowledge from childhood, to recreate and maintain their ties with their culture through the liminal space of the dance studio that allows them to move between personages. And through the art of dance and the vestuario that accompanies it, they are able to explore different aspects of their gender and sexual identities, and reconcile being queer in a culture that has not been historically accepting of it in a way that still honors the positive aspects of their heritage.

As mentioned in the previous chapters, the dance studio is a space of liminality where students are free to explore various aspects of their identity. As I have already argued, the dance studio exists in a space that is between both the everyday profane and the sacred ritualization of performance. When a student enrolls in classes, the dance studio becomes part of their weekly routine, a place where they one to two hours of their lives on a regular basis, making the studio a familiar and comfortable place, however it is also a specialized place. It is the one place where they engage with and live in their bodies in a way that is unique to other aspects of their lives – they do not usually perform zapateados while at work or with family. This singularity of the dance space in their lives allows the bailarines to open up, to feel more comfortable asking questions, making mistakes, and trying things they have never tried before. In the work done by Loïc Wacquant, he notes that in a boxing gym on Chicago’s south side in the early 1990s, the gym’s atmosphere helps the boxers to enter a different mindset, where they are moving and thinking differently than they would when outside the gym. “These sounds, these smells, this atmosphere impregnate the body through every pore, penetrate it and shape it, invest it and excite it through every nerve ending . . .” (Wacquant 2004, 237). In the same way, the dance studio of La Escuela functions as a safe place for students to physically embody different aspects of themselves. When our class practices zapateados, one of the most important aspects about the footwork is the timing. Due to the nails on the shoes creating loud tapping noises whenever our
feet hit the floor, it becomes easy to hear when we are off time with the music we are dancing too, or with each other when there is no music. Cesar, the maestro, tends to not use musical counts (i.e. one-and-two-and-three-and-four-and) when demonstrating steps, instead, he intones the step pattern with random syllables (i.e. da-da-diga-dat!), and when he wants to emphasize the counts we are meant to hit with our steps, he pounds a wooden walking stick on the floor, so that we can both see and hear the counts while making sure we have an internal knowledge of the steps without him.

As with many Western dance styles, both men and women who perform must wear specialized shoes in order to perform. While ballet folklórico has many different types of footwear, or no footwear – depending on the region – the traditional zapatos for women have a 2 inch heel, and have nails on the bottoms of the heels and toes (Figure 3.5, Figure 3.6), while the boots that men wear have a 1.5 inch heel. In the United States, it is uncommon for those who identify as men or present as masculine to wear shoes with any sort of heel, especially in the northern part of the country, so men who take up ballet folklórico must become used to not only wearing heeled shoes but also dancing in them, which gives them experience doing a more feminine coded art form (dance) in feminine coded footwear (heeled shoes). In the dance studio, the liminality that makes it space outside of the everyday and yet private, as practices do not often have an audience, leads a feeling of collective effervescence with the other students, where it no longer becomes odd to wear heeled shoes, see men in skirts, or dance with members of the same or opposite gender role since it is something that everyone else is doing. The participation in the group ritual of arriving to class once a week, wearing the practice shoes and vestuario, and being surrounded by others who identify as Mexican American and/or queer folk creates the sense of unity Durkheim describes, so that it is no longer dangerous, perverse, or non-traditional to explore and live experiences that may not be in line with a dancer's assigned gender or heteronormative sexuality. The dance studio becomes a place where everyone can feel
welcome as long as they reflexively embody the positive attitude the studio promotes through its staff and its décor.

Figure 3.5: Ballet Folklórico Shoes Tops (left) and Figure 3.6: Ballet Folklórico Shoe Bottom (right). November 6, 2023.
Conclusion

- September 2023 -

When La Escuela performed at the Northcreek library, not even the gloominess of the pouring rain could dampen the joyful spirits of the day. I had gotten there early, just to make sure that we would not miss any of the performances, so we were more than ready when the crowd finally began congregating around the performance space. Women and children in colorful vestuario weaved in and out of audience members who had already begun to claim the best spots. I found a place for myself near the library’s welcome desk, right in front of where the dancing would take place, and let myself people watch. I was surprised at how many familiar faces I saw. Not only did I recognize my own maestro, Cesar, who was with his youth class, but I recognized some of the women from the weekend adult classes I had observed, as well as many of the parents I had sat with at the studio – waiting for their children’s class to end so that mine could start. One father I had even chatted with casually saw me, and wave warmly in greeting before heading off to work on the speaker system. Olga was also running back and forth across the library, making sure all the dancers knew where they were meant to be waiting and making sure that the music would actually play for them. Despite the hecticness of her day, she still took the time to stop and speak with me, ask me how I was doing, and double checking that I was enjoying myself. This goes to show the character of the studio Olga helped create. Even though it is now one of the largest folklórico studios in the city (by sheer number of members alone), it still feels like a giant family, where everyone seems to know everyone, and where anyone can come when they are having a bad day to feel better about themselves.

Answering the Research Questions

It is this phenomenon that made me want to work with La Escuela in the first place. As stated in the introduction, I came into this paper with several questions about La Escuela, its students,
and its impact on the community. The thing I set out to understand was the “why” of it all. Why did these young Latinx people choose to start dancing folklórico? What did they get out of dancing folklórico? Based on my field observations and one-on-one interviews, I believe that I have at least begun to understand the “why”. The majority of the adult students at La Escuela grew up either watching folklórico being performed at community events or they performed it themselves as children. It was these performances that stuck with them, that tied the idea of Mexico and Mexican culture to the art of folklórico itself. So, when these students, now fully grown, felt like they were disconnected from their heritage in their everyday lives, they searched for a space where they could reconnect and explore their culture close to home. However, in Chicago, the majority of Latinx cultural programming takes place on the South side, so the North and Northwest side residents had nothing nearby, nor did many of the schools they found accept beginner adult students. La Escuela filled that gap for them.

It provided students with a doubly-safe space where they could explore and express both their ethnic identities as Mexicans in Chicago and, for students in the LGBTQIA+ community, what it means to be masculine and feminine in non-traditional ways. One stereotype associated with the Mexican community, and many other Latin American communities, is machismo, a form of toxic hyper-masculinity. As stated in the previous chapters, folklórico has given the masculine-presenting queer dancers the opportunity to experience traditional, heterosexual masculinity in a more positive light and has helped them feel more comfortable with the masculine side of the gender spectrum. The students of La Escuela have been able to live in and express their mexicanidad with others who understand the struggle of being a non-Anglo person in the United States without worrying about being tokenized. The studio has provided them a space in their own backyard where they could feel connected with their heritage once again.

While it was this longing to connect that brought them into the studio, it was how active they are in the community, the positive energy, and welcoming aura that the studio projected that made the students stay. Yes, many of my informants loved that they could push themselves
physically and mentally by doing something they never thought they could, I believe they also liked who they became while at the studio. They became learners again, people who found enjoyment in the process of education, who were able to use that education to reaffirm that they were Mexican enough, and that no one had the right to tell them they were never enough in the first place, not even themselves. The LGBTQIA+ students were also able to reconcile their gender and sexual identities with a culture that has not always been accepting of them. By participating in dance, they were able to push the boundaries of what they thought it meant to be a man, woman, and queer Mexican. They were able to find the beauty in traditional gender roles, while feeling accepted by the community to move beyond those traditional roles.

**Future Research**

While my research has focused exclusively on the Mexican American community and ballet folklórico, by looking at how other diasporic populations in the United States have used folk dance to rebuild ethnic connections outside of their countries of origin, it shows that ballet folklórico and La Escuela are not unique and isolated occurrences. A future research project could look at how folk dances from different ethnic background use the same techniques, such as education, to counteract the feelings of double-consciousness in their dances. Another project could also look at how these different groups use soft power to create a positive image of their culture and community to mainstream American society and cultural outsiders.

Research that is focused primarily on ballet folklórico could explore other Midwestern groups, since there is still such a void in the academic literature. Researchers could look at groups in Milwaukee, Detroit, Minneapolis, Kansas City, Indianapolis, and other large Midwestern cities to see if there are any other groups like La Escuela de Ballet Folklórico – Chicago, or if a group like that is something that those communities would even want in their areas. It would also be interesting to explore both Latinx and Anglo audience responses to seeing a ballet folklórico performance at their community event, especially if that event is not
specifically catered to the Latinx community. Another project could look at ballet folklórico
groups outside of large metropolitan areas, compare folklórico groups in the United States and
Mexico, and even the difference between school groups and professional community groups.
The ballet folklórico community is so large, and has so many iterations that the research
opportunities are practically endless. I hope that my own research can foster more interest in
the study of the art form, not just in anthropology but throughout all of the social sciences.
There is so much we can still learn from ballet folklórico and those who choose to dedicate their
lives to it.
REFERENCES

Adobe Stock. Figure 2.3. Google, image. Accessed December 10, 2023.


Cabrera, Luz in discussion with the author, August 2023.


Díaz Morillo, Jesus in discussion with the author, August 2023.

Drenon, Brandon. Latino Hoosiers lead Indianapolis’ population growth among racial and ethnic groups. Indianapolis Star. January 14, 2022. [Indianapolis Latino population face disparities, La Plaza developments (indystar.com)]


https://www.costumingacrossboards.com/jalisco-ribbon-dress


Gomez, Belen (pseudonym) in discussion with the author, April 2023.

Gonzalez, Milagros (pseudonym) in discussion with the author, January 2023.

Guerrero, Olga (pseudonym) in discussion with the author, February 2023.


Health Compass Milwaukee. 2023 Demographics. Ethnicity Data for County: Milwaukee. Claritas. Updated March 2023. Health Compass Milwaukee :: Demographics :: County :: Milwaukee :: Ethnicity

Huerta, Vicente (pseudonym) in discussion with the author, January 2023.

La Escuela de Ballet Folklórico – Chicago. Figure 1.1. Facebook, image, September 6, 2023.

La Escuela de Ballet Folklórico - Chicago. Figure 2.6. Facebook, image, March 16, 2023.

La Escuela de Ballet Folklórico - Chicago. Figure 2.7. Facebook, image, October 21, 2023, 9:33pm.

La Escuela de Ballet Folklórico - Chicago. Figure 2.8. Facebook, image, October 9, 2023, 10:52am.

Maldonado, Santana in discussion with the author, August 2023.

Montez, Ximena in discussion with the author, August 2023.


Trujillo, Carolina in discussion with the author, February 2023.


Vich, Chloe. “Cruzando La Frontera: Choreographing the Mexican-American Identity.” *CMC Senior Theses* (2020): 1-45. [Cruzando La Frontera: Choreographing the Mexican-American Identity (claremont.edu)]


United States Census Bureau (2). QuickFacts Columbus city, Ohio. 2021. [U.S. Census Bureau QuickFacts: Columbus city, Ohio](https://www.census.gov/quickfacts/ohio/Columbus)