

UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA

Los Angeles

*Composing Histories:*

The Transmission and Creation of Historicity, Music and Dance in the Los Angeles Danza  
Community

A dissertation submitted in partial satisfaction of the  
requirements for the degree Doctor of Philosophy  
in Ethnomusicology

by

Kristina Frances Nielsen

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## ABSTRACT OF THE DISSERTATION

*Composing Histories: The Transmission and Creation of Historicity, Music and Dance in the Los Angeles Danza Community*

by

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Across Los Angeles, Mexican-American men, women, and children of all ages perform *Danza*, a communal dance accompanied by the reverberating beat of rattles and the emblematic Aztec log drum known as the *huehuetl*. Presently, a growing number of Danza communities incorporate additional Indigenous identification projects that include learning Indigenous languages, songs and dances, marking a distinct shift from the initial form introduced in the 1970s that was positioned more broadly as a syncretic Mexican cultural practice. Many of these efforts aim to recover a pre-Hispanic aesthetic through song and dance. These attempts to recapture a perceived authenticity in the Mexican-American diaspora offer insight into competing interpretations of Indigenous aesthetics, histories, identities, and authenticities, and highlight incongruities between United States and Mexican perceptions of Indigeneity.

Drawing on interviews and research with three generations of Los Angeles dancers in the tradition, I examine how identities and histories are created, sustained, and embedded in the

songs and dances of the Danza repertoire. These findings are further contextualized through an intertemporal methodology, and I suggest that seminal influences of colonial-era Catholic conversion theater and twentieth-century nationalist art movements endure and provide a vital framework for the composition of repertoires and histories within Danza. Drawing on Latin American, Chicano, and Indigenous studies, I argue that musics, identities, and histories reinforce and inform each other within Los Angeles Danza communities, creating powerful spaces of experiential historicity for participants. These findings contribute to broader ethnomusicological discourses regarding Indigenous intangible cultural ownership, authenticities, and the roles of music and history in contemporary cultural movements.

The dissertation of Kristina Frances Nielsen is approved.

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## TABLE OF CONTENTS

List of Figures	vi
Acknowledgements	ix
Vita	xii
Chapter One Introduction	1
Chapter Two The Introduction of Danza to Los Angeles	31
Chapter Three The Diversification of Danza	58
Chapter Four The Danzas	102
Chapter Five Histories in Danza	130
Chapter Six Transmission and Composition in Danza Song Repertoires	181
Chapter 7 Conclusion	229
Appendix 1 Virginia Carmelo's Xipe Totec and Caravana Teponaztli	240
Appendix 2 Drumming Observations and Techniques	244
Appendix 3 "Ofrenda" as performed by Members of Lazaro Arvizu's Xipe Totec on December 12, 2015	246
Appendix 4 Additional Danza Rhythms and Songs Commonly found in Southern California	250
Appendix 5 Glossary of Danzantes and Cultural Leaders	253
References	255

## LIST OF FIGURES

Figure 1.1: Dancers gathered at the annual Mexica New Year ceremony in San Jose, California. The <i>huehuetl</i> drums are the upright log drums in the center of the circle (Photograph by Kristina Nielsen).....	1
Figure 1.1: Map with the Bajío region of Mexico outlined in red. Image a CC-licensed image on the Wikimedia commons.....	2
Figure 1.3: A danzante with a <i>concha</i> , the stringed instrument of the Concheros, prepares to enter the circle at the Celebration of the Founding of Tenochtitlan on July 25, 2015 (Photograph by Kristina Nielsen).....	12
Figure 2.1: Four huehuetl drums featuring elaborate paintings and carvings at the Mexica New Year Ceremony at Baldwin Park on March 26, 2016 (Photograph by Kristina Nielsen).....	33
Figure 2.2: Yescas and Carolina Russek dancing on May 3, 1963, at Los Angeles City Hall in preparation for a Cinco de Mayo celebration (Photograph Courtesy of the Los Angeles Public Library).....	37
Figure 2.3: Yescas receiving a limpio from Margarito Aguilar holding a Santo Xochitl in Mexico in 1977 during the Caravana Teponaztli (Photograph courtesy of Lazaro Arvizu) .....	38
Figure 2.4: Lazaro Arvizu at a powwow in Florida hosted by the Miccosukees in the 1970s. Lazaro Arvizu regularly attended this powwow and the Seminole Powwow in Hollywood, Florida (Photo courtesy of Lazaro Arvizu) .....	44
Figure 2.5: Danzantes in the final scene with the apparition of the Virgen de Guadalupe at the December 3, 2015 performance of “La Virgen de Guadalupe” at the Cathedral of our Lady of the Angels in Los Angeles. Arvizu arranged the choreography for the production (Photograph by Kristina Nielsen) .....	54
Figure 2.6: Lazaro Arvizu at the December 6 <sup>th</sup> , 2015 honoring of the Virgin of Guadalupe at Olvera Plaza in Los Angeles. In addition to his skills as a dancer, Lazaro is also a skilled craftsman and made the cape in this photograph himself (Photo by Kristina Nielsen).....	55
Figure 3.1: This chart depicts the dissemination and spread of Danza from Mexico to Los Angeles. This chart is by no means comprehensive and only includes the danzantes and spiritual leaders most relevant to this study. It was compiled by drawing on oral histories with members of the community and recent research on Danza in California (Luna 2012; Colin 2014). In addition to the interviews conducted, several side conversations occurred with others, particularly at shared ceremonies where I had the opportunity to meet with other prominent leaders in the community. These conversations guided my analysis but did not figure centrally in my research.....	62
Figure 3.2: Arteaga dancing at the 2016 Mexica New Year Ceremony in San Jose (Photograph by Kristina Nielsen).....	65
Figure 3.3: Arteaga leading a planting ceremony at Xochipilli’s 2016 Mexica New Year Ceremony in Salazar Park (Photograph by Kristina Nielsen).....	69
Figure 3.4: Ruiz (left) with members of Gran Tenochtitlan at the 2016 Gathering of Nations in Albuquerque, New Mexico (Photograph by Kristina Nielsen).....	72
Figure 3.5: Cuezalin with Xiuhcoatl at the Noche de Altares celebration in Santa Ana	

(left), and at the Mexica New Year Ceremony in San Jose (right) (Photographs by Kaj and Kristina Nielsen).....	77
Figure 4.1: The typical structure of a danza.....	105
Figure 4.2: Transcription of “Guajalote” as performed with conchas. Transcribed by Kristina Nielsen.....	107
Figure 4.3: Huehuetl pattern of “Guajalote.” Transcribed by Kristina Nielsen.....	108
Figure 4.4: Transcription of the Conchero version of “Cojito” or “Tezcatlipoca.” Transcribed by Kristina Nielsen.....	108
Figure 4.5: Huehuetl pattern of “Tezcatlipoca” or “Cojito.” Transcribed by Kristina Nielsen.....	109
Figure 4.6: Huehuetl rhythm of “Paloma.” Transcribed by Kristina Nielsen.....	112
Figure 4.7: Huehuetl pattern in “Fuego.” Transcribed by Kristina Nielsen.....	114
Figure 4.8: Sergio Ruiz performing “Fuego” at the 2016 Gathering of Nations (Photograph by Kristina Nielsen). .....	115
Figure 4.9: Huehuetl rhythm for “Mayahuel.” Transcribed by Kristina Nielsen.....	118
Figure 4.10: Huehuetl rhythm for “Nanyeri,” composed and choreographed by Cuezalin. Transcribed by Kristina Nielsen.....	119
Figure 4.11: Huehuetl rhythm for “Macuil Xochitl,” Composed by Cuezalin. Transcribed by Kristina Nielsen.....	120
Figure 4.12: The typical layering of Danza music with melodic instruments. The full style utilizes pitched or unpitched drum rhythms under melodic motif that are supplemented with effects. Occasionally melodic motifs are sung, but most often they are performed on ceramic ocarinas or flutes. These various layers can come in or fade out, but the basic structure of three distinct layers of sound remains constant.....	124
Figure 5.1: Map of key places in the development and dispersal of Nahuacized Catholic forms referenced in this chapter. Note that not all the locations noted existed contemporaneously (Map created by Kristina Nielsen based on image from CC-licensed image from the Wikimedia commons).....	131
Figure 5.2: Depiction of dance from the Tovar Codex (c. 1585). The musical accompaniment includes a two-toned drum known as a teponaztli; a log drum known as the huehuetl; and rattles in the hands of the dancers. (Courtesy of the John Carter Brown Library at Brown University).....	133
Figure 5.3: 1690 Biombo from Santa Anita Ixtacalco depicting a mitote dance in the church patio accompanied by a harp and a lute (Courtesy of Los Angeles County Museum of Art).....	136
Figure 5.4: Aztec dancers walk parallel to conquistadors in the 2015 Our Lady of Guadalupe Procession on Cesar Chavez Boulevard in East Los Angeles on December 6 <sup>th</sup> , 2016 (left). In another Aztec dance group in the same procession, a dancer carries the estandarte for the Virgin of Guadalupe (Photograph by Kristina Nielsen).....	153
Figure 5.5: Mural from Chicano Park in San Diego conflating Spanish conquistadores with the San Diego Police (Photograph by Kristina Nielsen).....	163

Figure 5.6: A map of the states considered part of Aztlan. Image a CC-licensed image on the Wikimedia commons.....	178
Figure 6.1: A young woman recreates the scene of the Virgin of Guadalupe’s apparition to Juan Diego (Photograph by Kristina Nielsen).....	187
Figure 6.2: Transcription of “Corre Corre Venadito.” Transcribed by Kristina Nielsen.....	190
Figure 6.3: Plains-style tipi with Aztec symbols at the Mexica New Year Ceremony in San Jose (Photograph by Kristina Nielsen).....	196
Figure 6.4: Vendors in Quito, Ecuador, dressed in regalia reminiscent of the Sioux (Photo courtesy of Jessie Vallejo).....	198
Figure 6.5: Transcription of the first verse of “Ometeotl Huitzilopochtli Quetzalcoatl Tezcatlipoca.” Transcribed by Kristina Nielsen.....	208
Figure 6.6: Singers at the Coyolxauhqui-Toyaacan Teuxihuitl New Year ceremony in Baldwin Park, March 26, 2016 (Photograph by Kristina Nielsen) .....	209
Figure 6.7: Transcription of the first verse of “Huey Tonantzin” as sung by Cuezalin. Transcribed by Kristina Nielsen.....	210
Figure 6.8: Transcription of the first verse of “Huey Tonantzin” as sung at the Coyolxauhqui-Toyaacan Teuxihuitl New Year Ceremony. Transcribed by Kristina Nielsen.....	211
Figure 6.9: First verse of “Zan Yehuan” with the melody and accompanying rhythm composed by Cuezalin. Transcribed by Kristina Nielsen.....	225
Figure 7.1: Image depicting the interrelated circularity of histories, identities and musics in Danza. These three components collectively compose the Danza experience, and each informs the others.....	230

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- 2014 *Ethnomusicology Review Sounding Board* contribution: “The Role of Interpretation in Determining Continuity in Danza Azteca History.” May 17, 2014:  
<http://ethnomusicologyreview.ucla.edu/content/role-interpretation-determining-continuity-danza-azteca-history>.
- 2014 Review of Dafni Tragaki, ed, *Empire of Song: Europe and Nation in the Eurovision Song Contest* (Lanham, MD: Scarecrow Press, 2013). February 24, 2014. In *Ethnomusicology Review Sounding Board*:  
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## Chapter 1

### Introduction

Twirling and leaping in colorful garments and feather headdresses, Aztec dancers have become an iconic part of the California landscape. Today, men, women and children of all ages dance to the reverberating beat of a large log drum, known as the *huehuetl*, accompanying it with the percussive clacking of seedpod rattles strapped to their ankles. Since the initial introduction of Danza Azteca to Southern California in the 1970s by General Florencio Yescas, the Danza tradition has grown exponentially. Today, there are Danza groups across the United States, spanning from New York to Seattle, with many led by danzantes affiliated with the Los Angeles Danza community.<sup>1</sup>



Figure 1.1: Dancers gathered at the annual Mexica New Year ceremony in San Jose, California. The *huehuetl* drums are the upright log drums in the center of the circle (Photograph by Kristina Nielsen).

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<sup>1</sup> Field recordings referenced in this dissertation can be found on the Internet Archive at <https://archive.org/details/uclaethnomusicologyarchive>. From the main site, search “Nielsen, Kristina” or the collection number, 2017.02, to find the collection.

The Danza community in Los Angeles has diversified in the last thirty years, and today the community accommodates a range of interpretations regarding colonial histories, spirituality, Indigeneity, and the identity of the dance in diaspora. In recent years, many Danza circles in Los Angeles, as well as the broader transnational Danza community of the United States and Mexico, have moved towards disassociating Danza from the Catholic heritage of Conchero—Danza’s colonial-era dance predecessor from the Bajío region, or the high plateau in Northern Central Mexico that includes the contemporary states of San Luis Potosí, Querétaro, Guanajuato, parts of Zacatecas and Aguas Calientes (Figure 1.2).



Figure 1.2: Map with the Bajío region of Mexico outlined in red. Image a CC-licensed image on the Wikimedia commons.

These groups take any number of highly individualized forms with many identifying their interpretation as *cultural* or *mexikayotl*, meaning based on interpretations of pre-Hispanic cultures and spirituality. Another significant branch that has similarly disassociated itself from Catholicism is *Danza Mexica*, or *Danza Mexica-Cuauhtemoc*, that embraces a political role and

adamantly rejects identifiable European and Catholic elements.<sup>2</sup> Danza Mexica combines the spiritual reawakening of mexicayotl with a political agenda of decolonization. The similarities in the performance styles of all branches of Danza belie the philosophical gaps that impact their interpretations of histories and the Indigenous, ethnically, and nationally mixed community and self. Where outsiders see only bright feathers, participants are negotiating complex schisms in what constitutes the core of Danza, Indigeneity, and the Mexican-American diasporic experience.

In light of these recent philosophical schisms, a number of questions regarding cultural heritage, history, and Indigeneity have come to the fore within the Danza community. For instance, what do these shifting interpretations of histories and origins mean for the music and dances practiced by members of the community? And how do danzantes navigate the social construction of Indigeneity in the Mexican-American diaspora? What might musical and artistic developments reveal regarding the resurgence of diasporic Indigenous identities and communities?

I first met members of the Los Angeles Danza community because of my long-standing interest in music archaeology and pre-Hispanic music in Mesoamerica. Members of the Danza community increasingly draw on methods akin to those of music archaeologists to reconstruct instruments, rituals, and repertoires for the Danza community. This repertoire seeks to forge a connection with a pre-Hispanic past in a manner that dancers, known as *danzantes*, interpret as decolonizing. The goal is to facilitate a re-blossoming of Indigenous cultures in the Americas.

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<sup>2</sup> To accommodate the diversity of signifiers used to denote loosely the same practice—albeit interpreted through different historical, spiritual and ethnic frameworks—I use the term “Danza” to include the diverse branches that today identify the practice as *Danza Azteca*, *Danza Azteca Chichimeca*, *Danza Mexica*, *Danza Mexica-Cuauhtemoc*, or any number of other designations. When referring to the dances specifically, I use lowercase (“danzas”).

These newly developed ceremonies, songs, and rituals add new cultural dimensions to the core of Danza that descended from the Conchero tradition, complicating traditional modes of transmission and historical interpretation.

The research methods used by these segments of the Danza community coincide closely with the three lines of inquiry utilized by Robert Stevenson in *Music in Aztec and Inca Territory* (1968). These include the study of archaeological artifacts, often through reconstructions of ceramic instruments; the study of documents, particularly the handful of surviving codices from Central Mexico; and the analysis of contemporary practices in Indigenous communities that are viewed as uncontaminated by Christianity and European influences (ibid.:17, 18).<sup>3</sup> As a result, music from surrounding Native communities in Mexico, and increasingly music from Native American communities in the United States, are seen by some in the Danza community as viable sources for an Indigenous Mexican cultural recovery. This line of inquiry has proven problematic in cultural recovery as participants integrate and re-situate Indigenous instruments, aesthetics, and repertoires—such as peyote singing, Sun Dance, and other Native songs—into the Danza tradition.

The Indigenous cultural recovery processes undertaken by Danza circles identifying as cultural, mexikayotl, or Mexica are typically rooted in interpretations of pre-colonial Indigenous pasts, particularly those of the Mexica Tenochca, who ruled the Aztec Empire from the Central Valley of Mexico when Hernán Cortés arrived in 1519. Upon seizing Tenochtitlan in 1521, the Spanish oversaw the destruction of the Mexica as an autonomous culture, dismantling the pyramids, impressing soldiers, and restricting and repressing cultural practices. At the same time,

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<sup>3</sup> Stevenson describes the potential value of this last line of inquiry as follows: “The collection of melodies from certain out-of-the-way Indian groups which even today, after the lapse of centuries, may still preserve some of the basic elements found in the pre-Cortesian system” (1968:17, 18).

Central Mexico experienced a severe population decline from nearly one million to 250,000 between the period of 1519 and 1610 due to deaths from diseases brought by the Spanish, as well as deaths from slavery and forced labor (Evans 2008:540). The decline in population, paired with intense scrutiny and repression of Mexica musical and ritual, disrupted Mexica musical continuity; although song text transcriptions and several instruments have survived, it is widely agreed that the performance practices, melodies, and drum rhythms are lost and unknown.

The *mexicanidad* movement that began in Mexico City in the 1960s was the first significant attempt to recover Indigenous “Mexica” or “Aztec” cultural practices. In particular, a collective in Mexico City known as The Movimiento Confederado Restaurador de la Cultura de Anáhuac (MCRCA) began to learn Nahuatl, the Indigenous language of the Mexica Tenochca, and integrated songs and dances from surrounding Nahuatl communities into their emerging cultural practices. Additionally, they visited rural communities to partake in ceremonies and they began to learn the dances of Conchero, which had arrived in Mexico City with migrants from Guanajuato in the nineteenth century (González-Torres 2005:164; Rostas 2009:183). As the dances of Conchero took root in Mexico City, they increasingly became nationalized, conflating nationhood and Indigeneity through a state policy referred to as *indigenismo*. The Mexican state further facilitated the re-casting of the tradition and its history as predominantly Aztec or Mexica of Conchero by sponsoring dance groups, and later the world-renowned presentations of the Ballet Folklórico de México led by Amalia Hernández (Kurath 1946:388). This process of “Aztecification” has further fueled the complexity of identities within contemporary Danza in Los Angeles as Danza identities can be interpreted through the competing lenses of national, pan-Indigenous, and increasingly tribal, modes of identification. These competing interpretations are not mutually exclusive. Within the diaspora, Danza circles in Los Angeles have developed

their own brands of Indigenous cultural revitalization. These revitalization efforts reflect portions of the cultural legacies of the MCRCA and the *mexicanidad* movement that co-exist alongside a desire to maintain “Mexican-ness” and a connection to a Mexican heritage in a broader sense within the diaspora. In diaspora, *mexicanidad* can be interpreted in both these veins.

Deconstructing identity formation in Danza is complicated by the intermediary space the community occupies in narratives of colonization and the nuances of what, in fact, constitutes “Indigeneity” and an Indigenous identity.<sup>4</sup> Through communal song and dance, danzantes increasingly explore and challenge whether Indigenous identities are defined genetically, culturally, experientially, or through some constellation of these and other characteristics. Since the community encompasses such a diverse range of individual experiences—from those who have just relocated to the United States from urban or rural communities in Mexico, to those who have had families in the American Southwest since before the Mexican-American War—competing histories converge in Danza reflecting a multitude of social positionalities originating from both sides of the border. Additionally, though some manifestations of Danza are highly nationalistic, others increasingly challenge and reject national constructions of race, ethnicity and identity on both sides of the border. Some Danza communities have begun advocating strictly Indigenous identities while other Danza communities practice Danza as a Mexican syncretic tradition or *Chicano/a* tradition—meaning individuals of Mexican descent born in the United

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<sup>4</sup> Though it might strike readers as idiosyncratic to capitalize “Indigenous” and “Indigeneity,” this decision is consistent with the current orthography of journals such as *Decolonization: Indigeneity, Education and Society*, which note that “by spelling ‘indigenous’ with a lower case ‘I’ we un/knowingly reproduce dominant writing traditions that seek to minimize and subjugate Indigenous knowledges and people” (Ritskes). Further influencing the decision to capitalize both “Indigenous” and “Indigeneity” are the many contexts in which the two terms are put in opposition to “European” or other capitalized nationalities, leading to an artificial distortion on the page that reproduces colonialist narratives.

States. Musically, these disparate goals have led to a marked increase in musical repertoires, particularly among groups pursuing an Indigenous cultural recovery or identity through Danza.

In this dissertation, I suggest that the diasporic pan-Indigenous culture of Danza currently reflects influences from colonial-era syncretic Indigenous dances, indigenismo of the mid-twentieth century, mexicanidad movements of Mexico City, New Ageism of the 1970s, and increasingly, Native North American music and spirituality. I further suggest that current repertoires and interpretations of Danza are the result of the cultural snowballing of these historical influences that have impacted the music and choreography performed by members of the Danza community. Drawing on Stuart Hall's articulation theory (1986), I propose that the repertoires of Danza have become sites of cultural composition in which histories, identities, and musics are joined into a cohesive pan-Indigenous whole in the Mexican-American diaspora. I argue that these cascading layers and histories in Danza inform and complicate contemporary debates of authenticity and historicity within the Danza community.

## **Literature Review**

To date, there are no ethnomusicological studies on Danza, and most of the extant research on Danza in California has emerged from Chicano Studies scholars (Vento 1994; Aguilar 2009; Guerrero 2010). Other perspectives include one dissertation from a Native American Studies student from UC Davis entitled "Danza Mexica: Indigenous Identity, Spirituality, Activism, and Performance" (Luna 2012), and one from an anthropology graduate student "Remembering and Performing History, Tradition, and identity: A Multi-Sensory Analysis of *Danza Azteca*" (Castorena 2012). To date, all the dissertations written on Danza are by danzantes, and many are highly reflexive in their approach. For instance, Mario Aguilar's

dissertation “The Rituals of Kindness: The Influence of the Danza Azteca Tradition of Central Mexico on Chicano-Mexcoehuani Identity and Sacred Space” focuses on the arrival of Danza Azteca in Southern California. Aguilar includes an auto-biographical account of his experiences as a Chicano learning Danza Azteca in San Diego in the 1970s (2009). Today, he leads the Danza Mexi’cayotl Indio Cultural Center in San Diego where he teaches Danza.

In contrast, Jennie Marie Luna’s dissertation (2012) and Raquel Guerrero’s Master of Humanities thesis “Dancing in the Street: Danza Azteca as a Cultural Revitalization and Spiritual Liberation for Chicanos” (2012) reflect the perspectives of a younger generation of danzantes. Instead of the theme of Chicano pride prevalent in Aguilar’s dissertation, Luna and Guerrero view Danza as a source of Indigenous identity reclamation (Guerrero 2010; Luna 2012). Additionally, both note their participation in Danza at protests with Luna even remarking that “danzantes as ‘protesters’ or part of political movements would be a major trait of Xicano/a danzantes in the U.S.”<sup>5</sup> (ibid.:200). This contention reflects one of the significant divisions and changes in the Los Angeles and Californian Danza community, as many danzantes believe politics is best kept out of Danza.

Another more recent book by Ernesto Colín, entitled *Indigenous Education through Dance and Ceremony: A Mexica Palimpsest*, approaches Danza from the perspective of education studies. Colín focuses on the practices of one *calpulli*, meaning a cultural or mexikayotl Danza community, in San Jose, California. He notes that the calpulli has two primary cultural objectives: teaching Danza and diffusing Indigenous Mexican culture (2014:82).

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<sup>5</sup> In recent years, several scholars have chosen to spell “Chicano” as “Xicano,” “Xicana,” or “Xican@.” These spellings reinforce an Indigenous heritage through spelling as the letter “x” in Nahuatl was traditionally pronounced as “sh.” Similar irregularities arise with the spelling of “Mexica,” which currently has several spelling variants including “Mexika,” or “Mexikah.” I have chosen to use the standard spellings of “Chicano” and “Mexica” since there is not a full consensus on the spelling at present.

Regarding the question of the Indigenous identity of *danzantes*, Colín remarks that “Calpulli Tonalehqueh leaders recognize that modern Mexicas are a minority even in the Mexican-origin community and that many Mexican-origin individuals are disconnected from their Indigenous past. They hope to attract as many Mexicans and Mexican Americans as possible so they may come and reconnect with their cultural heritage” (2014:57). Music is described by Colín as a key part of this educational experience, and he notes that Calpulli Tonalehqueh frequently hosts Indigenous musicians, particularly musicians identifying as Mexica, during their annual Mexica New Year Ceremony (*ibid.*). His findings highlight the re-emergence of a distinctly Mexica tribal identity within *Danza* communities that is typically coupled to the core of *Danza*.

Two key pages in Colín’s book describe the growth of a musical repertoire within the *Danza* community. His description highlights the role of music in facilitating a cultural recovery guided by the calpulli’s historical research, in addition to its approach of realizing historical musical forms:

Recognizing that music and songs were central in pre-Cuauhtémoc Mexica schooling and ceremonies, and that powerful cultural, visceral, and spiritual experiences are made available through music, Calpulli Tonalehqueh leaders organized *tequio* [work] for these music classes. Many members of Calpulli Tonalehqueh are gifted multilingual singers, musicians, instrument makers, drummers, and teachers . . . They also constantly seek out veteran musicians like Xavier Quijas Yxayotl, Grupo Tribu, Martín Espino, Ernesto Hernández Olmos, Ocelocoatl, and many others for musical collaborations and lesson . . . The singers and musicians dedicated play at each of the weekly *ensayos* [practices], at the MNY [Mexica New Year] ceremony, at other calpulli events, and during community performances. *Danzantes* recover Nahuatl as well as Mexica poetry, lyrics, instruments, musical structures, and spirituality in a contemporary context.<sup>6</sup> (2014:76, 77)

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<sup>6</sup> Colín’s uses the term “pre-Cuauhtémoc” in an effort to decolonize the Eurocentric narrative created by the terms “pre-Columbian” or “pre-Hispanic” by defining the “pre” and “post” colonial era to the death of the last Mexica *tlatoani*, or king. The new challenge that arises with this well-intentioned effort to decolonize language is that it further entrenches Nahua-centric histories. In approaching this semantic challenge, I have chosen to use “pre-Hispanic,” signifying before the arrival of the Spanish as opposed to Columbus (“pre-Columbian”) to denote this same period as there is currently no singular term available that does not inadvertently homogenize Indigenous experiences in the Americas.

This theme of music and cultural recovery is similarly present in Jennie Marie Luna's dissertation, and she describes cultural recovery as a "healing process" to "rebuild and recover what was lost due to the invasion over 500 years ago" (2012:83). Neither Colín nor Luna offer any musical analysis of this nascent Mexica repertoire nor the dances themselves. Colín, however, does offer a few general statements regarding the repertoire, including the belief that there are more than 365 dances that each represent animals, aspects of nature, or other concepts, which Colín lists as including concepts like memory, willpower, or even "children's laughter" (ibid.:124).

The role of Danza in creating or sustaining Indigenous, Mexican, and Chicano identities is also explored in several chapters of the book *Dancing Across Borders*. Elisa Diana Huerta, Renée de la Castellanos, and María Teresa Ceseña (2009) author the chapters that provide the most detailed accounts and analyses of contemporary Danza practices. In her chapter entitled "Embodied Recuperations," Huerta draws from fieldwork in Northern California, Central Texas and Mexico. She finds that Danza offers a "critical medium through which Chicanas and Chicanos are able to claim and embody an Indigenous (Azteca-Mexica) ancestry" (2009:6). Regarding the dances, Huerta states that "each dance corresponds to a particular philosophical-scientific principle within Aztec/Mexica thought" (ibid.:11). This statement uncritically connects the dances back to the Mexica and positions the dance repertoires as collectively ancient and esoteric.

In the chapter "The Zapopan Dancers: Reinventing an Indigenous Line of Descent," Castellanos draws heavily on Eric Hobsbawm and Terence Ranger's theorizing regarding the invention of tradition (1983). She examines several sites, focusing predominantly on Guadalajara, Mexico, and finds that danzantes, including Aztec dancers as well as Apache

dancers in Guadalajara, can temporarily identify with their Indigenous pasts without associating themselves with contemporary Indigenous communities or experiences (2009:40). Castellanos notes that an “imaginary Indigenous line of descent” is key to reduplicating the idea of the Mexican nation and supporting ideas of historical continuity between the pre-Hispanic past and today’s nation-state (2009:19, 20).

María Teresa Casteña is one of the few to date who has explored the schisms within Danza. She performed a comparative study of two San Diego Danza communities in her chapter entitled “Creating Agency and Identity in Danza Azteca” in *Dancing Across Borders* (2009). Casteña performed fieldwork in San Diego with Mario Aguilar’s group, Danza Mexicayotl, as well as a University of California, San Diego (UCSD) campus student group. Her research highlights the split in Danza between a younger generation that increasingly identifies primarily as Indigenous and uses Danza as a platform political activity, and an older generation that believes Danza should be used strictly for “cultural and spiritual fulfillment” (ibid.:81). Casteña found the two groups to have contrasting missions: The UCSD group sought to recover a pre-Hispanic past by avoiding European instruments and unearthing a “purer form of Danza as they believed it existed before its co-optation by Europeans” —an analysis that draws on Stuart Hall’s 1989 analysis of cultural recovery among colonized groups (ibid.:92). In contrast, Danza Mexicayotl sought to continue the dances and songs as they had been taught by Florencio Yescas, who first introduced Danza to California (ibid.).



Figure 1.3: A danzante with a *concha*, the stringed instrument of the Concheros, prepares to enter the circle at the Celebration of the Founding of Tenochtitlan on July 25, 2015 (Photograph by Kristina Nielsen).

In contrast to the limited scholarship that specifically studies Danza, Conchero has received significant scholarly attention during the last century. Conchero dancing features musical rhythms played on the *concha*, a string instrument with between four and six strings, previously made with an armadillo as the resonating back. These instruments play triads in rhythmic patterns, alternating between I, IV, and V chords, while the danzantes perform footwork in unison. Research on Conchero, the predecessor of Danza, focuses on sites in Central Mexico with an emphasis on Mexico City and Queretaro. The earliest documentation of Conchero that includes musical analysis is Justino Fernández, Vicente T. Mendoza, and Antonio Rodríguez Luna's book *Danza de los Concheros en San Miguel de Allende* (1941). Accompanied by diagrams of dance movements, the authors provide a series of music transcriptions with chords and rhythms (ibid.:18-36). In addition to these musical examples, the

authors offer brief accounts of the meanings of several Conchero dances, descriptions of the structure of Conchero organizations, and historical accounts of the origins of Conchero (ibid.).

Dance scholar Gertrude Prokosch Kurath also provides early observations of Conchero in several articles (1946; 1949; 1956). Her 1946 article includes several transcriptions alongside a description of the accompanying steps. She also includes a musical analysis of the *concha*, the traditional stringed instrument of the Concheros (1946:388). Her 1949 and 1956 articles draw on these findings and explore the relationship between Conchero and other dances from the *danza de conquista* tradition, giving a broader view of the dances disseminated across Mexico and Europe.

Portia Mansfield's dissertation *The Conchero Dancers of Mexico* from 1953 has received less attention in recent years. Mansfield, a dance scholar, was enamored by pre-Hispanic aspects of Conchero and focused much of her analysis on drawing parallels between the contemporary practices she witnessed and surviving codices from Central Mexico. Her findings led her to argue that the dances of Conchero are pre-Hispanic while the songs originate from after the arrival of the Spanish (1953:177). Mansfield provides several transcriptions for danzas entitled "Alabanza," "Dance of Cruz," and "The Dance of the Sun" (ibid.:197, 200, 203, 207). Mansfield additionally provides descriptions of the steps with each of the musical transcriptions. Several reels of Mansfield's original recordings are available in the New York Public Library Archive, although a trip to the New York Public Library Archived revealed that they are currently in too poor a condition to play until they have received preservation treatment.<sup>7</sup> The next earliest recording available that features audio and video is the "El es Dios" documentary that was

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<sup>7</sup> I would like to thank Susanna Rostas for alerting me to these surviving reels of footage that are currently among the oldest footage of the tradition available. In collaboration with the New York Public Library Archive, it is my hope that we might be able to get these reels preserved in the next few years so they will once again be available for viewing.

produced by the National Museum of Anthropology in 1965 (Muñoz et al.:1965).<sup>8</sup> The video features a Conchero procession and vigil with narration, offering a rare early musical recording of the tradition.

Martha Stone's *At the Sign of Midnight: The Concheros Dance Cult of Mexico* is among the most cited works on Conchero (1975). Stone traveled to Mexico with her husband, who worked for the United States Department of Agriculture. With no formal anthropological training, Stone gives an ethnographic account from twenty-five years of participating in Conchero while living in Mexico City. Stone's publication offers insight into the ritual life of the Concheros in the mid-twentieth century, including ceremonies, blessings, and fiestas. Additionally, Stone's account provides key insight into how Concheros initially received the changes of Danza Azteca, which were highly contentious when they were first introduced (ibid.:173). Although Stone does not devote much of her discussion to music, she does include some lyrics that highlight how the Concheros with whom she practiced situated the tradition historically (ibid.:199).

More recent scholarship on Conchero has necessarily confronted the schism between Conchero and Danza Azteca and its growing significance in both Mexico and the United States. For instance, Jesús Jáuregui and Carlo Bonfiglioli's compendium *Las danzas de conquista: I. México contemporáneo* includes a chapter by Anáhuac González on the Concheros that also briefly describes Danza Azteca (1996:221). The chapter includes the lyrics for several songs and descriptions of the dances, music, and rituals. The collection does not include any transcriptions, and the passages devoted to discussing musical practices are brief.

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<sup>8</sup> The earliest recordings I have found of Conchero dancing are from Sergio Eisenstein's 1931 film *Que viva México!* Concheros are featured at 30:30; however, this minute of footage is accompanied by mariachi music, rendering it less useful for musical study.

In *Danza tu palabra* (2005), anthropologist Yolotl González-Torres provides a detailed history of the transition by Concheros to an Aztec visual and auditory aesthetic. Her analysis includes the role of cinema in the 1950s in addition to musical recordings, such as those by Fernando Flores Moncada, who recorded under the title *El Príncipe Azteca* (ibid.:151, 155). Her analysis offers insight into the earliest phases of viewing the nascent Danza Azteca form as a source of Indigenous cultural recovery (ibid.:155), as well as the resulting schisms in Mexico that parallel those in Los Angeles. She labels these *Mexica tiahui*, which she describes as nationalistic and political; and *mexikayotl*, which she describes as spiritual (ibid.:159). Additionally, she traces the re-authoring of Danza histories in recent years, particularly among groups organizing as *calpulli*, in addition to the attribution of Danza to the Mexica (ibid.:169).

González-Torres also provides a brief history of Danza in the United States that includes the contributions of Florencio Yescas and Andres Segura in disseminating Danza in California and Texas respectively (ibid.:152, 153, 183). Additionally, she critically scrutinizes the increased use of Native North American culture as a part of an Aztec or Mexica cultural revival in Central Mexico (ibid.:198). She notes Tlakaheel's use of the Lakota Sun Dance in his nascent *Kaltonal* religion and the participation of members of *mexikayotl* and *mexicanidad* Danza circles in Tlakaheel's ceremonies (ibid.:200).

Susanna Rostas has also written extensively about the Concheros and Danza Azteca circles of Mexico City. She has written multiple articles on the Concheros, including a 1991 article specifically on Conchero as a vehicle for ethnic identity—a theme that was further explored in her 1994 article “The Concheros of Mexico: Changing Ideas of Indianity.” Another article by Rostas pertaining to the relationship between Danza and conceptions of national heritage from 2002 critically examines *danzantes* identifying as Mexica in Mexico City. The

article offers insight into the critical intersection of Indigenous re-identification and nationalism. Rostas suggests that *mexicanidad* in Mexico and contemporary movements to re-identify as Indigenous through Danza are highly nationalistic as they are involved “in a subculture that foregrounds ‘nationhood’” despite their intent to reject the political and identity project of the nation-state (2002:35). Additionally, a recent chapter by Rostas entitled “Los Concheros en un contexto mundial: mexicanidad, espiritualidad new age y Sufismo como influencias en la danza” in the collection *Raíces en movimiento: practices religiosas tradicionales en contextos translocales* examines the integration of New Age spirituality and Sufism into Danza practices, highlighting the broader syncretic processes at play in the Danza community (2008).

Rostas addresses the split between the Conchero, Danza Azteca, Mexica, and mexikayotl groups in the book *Carrying the Word* (2009). Rostas additionally provides a compelling historical analysis of Conchero and ethnographic accounts of the dance that includes data from interviews with participants. In both *Carrying the Word* and her article from 2002, Rostas theorizes reidentification movements in Danza as a form of “invented ethnicity” or “invented tradition” (2002: 26; 2009: 214), drawing on Hobsbawm and Ranger’s *Invention of Tradition* (1983). As an anthropologist, Rostas focuses primarily on identity formation in her publications and does not include musical analysis (2009:134). Despite the limited descriptions of music, Rostas includes several useful observations about changes in the lyrics, titles of danzas, and the increased use of Indigenous instrumentation (ibid.:134, 253).

Scholarship on Danza in the United States currently has a significant blind spot, as it does not fully contend with the role of social positionalities in diaspora including the intersections of socioeconomic status, class, ethnicity, and constructions of race. Additionally, significant differences in the colonial and racial histories in the two countries are leveled, and Indigenous

histories and identities in Mexico are equated uncritically with Indigenous histories and identities in the United States. In diaspora, the collision of subtly distinct interpretations of Indigeneity and Indigenous historical experiences come to a head. Only one article has touched on the significant role of these interpretative differences. In a 2009 article entitled “Aztec Dance, Transnational Movements: Conquest of a Different Sort,” Sandra Garner examines the appropriation of Lakota intangible cultural heritage by *danzantes* and critically scrutinizes Chicano claims to an Indigenous identity. Garner focuses on the presence of *danzantes* at the annual Lakota Sun Dance and a series of conflicts that arose from the cultural assumptions of these *danzantes* regarding pan-Indigeneity. The representation and marketing of Lakota traditions by members of the *Danza* community are also addressed (*ibid.*).

Besides Garner’s examination of one instance of cultural conflict between *danzantes* and the Lakota attending the Sun Dance, no studies have critically examined how these communities interact and exchange culture. Furthermore, although there are a growing number of documented instances of *danzantes* performing Native North American musical instruments, songs, and song styles (Vento 1994; González-Torres 2005; Garner 2009; Guerrero 2010; Castorena 2012; Luna 2012), the meaning and implications of such performances have not been problematized. Understanding the appeal of Native North American music and repertoire to *danzantes* is one key facet for understanding how new repertoires and histories are composed within *Danza* communities.

### **Theoretical Framework**

In her critique of modernism and post-colonialism, Linda Tuhiwai Smith notes that fragmentation has been an enduring characteristic of colonialism, as have the projects of culture

and identity reclamation: “While the West might be experiencing fragmentation, the process of fragmentation known under its older guise as colonialization is well known to Indigenous peoples . . . Fragmentation is not an Indigenous project, it is something we are recovering from” (1999:97). From the perspective of decolonization theory, modernity and reconstruction projects are no different from historical processes of maintaining and protecting heritage. But where does Danza fall in this dichotomy between “West” and “Indigenous”? Danza has a place in each of these histories: Although its roots are Indigenous, it is also heavily marked by its role in disseminating Catholicism from the colonial period onwards. Additionally, Danza’s trajectory intersects with nationalist projects in the twentieth century that sought to promote a Mexico City-centric notion of a shared Indigenous heritage. This approach marginalized many Indigenous communities of Mexico through a process referred to by Martin Stokes as a “top down” approach to ethnicities (1994:16). These problems have given rise to critical questions in contemporary understandings of Mexican Indigeneity; for instance, should nationalist portrayals of an Indigenous Mexico be broadly interpreted as “inauthentic”? Can the dichotomies of “West” and “Indigenous” that ignore the complexities of colonial histories be further dissected to allow for a more fluid means of interpreting contemporary manifestations of Mexican Indigeneity?

Presently, current scholarship on Danza is divided into several camps with the two poles consisting of those who view contemporary Danza uncritically as an Indigenous dance—with Indigenous often conflated with pre-Hispanic Mexica—that serves to decolonize the community (Guerrero 2010; Luna 2012; Colín 2014). These works are predominantly written by danzantes. In contrast, the opposing camp predominantly draws on Eric Hobsbawm and Terence Ranger’s 1983 *The Invention of Tradition* and critiques Danza as an “invented tradition” —or even an “invented ethnicity” —and typically measures it against its Conchero predecessor. These

critiques are predominantly leveled against those who identify as Mexica through their participation in Danza (Rostas 2002:26; 2009:200, 205). Nonetheless, from my conversations with danzantes, individuals from all segments of the community have experienced such accusations, including those who participate in Danza Azteca. A danzante I interviewed recounted to me that approximately twenty years ago an unknown ethnomusicologist told her that from her perspective if you were not “actually an Indigenous person, from that Indigenous tribe, from that Indigenous town, your music was not valid as Indigenous” (Personal Interview 2015). In this instance, this ethnomusicologist’s benchmarks for “authentically Indigenous music” were at odds with the experiences and more fluid interpretations of the Danza community.

The primary cause of this stark division are the methods by which narratives and sources are appraised, found, prioritized, interpreted and put into relation with each other—a methodological process Charles Briggs refers to as “metadiscursive practices” (1993, 1996). Briggs’ analysis of “invention of tradition” literature in his 1996 article “The Politics of Discursive Authority in Research on the ‘Invention of Tradition’” offers a case study of how metadiscursive practices contribute to the politics of research and representation (1996:439). Instead of focusing on the merits of conflicting views presented by “invention of tradition” literature and Indigenous scholars, Briggs advocates approaching such disagreements from a position that scrutinizes the metadiscursive practices that constitute both approaches (1996:463). Employing this approach, it becomes possible to elucidate the underlying causes of these political stances. In the case of “invention of tradition,” Briggs identifies postmodernism as the primary culprit behind the political controversy (ibid.:464). In addition to his study of scholarly analyses, Briggs examines how discursive authority is created by informants, illustrating his

1993 challenge to the artificial divisions between “local” and “scholarly” metadiscursive practices (1993:420). Briggs’ analysis of metadiscursive practices offers several useful considerations for ethnographic project construction and writing. His recommended considerations include the importance of reflexivity, the importance of selecting data and recognizing what is omitted, and the need to evaluate the role of the researcher’s discursive authority in interpreting of data.

Briggs finds that authority is derived from the metadiscursive practice of intertextuality, or drawing links between many sites of discourse (1996:459). In particular, he notes that this is characteristic of “invention of tradition” research, where the resulting links and gaps become “building blocks for imbuing scholarly works in this area with authority” (ibid.). In considering the metadiscursive practice of selecting data and creating “gaps and links,” omitted data becomes as significant in narrative construction as included data in shaping a political narrative. In his 1993 article Briggs argues that politics underlie all discourse (1993:388). Briggs further notes that politics can be obscured through representation and “selectively minimizing certain intertextual gaps and maximizing others” (ibid.:391). Previous Danza scholarship has often similarly “minimized” or “maximized” gaps in interpretations to achieve various political objectives.

In approaching the question of how Danza communities interpret their repertoires, histories, and identities, I pair Brigg’s approach of metadiscursive analysis with theoretical frameworks from Indigenous studies that permit a more nuanced perspective in approaching fragmentation and the reconstitution of fragments within cultural recovery movements. Analyzing metadiscursive practices in the Danza community and its literature clarifies the construction of historical and political narratives. As noted by Briggs, this form of analysis shifts

the emphasis away from evaluations of whether histories and performances are “true” and refocuses on how communities, both local and scholarly, determine historical and performative “truths.” The metadiscursive practices employed by Danza scholars and their informants reveal how danzantes construct their discursive authority and how intertextual gaps facilitate these objectives.

In examining how communities transmit and interpret culture and histories, I draw on James Clifford’s argument that culture is translated rather than transmitted (2013:48). Clifford notes that the translation process results in local forms where there is consistently loss and addition as new elements are added into the translated tradition (ibid.). Analyzing the articulation of tradition—described by Clifford as processes that occur in “a kind of a collective ‘voice’ but always in this constructed, contingent sense” (ibid.:60)—permits a fluid interpretation of traditional manifestations of culture. Drawing on Stuart Hall’s adaptation of Antonio Gramsci’s use of “articulation” (1986), Clifford proposes its use for Indigenous contexts since it allows for fluidity, or a “middle ground” and contestation (2013:59). One of the key reasons articulation theory is useful in conceptualizing the Danza community is its approach to the unavoidable problem of authenticity. As noted by Clifford:

In articulation theory, the whole question of authenticity is secondary, and the process of social and cultural persistence is political all the way back. It’s assumed that cultural forms will always be made, unmade, and remade. Communities can and must reconfigure themselves, drawing selectively on remembered pasts. (Clifford 2013:62)

From a musical perspective, articulation theory can be likened to musical composition in the creativity and flexibility of its forms. As in articulation theory, composition includes a coupling and de-coupling of aesthetics, phrases, and stylistic elements to accommodate a contemporary aesthetic or communal need that in turn reflects other articulated histories and identities.

Individual fragments of musics, cultures, heritages, and histories are assembled and pieced

together as *danzantes* form new Danza communities. Analyzing these cultural and artistic processes and products as compositions allows for a deeper analysis of the *how* rather than an over-emphasis on the *what* that commonly results in rigid comparisons to traditions of the past and labels of “authenticity” or “invention.”

Instead of measuring claims of authenticity by the community against a vague historical backdrop, it is more informative to consider how Danza communities are assessing what they consider “authentic,” which is inherently intertwined with what they consider historical. As noted by Martin Stokes, “authenticity” should be considered a powerful discursive tool (1994:7) —a perspective that offers an ethnomusicological approach to dissecting the metadiscursive practices and the establishment of authority highlighted by Briggs and Edward Bruner (1993, 1996; 1994). A meaningful analysis of Danza requires a consideration of interlacing questions of interpretations of authority, authenticity, and histories, and the ways in which these are composed socially and musically. This framework offers additional nuance in the complicated undertaking of balancing the many Indigenous cultural heritages represented in contemporary Danza practices. Furthermore, it provides an opportunity to contribute to ethnomusicological discourses on musical recovery and Indigenous studies discourses on decolonization and Indigenous revitalization movements.

## **Research Method**

My first introduction to Danza was with the Arteaga family, whom I met through their participation in the 2012 California State University, Dominguez Hills powwow. At the time, I was interested in historical music archaeology following my collaborations with archaeologist Christophe Helmke on a historical research project in Belize. Following my introduction to

Danza, my historical interest shifted to the role interpretations and recreations of the past have in the development of diasporic Indigenous identities and repertoires. In fall 2014, I began Danza in earnest with Calpulli Xiuhcoatl in Santa Ana, and I became *Xiuhcoalca* (“of Xiuhcoatl”).

Starting in spring 2015, I began reaching out to other captains and leaders of diverse Danza groups in the Greater Los Angeles Area. In the overwhelming majority of cases, my project was well received once it was clarified that I had no intention of portraying an authoritative interpretation of Danza but rather aimed to explore the constellation of interpretations of the tradition, histories, and musics currently in circulation.

My interest in Danza grew as I found references to danzantes performing repertoire originating from Native American communities residing in the United States, particularly songs from the Sioux and Comanche. Initially, I planned for this dissertation to analyze recordings of songs performed in the Danza community and scrutinize questions of intellectual property ownership with members of the tribes represented in the repertoire; however, as I began to dig deeper, I realized that the underlying reasons for such performances and their contentiousness within the Danza community itself required deeper analysis first.

Through interviews and casual conversations with danzantes, I became aware of whom members of the Los Angeles community viewed as most reputable in their knowledge of local Danza history and spirituality. I tried to contact as many of these individuals as possible, but it quickly became apparent that meeting with all of them would be impossible, as the community is increasingly large and diffuse. Additionally, a limitation I encountered in my fieldwork in Los Angeles is the unavoidable reality of traffic. The consistently formidable traffic between various Danza circles in Santa Ana and East Los Angeles placed limitations on my fieldwork since most Danza groups meet around 7 PM, placing me in peak rush hour congestion. This unavoidable

aspect of the Los Angeles landscape has contributed to shaping the distribution of Danza groups in the Greater Los Angeles Area, and several dance groups, including Xiuhcoatl, grew as the drive from Santa Ana to East Los Angeles became more grueling (Personal Interview with Cuezalin 2016).

I draw on ethnographic research with five current Danza leaders, or *capitanes*, in the Greater Los Angeles Danza community, who provide insight into the shifting interpretations of Danza over several generations in the Los Angeles Danza community.<sup>9</sup> These Danza leaders each have their own interpretation of Danza repertoires, spirituality, and traditions that have resulted in a multitude of musical, spiritual, and artistic directions for individual Danza circles. In addition to the histories and perspectives of these five contemporary Danza leaders in the Greater Los Angeles region, I found it necessary to examine the lasting influences of several key leaders who greatly influenced the community that are no longer present—as in the case with Florencio Yescas, who passed away in 1983; or who have become estranged from the Los Angeles Danza community—as in the case of Arturo “Pastel” Mireles. This research drew on conversations with members of the community, archival research, existing publications, and extensive research on the internet.

A central challenge I have encountered in this study is that of defining the “site” and field of study. Although my research focuses on Danza communities in the Greater Los Angeles Area, the transnational nature of the larger Danza community means that a discussion of the Los Angeles community cannot take place without a thorough discussion of the tradition as practiced historically in Mexico. Further complicating the question of defining the “field site” is the spread of Danza from what is now its diasporic hub in Southern California to cities across the United

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<sup>9</sup> I use both “leader” and “capitán” in this dissertation, as in some instances Danza circles are moving away from the hierarchies of Conchero denoted by “capitán.”

States and even Canada. In many nascent Danza circles across the United States, strong connections with the Danza communities of Los Angeles are maintained, and danzantes from the Los Angeles community are regularly invited to visit and teach in other cities. In yet another complicated twist, members of the Los Angeles Danza community now travel to Mexico to teach or lead ceremonies that have been developed by members of Los Angeles Danza communities or other satellite communities in the United States.

In this larger transnational Danza community, the internet now serves a key role in connecting members of the entire transnational community. Most of the music I discuss in this dissertation came from performances I heard while performing fieldwork and subsequent conversations about these performances with the performers and members of the community. Nonetheless, the importance of mediums like YouTube and Facebook for song and ceremony distribution within the transnational community also became apparent during my research. Ignoring these critical sites would present an incomplete picture of the contemporary Los Angeles Danza community and the circulation of musical developments. Threads on YouTube boards and Facebook discussion groups are among the primary sites in which the transnational community addresses questions regarding the direction of an Indigenous “Aztec” or “Mexica” musical recovery, as well as broader themes regarding what constitutes an Indigenous Danza identity. Therefore, my musical analyses and descriptions include a mixture of both music I witnessed and recorded and recordings disseminated online. When possible, I note the differences between the performances as observed in the Los Angeles community and those broadcast on YouTube to highlight the ongoing dialogue between local and transnational Danza communities.

In *Theory and Method in Historical Ethnomusicology* (2014) editors Jonathan McCollum and David G. Hebert note the trend in ethnomusicology to focus predominantly on ethnography and neglect history, pointing to Ruth Stone's 2008 observation in *Theory for Ethnomusicology* that,

the dearth of historical perspective in ethnomusicology from the 1950s to the late 1980s—a period of some thirty years—is notable. This lack of historical studies in ethnomusicology was influenced, in part, by a vein of antihistorical feelings that ran through anthropology (Evans-Pritchard 1961). “Primitive” people didn’t possess history, in large part because they didn’t have written sources. Instead they were assumed to possess fairly fixed *traditions*, practices that were replicated nearly unchanged again and again. The focus of study for anthropology was the “ethnographic present” (Stone 2008:181)

To counter this problematic legacy, they call on music scholars to “‘present’ the musical past in a more robust way” (2014:27). Danza in Los Angeles offers such an opportunity for the “presenting” of the past—and even the “futuring” of the past— as a growing number of Danza communities strive to become more as they believe their ancestors’ communities were prior to European incursions. To portray multidimensional histories, I draw on historical research spanning from the colonial era through the twentieth century as a necessary foreground to deciphering how Danza communities are interpreting music and Indigeneity through a historical lens. Key sources for colonial histories include colonial-era texts, censuses, and historical analyses from neighboring disciplines of Latin American history and art history. In contrast, the recent histories of the twentieth century included in this dissertation draw heavily on archival research and oral histories from members of the Los Angeles Danza community.

My approach to contemporary questions of identity integrate these historical findings, as these histories inform interpretations of the identities of the self and broader Danza community. In approaching the composition of identities within Danza, my analysis draws on interviews with *danzantes* alongside literature from sociology, Latin American studies, and ethnic studies. The

contextualization of shifting modes of identification within a historical context further highlights how identities are articulated in modes reflective of their historical moment.

Presently, the composition of repertoires within Danza communities has been largely overlooked. My research method integrates musical analysis into the study of Danza by deciphering how the composition of repertoire reflects the varying interpretations of the community and Indigenous histories. Musical analysis is a particularly fruitful tool in this instance, as the repertoires are composed of various segments of texts, stylistic elements, and rhythms whose selection and reformulation as Danza repertoires are closely intertwined with interpretations of identities and histories. Triangulating histories, identities, and musics allows for a more meaningful deconstruction of how different Indigenous Mexican cultural revitalizations are being undertaken by members of the Los Angeles Danza community—a process that in turn influences the larger transnational community.

Lastly, as one of the few cultural outsiders to study Danza in the United States, I have no personal stake in cementing a single interpretation of the tradition or its history; instead, I aim to challenge some of the simplified analyses and narratives, particularly those of Danza as pure invention and those of Danza as a tribal Mexica practice. I complicate both these narratives by scrutinizing how these histories have been composed. I highlight the diversity of opinions within the community and challenge the metanarratives that have been forwarded by a handful of danzantes who have frequently been cited in academic works while many knowledgeable Danza leaders remain unpublished and sidelined in academic discourses. Members of the community with whom I spoke noted that this has led to problematic historical revisionism, particularly as some danzantes attempt to strengthen their positions as authoritative carriers of the tradition (Personal Interviews 2016). Additionally, in recent years the Mexica interpretation has received

increasing attention within the academic discourse (Luna 2012; Castorena 2012; Colín 2014). I problematize these narratives while prioritizing other voices within the community to underscore the many interpretations currently found in the tradition.

## **Dissertation Overview**

Chapter 2 begins with an analysis of Danza as it was first introduced to Southern California. I explore the connection between Danza Azteca and Conchero, and how traditional modes of transmission have continued in the Danza community. I first approach these histories biographically, focusing on the lives and contributions of Florencio Yescas and his student Lazaro Arvizu, who continues to lead a Danza Azteca circle in East Los Angeles. This history lays the groundwork for subsequent explorations of the relationships between nationalism and Indigeneity, and ritual and folkloric forms of Danza.

In Chapter 3, I focus on the changes in the Los Angeles Danza community that occurred in the generations of Danza leadership following Arvizu. Drawing on interviews conducted with three *capitanes*, or leaders, I scrutinize the sources they draw on to align Danza more closely with their interpretations of their individual and communal identities, and their perspectives on Indigenous histories. The biographical sketches and analyses of the sources trusted and consulted by each of these danzantes provide a basis for subsequent discussions regarding how danzantes are gauging authenticity, and how interpretations of authenticities subsequently affect the composition of musical repertoires. Additionally, I examine the impact of the Mexica Danza groups that have disseminated tribalized Mexica interpretations of Danza. Following this ethnographic analysis, I suggest that new interpretations of Danza might be interpreted as

methods to navigate and subvert the overlapping and contradictory cultural-racial matrices of Mexico and the United States.

The fourth chapter delves into the composition of the Danza repertoire. I begin with a musical analysis of the transition from Conchero to Danza Azteca that examines how the music was “Aztecified.” Following this analysis, I focus on both the composition of new danzas and the re-signification and historicizing of danzas in the tradition, particularly those developed by Florencio Yescas. I suggest that the historical interpretations of younger generations of danzantes have created new platforms for danzantes to connect musically with a shared communal vision of pre-Hispanic Indigeneity.

Chapter 5 provides a historical analysis of the broad appeal of Danza and a Nahua-Aztec cultural matrix to a diasporic community comprising members from diverse Indigenous backgrounds. I revisit colonial era genres, such as the mitote and danzas de conquista, suggesting that they have pan-Indigenous origins that facilitate the broad participation in the Danza. Following a historical analysis, I scrutinize several subversive histories in circulation, particularly those centered on a Mexica cultural re-emergence. I suggest that interpretations of histories—particularly the growing number of subversive histories of survival and broader pan-Indian cultural continuity before the invasion—have informed and impacted interpretations of music, its history, and the sources sought for a desired musical and cultural recovery by Mexica and mexikayotl Danza communities.

The sixth chapter focuses on changes in the song repertoires, particularly those informed by the historical interpretations detailed in Chapter 5. Starting with the *alabanza* repertoires—a form of Catholic praise song performed by Concheros and the Danza Azteca circles directly connected to them, such as that led by Arvizu, I trace how new song repertoires have been

introduced and traditionalized in the community. Additionally, I examine the entrance of Native North American music traditions into Danza, focusing on the historical interpretations and assumptions underlying them. These findings contribute to understandings of how authenticities are gauged by different segments of the community, highlighting how historical interpretation informs music—as well as how music performances increasingly inform historical interpretation.

In Chapter 7, I connect my central findings detailed in the previous chapters, highlighting the interrelationship between identities, histories, and musics. Drawing on the analyses throughout this dissertation, I examine how these in turn inform interpretations of authenticity and authority in the tradition. I conclude by offering some final considerations for future research on Danza, focusing on the need to include competing perspectives and acknowledge the current diversity subsumed under Danza.

## Chapter 2

### The Introduction of Danza to Los Angeles

Ritual and performance have co-existed in Danza since its introduction to Southern California by Florencio Yescas. Drawing on the development of Danza Azteca in Mexico City and its subsequent introduction to the Mexican diaspora in Southern California, I examine the artistic contributions of Yescas and the distinctions between ritual and the performance that he advanced. I suggest that his artistic vision was fundamental in creating a lasting vision of “Aztecness” for both the national and diasporic communities of Mexico. Following an examination of the contributions of Yescas and Arvizu—Yescas’ heir to the tradition in Los Angeles—I challenge the prevalent notion that folkloricized art forms are inventions by scrutinizing how it has maintained vital links with its origins in the *Conchero* tradition. This chapter provides a foundation for understanding the subsequent historicizing of Yescas’ artistic contributions by younger generations that will be explored in subsequent chapters.

#### Danza’s Path to Los Angeles

The Danza Azteca Florencio Yescas brought to Southern California was shaped by his experiences with both traditional *Conchero*, a traditional syncretic Catholic-Indigenous dance passed down through hierarchical structures, and staged folkloric dance.<sup>10</sup> Yescas, born around 1920 in San Juan Tezompa, Mexico, in the state of Mexico City witnessed and participated in the Aztecification of the *Conchero* tradition in the capital (Armstrong 1985:33). Drawing on a short interview for a Master of Arts in Dance thesis, Gayle Armstrong relates that Yescas’ father was a

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<sup>10</sup> His last name has alternatively been spelled “Illescas” (González Torres 2005); however, the “Yescas” spelling is the correct spelling.

Native Otomí speaker and his mother a Native Nahuatl speaker (ibid.).<sup>11</sup> Arvizu recounts that Yescas began dancing with a concha when he was young. When Yescas was approximately twelve years old, an unknown incident occurred that resulted in discipline. Many of the Conchero groups practiced harsh disciplinary measures including corporal punishment, and after being disciplined, Yescas left the first group with which he had danced and joined Manuel Pineda's group in Mexico City (Personal Interview with Arvizu 2015).

Pineda's group "San Miguel Arcángel" was key to establishing Yescas' interpretation of the tradition. The group has a long history, and its *estandarte*, or banner, is over one hundred years old, making it among the oldest circles in the tradition (Personal Interview with Arvizu 2015). Pineda's group "Aztecified," and in 1940 they began dancing shirtless, much to the dismay of the older generation of Concheros (Stone 1975:173). Martha Stone describes the conflict in which Don Manuel, another Conchero dancer, confronted Pineda about the change, to which Pineda responded that their ancestors had danced with bare chests. To this, Stone recalls that Don Manuel responded: "Certainly our ancestors danced like that, but our ancestors were savages and we—we are civilized people. I told him frankly that he will put on a sweat shirt or he will not dance" (ibid.:173).

Despite the resistance of an older generation of Concheros, Pineda introduced an interpretation of Aztec dress drawn from the codices along with another Conchero leader, Felipe Aranda, who would later play a prominent role in the *mexikayotl* movement in Mexico City that sought to re-create interpretations of pre-Hispanic cultures and spirituality (González-Torres 2005:157). During the early period of the transition from Conchero to Danza Azteca, the older

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<sup>11</sup> The Otomí of the Bajío, or the high plateau in Northern Central Mexico that includes the contemporary states of San Luis Potosí, Querétaro, Guanajuato, parts of Zacatecas and Aguas Calientes, played a critical role in the development of Conchero, as will be explored at length in Chapter 5.

generation of Danza capitanes would frequently prevent Aztecified groups from participating in ceremonies and joint events in church atriums in response to their dress (Stone 1975:173). Additionally, Pineda introduced the huehuetl, teponaztli drum, and shell trumpets into the dances of the Conchero tradition, effectively transitioning it both visually and sonically from “Conchero” to “Danza Azteca” (González-Torres 2005:143). After Yescas went on to attain local fame, he still retained a deep respect for Pineda. As a sign of this respect, Arvizu recalls that anyone wishing to dance with Yescas after he gained notoriety had to go dance with Pineda’s “San Miguel Arcángel,” as he would not dance with the circle of any other jefe in Mexico City. Their respect was mutual, and Pineda was proud of Yescas and the artistic direction that Yescas took Danza later in his life (Personal Interview with Arvizu 2015).



Figure 2.1: Four huehuetl drums featuring elaborate paintings and carvings at the Mexica New Year Ceremony at Baldwin Park on March 26, 2016 (Photograph by Kristina Nielsen).

Around this same time when Aztecification was rapidly occurring, an event occurred that disrupted the tradition and ushered in new leadership in many Conchero organizations. In 1945, a train carrying some of the most respected carriers of the Conchero tradition was in a gruesome

accident at Cazadero in route to San Jun de Los Lagos to celebrate the Virgin Mary (Stone 1975:36). In total, about one hundred people were killed and seventy were injured when a freight train filled with sugar collided with the train, causing a burning flood of molasses to overtake the trapped pilgrims (Stone 1975:36; *Lewiston Evening Journal*). In addition to the personal losses that many danzantes suffered, Arvizu relates that Yescas said that many in the Conchero tradition were somewhat adrift, as “there was no one to follow” after this event (Personal Interview with Arvizu 2015). This event led to a younger leadership and hastened the emergence of Danza Azteca as separate from Conchero (ibid.).

Around this same time, Yescas began to perform on stage, including at the nightclub El Patio in Mexico City. In the 1940s, El Patio was one of the hottest nightclubs in Mexico City that featured some of the biggest names of the decade, such as Sammy Davis Jr. and Edith Piaf (ibid.). Additionally, Arvizu recounts that Yescas received a scholarship to study modern dance at the National School of Fine Arts. It is highly likely that he studied with Waldeen von Falkenstein, who had been contracted by the Mexican Ministry of Education to create a national ballet for the Instituto Nacional de Bellas Artes (Teibler-Vondrak 2011:230). As a part of this training—or closely following it—Arvizu recounts that Yescas worked with Marcelo Torreblanca (1907-1986), and the two were close friends throughout their lifetimes (Personal Interview with Arvizu 2016).<sup>12</sup>

It was through this dance training that Yescas first met Amalia Hernández since both were affiliated with the blossoming nationalist Mexican dance community. Arvizu recounts that Hernández and Yescas were dance partners before Hernández gained notoriety, and later, when

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<sup>12</sup> In the 1940s, Torreblanca traveled with a group across Mexico documenting and studying regional dances during the tenure of José Vasconcelos as the Secretary of Public Education (Casanova 2002:12) — an approach to cultural collection that would later be made famous by Amalia Hernández.

Hernández got a contract to perform a folkloric presentation in Europe, Yescas was one of the seven dancers that joined her in preparation for the tour.<sup>13</sup> After months of planning and practice, the trip was cancelled by Hernández after she discovered she was pregnant with her first child. The cancellation of the trip resulted in no payment for months of painstaking preparation and work (Moya 2009).

In 1952, Hernández officially bankrolled the group and named it the “Ballet Moderno de México” —a tribute to their roots in modern dance. The group’s performance of the “Sones Antiguos de Michoacán” was their most successful performance. Through Hernández’s extensive connections from her politically and militarily connected father, she secured her group a permanent weekly show known as “Función de Gala” on Televisa (Ballet Folklórico de México). Danzantes who knew Yescas note that he played a vital role in developing choreography for Hernández, and he ultimately danced with the Ballet Folklórico for six years (Personal Interviews with Arvizu and Carmelo 2015, 2016; Armstrong 1985:34). Arvizu and others recount that Yescas played a role in both choreography and costume development, although he is not mentioned or credited by name in the official literature of the Ballet Folklórico. Ultimately, Hernández’s unwillingness to credit others for their contributions led to a falling out between the two. In an egregious example of this behavior example, Arvizu recounts that Yescas designed and made one hundred costumes for the ballet and had all the local seamstresses in Tacuba, Mexico, sewing for a deadline. Upon delivering the costumes, he was neither fully compensated for the work or given credit for his costume designs; instead, all the credit for costuming was attributed to Dasha (Personal Interview with Arvizu 2016). The failure to acknowledge contributions by other artists remains a recurring theme in the Ballet Folklórico;

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<sup>13</sup> The six others besides Yescas and Hernández included Roseyra Marengo, Alma Rosa Martínez, Edme de Moya, Hugo Romero, “los Gúiligúis, and Colombia Moya (Moya 2009).

for instance, the founding narrative currently provided on the Ballet Folklórico website acknowledges that there were eight dancers that founded the contemporary ballet, but they remain unnamed and any acknowledgement of their artistic contributions to the development of the Ballet Folklórico are absent (Ballet Folklórico de México).

Following his involvement in the nascent Ballet Moderno de México, Yescas was invited to perform at Copacabana in Cuba—an invitation that was extended to him after he was seen dancing at El Patio in Mexico City (Personal Interview with Arvizu 2015). The exact year in which Yescas left the Ballet Moderno de México is unknown. Arvizu recounts that Yescas did well in Cuba, and he remained in Cuba until the Revolution. When the Cuban Revolution began, Yescas left Cuba and travelled to Los Angeles (ibid.). Around this time, Hernández achieved international fame for her ballet at the Pan-American games in Chicago and the group was renamed the “Ballet Folklórico de México” (Ballet Folklórico de México). Tapping into this growing interest in Ballet Folklórico in the United States, Yescas joined a group of folkloric dancers in Los Angeles that toured up and down the coast performing Danza Azteca and other Mexican folkloric dances for audiences (Personal Interviews with Arvizu and Carmelo 2015, 2017). One of the few pieces of documented evidence of his life in these decades is a photograph from May 3, 1963, in Los Angeles currently held by the Los Angeles Library Archive that features Yescas a Veracruz folk dance (Figure 2.2). Despite the lack of formal recognition for his contributions to Hernández’s ballet—or many of the other projects in which he participated—Yescas distinguished himself as an expert in Conchero and Aztec-style choreography. The respected position he attained as a premier choreographer of Aztec dancing is further highlighted by his role in choreographing later international productions, and he became a trusted expert and

collaborator on productions including the video for Raquel Welch's "Aquarius," and a video for the Epcot Center in Florida's theme-ride for Mexico (ibid.).



Figure 2.2: Yescas and Carolina Russek dancing on May 3, 1963, at Los Angeles City Hall in preparation for a Cinco de Mayo celebration (Photograph Courtesy of the Los Angeles Public Library).

Though the trajectory of Yescas' dancing career may seem highly secular, Yescas remained Catholic and still participated in Catholic Conchero and Danza Azteca ceremonies, including *Guadalupana* celebrations and rituals to honor the Virgin of Guadalupe, and ritual cleansings, or *limpios*, as pictured below (Figure 2.3). Arvizu offered the following moving example of Yescas' unwavering devotion to the tenets of the syncretic Catholicism of Conchero. While in Mexico around 1970, Yescas' mother was ill; however, Yescas had an obligation to dance for the Virgin de Zapopan. While dancing for the Virgin de Zapopan in Guadalajara, Yescas was informed that his mother had passed away. Keeping his obligation, Yescas stayed and danced for the completion of the honoring of the Virgin de Zapopan before leaving. The death of his mother was a pivotal moment for Yescas and he was overcome with grief following the loss. Friends encouraged him to return to the United States, leading Yescas to put together a

group of dancers that would be key in the development of Danza Azteca in the United States (Personal Interview with Arvizu 2015). Yescas' dual proficiency and devotion to ritual and performance would be a catalyst for Danza Azteca as practiced in the Los Angeles community.



Figure 2.3: Yescas receiving a limpio from Margarito Aguilar holding a Santo Xochitl in Mexico in 1977 during “Caravana Teponaztli,” a trip where he led danzantes from Los Angeles on a visit to Mexico (Photograph courtesy of Lazaro Arvizu).

### **Analyzing the Development of Danza Azteca**

The transformation of Conchero to Danza Azteca—complete with the huehuetl, bare chests, regalia, and a historical narrative rooted in the Aztec—wove the basic choreography and the essence of Conchero into the national fabric of Mexico.<sup>14</sup> These efforts coincided with a broader romantic nationalism prevalent during the mid-twentieth century in Mexico (Nájera-Ramírez 2012). The grassroots spread of Danza Azteca, or “Aztecified Conchero,” in Mexico City coincided with the rise of indigenismo that attempted to fold Indigenous cultures into the

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<sup>14</sup> Chapter 4 provides a detailed analysis of Conchero musical and choreographic elements in Danza Azteca.

nation-state. Arguably, Conchero and Danza Azteca became two separate genres during this period; however, the fact that so many Conchero groups transitioned to Danza Azteca groups during this same period blurs the boundaries between the two. There are key continuities in Danza Azteca from Conchero, including basic rhythms and choreography (See Chapter 4), though performers in Danza Azteca had additional artistic discretion not afforded in traditional Conchero. This artistic discretion became significant in the staging of the past, particularly as choreographers, such as Yescas, worked towards presenting a vision of the historical Aztec for Hernández and other folkloric presentations.

The Danza Azteca that Yescas brought to California was rooted in the two separate— but overlapping—dance forms of the Ballet Folklórico, which featured danzas staged for audiences and new choreographic elements, and the slowly diverging Conchero and Danza Azteca styles in Mexico City. These two forms result in the co-existence of Danza as presentation and Danza as ritual. The modern dance choreography of the Ballet Folklórico that Yescas integrated into Danza Azteca was not seen as a threat to the continuity or integrity of the Conchero tradition, and his affiliation with Pineda’s Conchero group that had already “Aztecified” maintained an unbroken link to the Conchero tradition. Nationalism and the Ballet Folklórico were not interpreted as at odds with Indigeneity, as the Mexican state was actively seeking to create a national identity that highlighted a common Indigenous root through indigenismo. This would provide a vital foundation for introducing Danza Azteca as a celebration of Mexican pride and Indigenous heritage in the diaspora.

These changes have been the basis for accusations of “invention,” but as Yescas’ life and interpretation highlight, the label obscures important parts of Danza Azteca’s legacy. Even if other Concheros disagreed with Pineda’s decisions, Pineda had authority derived through

traditional Conchero hierarchies within his circle, and he instituted many of the central musical and choreographic changes. The conference of authority by Pineda, and Yescas' Otomí and Nahuatl heritages, further complicate the argument for drawing a hard line of distinction between Conchero and Danza Azteca. Presently, the two are simply interpreted as different branches of the same family by those who practice Danza Azteca and continue Capitán Florencio Yescas' teachings in Los Angeles.

### **Lazaro Arvizu and Florencio Yescas' Path to Los Angeles**

Lazaro Arvizu joined Yescas as one of twelve dancers who toured Mexico and later the United States in the early 1970s, and he remains prominent in the Danza community of Los Angeles today. Arvizu was raised in Tacuba, Mexico City, and relates that all the groups there had already undergone the transition from Conchero to Danza Azteca when he began to participate in Danza. He first met Yescas in the late 1960s when they both lived in Tacuba: In his early teenage years, Arvizu accompanied his childhood friend Gerardo Salinas, widely known as "El Cerillo," to Danza Azteca. Arvizu recounts that one day the danzantes encouraged him to put on the regalia; after that experience, Arvizu began dancing with the group. Yescas invited him to officially join the group and later invited Arvizu to join the twelve dancers to tour. Arvizu had just two hundred pesos when the group set out tour in 1971 with Guadalajara as their first destination. The group stayed and performed in Guadalajara for twelve days and they were well received by the public. Following their trip to Guadalajara, the group went to Nayarit for approximately a week, followed by Hermosillo, Sonora; Culiacán, Sinaloa; and major cities in

each of the other Mexican states where they were welcomed and appreciated (Personal Interview with Arvizu 2016).

In December of 1971, the group arrived in Tijuana, where they danced at the Cathedral for the Virgin of Guadalupe. Arvizu recalls that the weather was cold and the danzantes had to buy extra clothing; however, they were granted permission to stay in the Estadio Benito Juarez. The danzantes were out dancing in Tijuana daily, and during their stay they were spotted by Mona Hancock (Doña Mona), who was affiliated with the San Diego Community Concourse. Hancock approached the group about visiting the Centro Cultural de la Raza in Balboa Park. Yescas accepted the offer, and the community at the San Diego Community Concourse arranged for twelve visas for the danzantes, which Arvizu remarks was a rarity at that time (Personal Interview with Arvizu 2016).

In 1972, the twelve members of the newly assembled Danza Azteca group arrived in San Diego. These danzantes were Florencio Yescas, Lazaro Arvizu, Gerardo Salinas (“El Cerillo”), Alejandro Ramírez (“Conejo”), Andrés García Pacheco, José Noyolla, Juan Salinas, José Luis (“Pichi”), Rafael (“El Pato”), Mario Valente, Carlos Novoa Capetillo, and “El Chéforo” (Personal Interviews with Carmelo and Arvizu 2016, 2017). The group was brought over by a community organization known as “El Centro Cultural Toltecas en Aztlan” that was at the Centro Cultural de la Raza in Balboa Park (“The Cultural Center Toltecs of Aztlan”), and they began to receive numerous invitations to perform.<sup>15</sup> Their arrival coincided with the blossoming of the Chicano Movement, which had gained strength in the 1960s and culminated in the early 1970s. Following their initial successes and the overwhelmingly positive reception by the

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<sup>15</sup> The group “Toltecas en Aztlan,” which is recognized as the first Danza Azteca group founded in the United States, was founded in San Diego by Guillermo Rosette, León Magayan (“Azteca”), Felipe Esparsa, Mario Aguilar, and others (Personal Interview with Arvizu 2016).

audience, the renowned poet Juan Felipe Herrera worked with the immigration office and made it possible for the danzantes to remain in the United States after the expiration of their visas. Of the twelve who came to the United States, six accepted the offer to remain, including Arvizu and Yescas, and the six others chose to return to Mexico (Personal Interviews with Arvizu 2015, 2016).<sup>16</sup>

In its earliest stages, Arvizu recounts that the elite touring group, named “Esplendor Azteca” by Yescas, featured Yescas, Arvizu, Gerardo Salinas, Alejandro Ramírez (Conejo), and Andrés García Pacheco (“El Piolín”).<sup>17</sup> One of the most historically significant events in the trajectory of Danza that Esplendor Azteca attended was the M.E.Ch.A. (Movimiento Estudiantil Chicano de Aztlán) Convention in Austin, Texas. M.E.Ch.A. had begun just a few years earlier in 1969, and the organization was still very young (Movimiento Estudiantil Chicano de Aztlán).<sup>18</sup> At this conference, M.E.Ch.A. groups from across the country saw and experienced Danza Azteca for the first time, and the reception was overwhelmingly positive.

Following their national exposure, the group received invitations to M.E.Ch.A. organizations across the country where the student organizations covered their living expenses and transportation. M.E.Ch.A. was often involved in local and national politics; however, Arvizu recalls that Yescas emphasized that the dancers themselves not become involved in the ongoing

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<sup>16</sup> Of those who returned to Mexico, one, known as “El Chéfero,” regretted his decision and wished to return without a visa. He was never heard from again following his departure from Mexico for San Diego and his fate remains unknown to both his family and the Danza Azteca community (Personal Interview 2015).

<sup>17</sup> The names listed above are those that Arvizu acknowledges as the permanent members Yescas handpicked for the “Esplendor Azteca” touring group (Personal Interview with Arvizu 2016). Others occasionally substituted or augmented the group, but were never regarded as full members.

<sup>18</sup> Danza continues to intersect with M.E.Ch.A., as can be noted in the description of the 2013 National Conference in San Diego that lists Danza Azteca among the featured sessions (Octaviano 2013). The group recently modified its name to “Movimiento Estudiantil Chicanx de Aztlán” to make it gender neutral.

politics, stating that “politics close doors” (Personal Interview with Arvizu 2015). Such a stance proved expedient in allowing Danza to gain wide acceptance since participation did not require adherence to any political ideology.<sup>19</sup> These trips took Esplendor Azteca across the United States; at each site, the group instructed Danza to the students eager to learn the dances. During the 1970s, the group also briefly taught in Chicago under a contract arranged by Yescas; however, when it got cold the group returned to Los Angeles (Personal Interview with Arvizu 2015). Additionally, Yescas took a group of danzantes to Mexico City with him on a trip known as “Caravana Teponaztli,” where the danzantes from the United States had the opportunity to dance at Teotihuacan and meet danzantes and Concheros from Mexico (See Appendix 1).

In addition to these contracts, Esplendor Azteca performed at high-profile events in the 1970s and 1980s. Arvizu recounts that they performed for President Carter, and it was during this period that Yescas received a contract to make a video for the Mexico exhibit in the Epcot Center in Florida. The group also began performing at more powwows, including annual trips to the Miccosukee and Seminole powwows in Hollywood, Florida (Figure 2.4). Additionally, the group partook in Pueblo Indian events, including ones in Taos and San Felipe Pueblo, New Mexico, where Arvizu recalls they were well-received. Virginia Carmelo, a danzante of Californian Tongva background who had joined the group by this time, notes that Yescas was commonly introduced at events as Aztec and used to say of himself “I’m just an Indian” (Personal Interview with Carmelo 2015). She further notes that he had a lot of respect for Indigenous peoples, and the many invitations he received to perform in Native communities

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<sup>19</sup> In contrast, Arvizu suggests that politics might have been the stumbling block of other groups attempted to recreate Yescas’ success, such as Tlakaelel’s “Nahui Mitl” (Personal Interview with Arvizu 2015). The confluence of Danza and politics has become popular among some Danza communities today, and danzantes in the Southern California community with whom I spoke generally believe this started with Pastel, who will be discussed at length below (Personal Interviews 2015, 2016).

across the United States indicate that this respect was mutual.<sup>20</sup> Arvizu recalls of their visits to these communities: “We were well received. Without words or language to communicate besides the drums and Danza, through the steps and rhythms we spoke the same language” (Personal Interview with Arvizu 2015; translated by author).



Figure 2.4: Lazaro Arvizu at a powwow in Florida hosted by the Miccosukees in the 1970s. Lazaro Arvizu regularly attended this powwow and the Seminole Powwow in Hollywood, Florida (Photograph courtesy of Lazaro Arvizu).

Arvizu became more established in Los Angeles in the early 1980s, and Plaza de la Raza and Olvera Street provided key places for his emerging group to practice, perform, and recruit danzantes. The group also began participating in local celebrations including Cinco de Mayo and Dieciseis de Septiembre celebrations. The group took the name “Xipe Totec” in August of 1978— a name symbolically associated with new beginnings—to highlight the emergence of a new

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<sup>20</sup> A brief account of Carmelo’s perspectives on Danza Azteca can be found in Appendix 1.

generation of danzantes (Personal Interviews with Carmelo and Arvizu 2016, 2017).<sup>21</sup> The group was established with Yescas's blessing, and Arvizu and Yescas remained close for the remainder of Yescas's life. Not long after the founding of Xipe Totec, Yescas passed away on July 5, 1985, from pneumonia (ibid.).<sup>22</sup> Following Yescas' passing, Arvizu was recognized as the *heredero*, or heir, of Yescas' Danza Azteca leadership in the United States (Personal Interview with Arvizu 2016; Aguilar 2009:397). A recent ceremony in Los Angeles completed on October 28<sup>th</sup>, 2016, by General Miguel Ángel Pineda, the son of General Manuel Pineda, and Generala Esperanza Aranda, the daughter of General Felipe Aranda, bestowed Arvizu with the title of General (Personal Interviews with Arvizu and Carmelo 2017). This ceremony reinforces the traditional lines of transmission from Conchero to Danza Azteca in California.

From 1978 till the late 1980s, Xipe Totec was the only year-round Danza Azteca group in Los Angeles, and Arvizu led the group alongside his wife, Virginia Carmelo (Personal Interviews 2015, 2016).<sup>23</sup> Xipe Totec continued Yescas's legacy of dance and teachings that included spirituality and performance. Today, the original Xipe Totec has split into several Xipe Totec groups, including Arvizu's Xipe Totec, and separate branches led by Carmelo in Los Angeles and Gerardo Salinas in the Bay Area, renamed "Xipe Totec Esplendor Azteca," that

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<sup>21</sup> Field recordings of Arvizu's Xipe Totec are available on the Internet Archive at <https://archive.org/details/uclaethnomusicologyarchive>. From there, search "Nielsen, Kristina" or the collection number, 2017.02. A recording of Arvizu's Xipe Totec can be seen in the video DSC\_0533 in the folder "Celebration of the Virgin de Guadalupe."

<sup>22</sup> Some have recently mistakenly attributed his cause of death to AIDS—a fact that all of those I spoke to who knew him and were at the hospital at the time of his death refute (Personal Interviews 2015, 2016).

<sup>23</sup> Other Danza Azteca and Conchero groups emerge for specific celebrations, such as those of the Virgin of Guadalupe, but they only dance for specific occasions instead of meeting weekly like Xipe Totec and the Danza Azteca circles focused on in this dissertation.

draws on the names of both Xipe Totec and the original touring group (Personal Interviews with Arvizu and Carmelo 2015, 2016).

### **Indigenismo in Diaspora**

In the diaspora, the dynamic tension between Indigenous communities and national projects of indigenismo and mestizaje were substantially altered. Instead of power and class differences between Indigenous Mexican communities and a dominant racially and culturally mixed majority, Danza Azteca entered the United States at a time where Chicanos and Mexican Americans faced discrimination and cultural repression. The form of Danza Azteca that Yescas introduced was therefore in part responding to a perceived need to counter these oppressive forces by offering a platform for pride in *mexicanidad*, or “Mexican-ness.” Though Yescas rejected the mixing of politics and Danza Azteca in performance, arguably his performances could not be fully apolitical as his audiences in the United States were interpreting his performances in a politically charged environment. The early affiliations between Danza Azteca and M.E.Ch.A.—even if only as apolitical guest artists—vaulted a new vision of *mexicanidad*, or “Mexican-ness” into the diasporic political consciousness.

From their initial introduction into the community, Arvizu offered the following explanation about the impact on identity politics that occurred upon their arrival:

There was a separation between the Indigenous peoples and Chicanos that wanted to be Indigenous, right? We are Indigenous, but for the Natives [Native American people of the United States] we didn't look like it because they would say “they are Indigenous, but they don't have feathers. They have the right color, but they are missing the feathers.” When we came with the feathers and entered with feathers as Mexicans, and they came as Chicanos saying, “We are Chicanos from here,” and we danced, *then* they recognized that we were Indigenous. Of course, there has been politics and people have gone to the

convention in Vienna to say that Chicanos are Indigenous,<sup>24</sup> which makes people feel threatened . . . The Indigenous people in this country have a lot of rights. And they [Chicanos] are fighting because the Indigenous peoples of the pueblos had their native languages of the pueblos. For instance, the Navajo teach their language in the schools. They [Chicanos] want to put Nahuatl in the schools, but today barely anyone speaks Nahuatl and they wind up threatening people and cannot reach the level of declaring themselves Indigenous Chicanos. The Chicano is a Chicano. And the movement is very heavy. As my teacher [Yescas] told me “don’t get involved in politics. Politics closes the doors.” (Personal Interview 2015; translated by author)

For Arvizu, Danza in the diaspora centers on *mexicanidad* in a national sense, which is understood to include Indigeneity. Arvizu is not opposed to danzantes learning Nahuatl, as will be highlighted below, but is wary of the political ramifications of leveraging language and Danza for Indigenous recognition. Danza is interpreted as one way connect with an Indigenous root of Mexican heritage, but not an exclusive demonstration of Indigenous identity. Underscoring this point, Arvizu further stated: “It is an honor to represent *mexicanidad* with Danza. . . Danza represents the root of what is Mexican” (Personal Interview with Arvizu 2015). This Danza identity continues to celebrate a syncretic Mexican spirituality, national and Indigenous heritage, but avoids overtures to lay claim to a single “Danza” Indigenous identity that might be construed as political.

### **Yescas’ Legacy**

Yescas’ legacy within the development of both the Ballet Folklórico and Danza Azteca disrupts simple narratives regarding “fakelore” or invention. While he staged performances for the Ballet Folklórico that would appeal to audiences accustomed to ballet and modern dance, he simultaneously continued practicing the rituals of Conchero as taught to him by Pineda. From

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<sup>24</sup> The Danza group continuously protesting in Vienna is led by Xokonoschtletl Gómora. For years, he has protested to have the *penacho*, or quetzal feather headdress, that he and his group allege belonged to Moctezuma returned to Mexico from the Vienna Weltmuseum (Escárcega 2003:13).

what has been recounted to me by his students, Conchero and the Danza Azteca were understood to be living traditions, with the latter offering new space for artistic developments undertaken in accordance with their understanding of the tradition (Personal Interviews with Arvizu and Carmelo 2015, 2016). At the same time, prevalent trends of historical indigenismo that were influential in Mexico City during the mid-twentieth century exerted an influence on how this vision of the Aztec past was imagined. The emerging vision of “Aztecness” easily blurred into a nationalism that anonymized its sources to create a sense of historical authenticity within the Ballet Folklórico, which marketed the new choreography and regalia, including that introduced by Yescas, as ancient—a concept the Ballet Folklórico regularly equated with “authentic.” For instance, the souvenir program from the “Ballet de los cinco continentes” of 1968 sells the dances as “primitive” and “survivals,” minimizing mention of contemporary staging and artistic discretion:

These are primitive dance rituals with Indigenous music whose rhythms, steps, and musical themes have survived up to the present day. The visual plastic form has been inspired by codex drawings and the sculptures preserved in the National Museum of Anthropology. The choreography is based on historians’ descriptions. (Ballet Folklórico de México 1968)

The positioning of dances as ancient and survivals maintained by Indigenous communities deemed culturally untouched by Europeans have likely contributed to the systematic minimizing of Yescas’ contributions: To acknowledge his choreography would be to acknowledge a facet of their modernity and demystify them.

Yescas, though key in developing choreography, ultimately became only one of the many sources in the dances developed for the Ballet Folklórico. Hernández offers some insights into her techniques for reconstructing the dances portraying the past in a 1963 radio interview:

You have to do a lot of research to reconstruct these in the spirit of the times. The most difficult ones, the Gods of the Aztec worlds, took four years to put together. First to

choose the music, then to go places and find different traces of music that, with an analysis, you find out they belong to an earlier period and have no influence of our modern scale. (Hernández 1963)<sup>25</sup>

As highlighted in both her interview and the program, for Hernández, surviving Indigenous music and dance could serve as site for musical and choreographic excavation to find “pure” — and thereby historic—practices.<sup>26</sup> Regardless of whether the cultures in question had a relationship to the historical Aztec, their culture became the basis of a revitalized historical understanding of what Aztec music and dance may have been. Arvizu recounts that Yescas also did extensive historical research for his recreations, including his staging of “Aguila Blanca,” or “The White Eagle,” and “Danza de los Guerreros,” or “The Dance of the Warriors” (Personal Interview with Arvizu 2015). This approach is akin to many Danza circles pursuing what they perceive as a historical form of Danza today, as will be discussed in Chapters 3, 5, and 6; however, in a key difference, for Yescas they were staged recreations specifically for performance.

Arguably the most problematic aspect of indigenismo in the Ballet Folklórico was its effort to establish authority in defining contemporary and historical Indigeneity. As pointed out by Sydney Hutchinson in her analysis of the Ballet Folklórico, and further illustrated by the quotes discussed above, Amalia Hernández and reviewers emphatically stressed the authenticity of its performances to audiences (ibid.:221). Not only is this authority established regarding the alleged authentic portrayal of Indigenous cultures, it was also established as genuine artistic

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<sup>25</sup> As noted above, much of the choreography, including that of “Los Dioses” is said to have been created by Yescas rather than Hernández (Personal Interview with Arvizu 2016).

<sup>26</sup> Referring to this notion of Indigenous purity, Hernández related later in the interview that “in Mexico we still have five million pure Indians that have their own way of life with small or in a different degree influences of the occidental culture. So you find that it is not a mixture exactly, but you find elements of another culture assimilated to their own” (Hernández 1963). This is one example of how arts movements have used the strategies of the “three lines of inquiry” described by Robert Stevenson (1968:17, 18)

recreations of the past, with reviewers extolling the show as a portrayal of ancient culture and Aztec ritual (Greene 1962).<sup>27</sup> These shows cultivated interest in Indigenous Mexican culture nearly a decade before Yescas officially began teaching in Southern California. The popular interpretation of recreations in the Ballet Folklórico as authentic portrayals of Aztec history further encouraged Mexicans in Mexico and the diaspora to interpret the recreated portrayals of the Aztec as historically accurate. At that time, however, Yescas was no longer involved in the production even if his choreography remained in use.

From a contemporary standpoint, it is tempting to roundly dismiss indigenismo as a form of cultural appropriation, invention, or exploitation; for instance, Les Field describes indigenismo as “a means for political and economic elites to appropriate Indigenous cultures for nation-building ideologies that end up maintaining the subaltern status of Indigenous peoples” (Field 1994:243). Many instances of indigenismo within Ballet Folklórico warrant such criticism. In many of these cases, the Indigenous contributors had little artistic agency once their materials were provided to the Ballet Folklórico, with Sydney Hutchinson sharing a particularly egregious example where Hernández “improved” the deer dance, bucking Yaqui tradition and to kill the deer for her preferred narrative (2009:221). In these instances, the shift of artistic authority away from Indigenous communities is highly problematic, as the communities in question have no say over their own national representation.

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<sup>27</sup> The full first paragraph of the review reads “Beg, borrow or (don’t quote me) steal tickets for the performances tomorrow and Saturday night of Mexico’s Ballet Folklorico at the Hollywood Bowl. Last night’s opening was an explosion of the color, the drama, the pageantry, the splendor and the humor of an ancient culture that has assumed many influences without losing its identity. There is Aztec ritual, there is a miming of the woman soldiers (soldaderas) in the revolution of 1910, there is a mingling of gayety and tragedy in a dance of Huasteca [sic], there is an interpretation in the Tehuantepec tradition of the matrimonial rite that emerges in singular beauty” (Greene 1962).

The intricacies of Conchero's urbanization and Aztecification, and the agency of traditional Concheros within indigenismo movements of Mexico City, make such assessments significantly more complicated. Controversial as Pineda and Yescas may have been to other Concheros in the mid-twentieth century, they had traditionally derived authority within the Conchero tradition. Furthermore, unlike the other instance described above where materials were simply "collected," Yescas had additional agency in the presentation and reformulation of Conchero dances and other staged presentations of the Aztec past. Reducing power dynamics into a false opposition of folkloric national arts and Indigenous artists and tradition misses key moments of fluidity and agency of artists and contributors, such as Yescas, who was a respected artist and performer in both these cultural spheres.

### **Lazaro Arvizu's Xipe Totec: The Continuation of Yescas' Legacy**

The tensions inherent to folkloric and ritual performance continues today within the Danza community. Arvizu, who continues to lead his Xipe Totec Danza Azteca circle at the Cypress Park and Recreation Center, offers one example of how this challenge has been navigated within the contemporary landscape. Following in the footsteps of Yescas, Arvizu's Xipe Totec continues to perform publically as well as in special commemorations for the Virgin of Guadalupe that integrate the syncretic Indigenous-Catholic heritage of Mexico. He credits Yescas with teaching him how to keep the ceremonial and presentational separate (Personal Interview with Arvizu 2016). The group also continues to perform regularly at the plaza at Olvera Street, where they receive donations from tourists and visitors. Though Arvizu's Xipe

Totec group performs frequently, Arvizu stresses that Danza is not for the ego and that identical movements between the danzantes is necessary to not disrupt the spirituality.

In Danza there are three elements: the spiritual, mental and physical. Therefore, you are entirely surrendered. That's the reason you don't remember your problems while in the circle. You are entirely surrendered to Danza. But a lot of people do not understand this, and they only dance for their own egos. That is not spiritual, there is no harmony. When we are dancing and everyone is in harmony, we are praying. But if someone lifts their voice too much, it breaks the harmony. That is how it is when we are dancing and someone does different steps and wants to do more, it breaks the harmony. Many young people today do not understand this. (Personal Interview with Arvizu 2015; translated by author)

Though Xipe Totec is a Danza Azteca group and not a Conchero group, it still retains a closer affiliation to its Conchero roots than other Danza circles in Los Angeles that are introducing new interpretations of Indigeneity into Danza. Arvizu still maintains ties with jefes in Mexico and they visit the group for ceremonies; for instance, the General Rosendo Plascencia from Guadalajara, attended Xipe Totec's celebration of Cuauhtemoc (Personal Interview with Arvizu 2016). Another major difference between Arvizu's Xipe Totec and other cultural and political groups is the retention of "El es Dios," the common exclamation of the Concheros, instead of "Ometeotl." Arvizu recalls first hearing "Ometeotl" in Danza circles approximately twenty years ago, and he notes that many jefes and capitanes in Mexico did not approve of the change. Additionally, Arvizu's Xipe Totec retains a connection to Catholicism, and Arvizu assists several church groups in East Los Angeles that dance specifically for the Virgin of Guadalupe (Personal Interview with Arvizu 2016). The continued observance of the central celebrations of the Concheros connects Arvizu's Danza Azteca community to the Conchero lineage stemming from Pineda.

From Arvizu's point of view, when he sings and dances with copal—an act done only on special occasions and not at weekly practices—he establishes a bridge to their ancestors and

simultaneously honoring the Catholic tradition that maintained the dances and traditions they practice today. When I asked about the efforts to remove Catholicism from the tradition, a common occurrence in the younger circles that will be discussed in the following chapter, Arvizu said:

Today there are many young people who want to remove Catholicism, although I do not understand it because religion saved Danza. They [the Spanish] wouldn't let them dance because they were dancing for gods, but later they said: "Let them dance because they want to dance for the Virgin." That made them permit Danza. If not for that, Danza would not have continued. But since it is noble and spiritual, they permitted it. (Personal Interview with Arvizu 2015; translated by author)

In Arvizu's view, the Catholic background of the dances are incapable of being removed since it is the very reason for the endurance of Conchero—and thereby Danza Azteca. Attempts to remove Catholicism are interpreted as disruptions of a key part of the continuity of the tradition. Danza Azteca still retains a spiritual connection to the syncretic Conchero lineage of Pineda even if the danzas can also be staged as performances.

Arvizu does not see Catholicism as antithetical to Indigeneity, as for him the two coexist in Danza Azteca. Arvizu's group, Xipe Totec, and its members integrate special events into the first few weeks of December to honor the Virgin of Guadalupe, such as participating in church performances, processions, and full days of festivities around the twelfth of December. Additionally, Arvizu choreographed the "Virgin de Guadalupe Dios Tonantzin" performance that took place on December third and fourth at the "Cathedral of Our Lady of the Angels" in Downtown Los Angeles (Figure 2.5).<sup>28</sup>

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<sup>28</sup> Recordings from this performance can be found on the Internet Archive at <https://archive.org/details/uclaethnomusicologyarchive>. From the main site, search "Nielsen" to find the full collection. Video from this event is in the folder "Virgin de Guadalupe play in Señora de Los Angeles Cathedral."



Figure 2.5: Danzantes in the final scene with the apparition of the Virgen de Guadalupe at the December 3, 2015 performance of “La Virgen de Guadalupe” at the Cathedral of our Lady of the Angels in Los Angeles. Arvizu arranged the choreography for the production (Photograph by Kristina Nielsen).

Members of Arvizu’s Xipe Totec also participated in the procession on December 6<sup>th</sup>, 2015, for the Virgin of Guadalupe, and many dressed in intricate regalia specifically honoring the Virgin of Guadalupe with her image elaborately displayed on copilli headdresses, capes, and regalia, as can be seen in Figure 2.6. The group did not sing alabanzas at the performance in Olvera Plaza on Saturday December twelfth; instead, the group waited to perform these at a more intimate location at the home of a former danzante after a communal meal of pozole. Here, the group danced a few dances common in the Danza Azteca repertoire outside the house and sang two alabanzas, “La Guadalupana” and “Dulce Madre Mía,” with only friends and a few neighbors gathering to watch.



Figure 2.6: Lazaro Arvizu at the December 6<sup>th</sup>, 2015 honoring of the Virgin of Guadalupe at Olvera Plaza in Los Angeles. In addition to his skills as a dancer, Lazaro is also a skilled craftsman and made the cape in this photograph himself (Photograph by Kristina Nielsen).

Arvizu enjoys celebrating the Virgin de Guadalupe, and he has found that many people from Mexico join Danza specifically to honor the Virgin because they danced for her in Mexico and wish to continue dancing for her in Los Angeles. Danza Azteca can therefore serve as a vehicle of a broader pan-Indigenous Mexican spirituality that brings communities together in the diaspora (See Chapter 5). As noted above, from his perspective, the current rejection of Catholicism within Danza by the younger generation misses a key point, since he attributes much of the survival of contemporary Danza to Catholicism and particularly the long tradition of dancing for the Virgin de Guadalupe. As viewed by Arvizu, although the Church was oppressive

and resulted in cultural change, within the history of Conchero the Church provided key avenues for cultural continuity that Arvizu continues to honor (Personal Interview with Arvizu 2015).

Despite these seemingly conservative perspectives—at least in comparison to the generations in Los Angeles that have followed him, to peg Arvizu as a strict “traditionalist” in the Los Angeles community would be to misread subtle complexities within his interpretations, as he respects the innovations of younger generation of danzantes in Los Angeles, many of whom are former members of Xipe Totec or students of former members. For example, Arvizu appreciates the efforts of the younger generation to integrate Nahuatl into Danza and has noticed the translation of alabanzas into Nahuatl from Spanish in the last few years, as will be discussed in the following chapters. Regarding the rapidness of this change, Arvizu remarked that Danza is evolving quickly, and he admires the interest younger generations have taken in building on the tradition, including the composition of new songs (Personal Interview with Arvizu 2016).

## **Conclusion**

The lives of Arvizu and Yescas provide several vital insights into Danza Azteca in Los Angeles. First, Danza Azteca as practiced by Yescas and his students retains key points of continuity with Conchero, particularly in its direct lineage from Pineda. Though the danzas may sometimes be staged, there are still protocols surrounding their spirituality that distinguish between Danza Azteca as performance and Danza Azteca as ceremony. Decisions—such as when to use copal, sing songs, or perform certain music—further reinforce these distinctions. Second, the forms of Danza Azteca and mexicanidad introduced to Los Angeles were heavily influenced by indigenismo movements in Mexico City in mid-twentieth century. As has been argued in this chapter, summarily dismissing Danza Azteca as invented because of the influences

of indigenismo and Yescas' role in the Ballet Folklórico is problematic; nonetheless, power dynamics within Mexican indigenismo movements warrant scrutiny, particularly as pan-Indigenous artistic contributions, including those of Yescas and Pineda, are subsumed under Mexica historical and nationalist narratives. These trends will be problematized further in subsequent chapters.

Yescas' introduction of a new form of mexicanidad in the diaspora provided a new basis for taking pride in Mexican and Indigenous ancestry, and became formative for subsequent developments within Danza that will be explored in the following chapters. The history and the development of Danza Azteca as practiced by Arvizu and an older generation of danzantes in the community highlights the endurance of individual artistic contributions within the tradition. From the vision and sound of the Aztec developed by Pineda to new choreography introduced by Yescas, Danza Azteca has been a site of continuous artistic composition, creation, and innovation.

## Chapter 3

### The Diversification of Danza

Since the introduction of Danza Azteca to Los Angeles by Florencio Yescas, the Danza Azteca tradition has morphed as groups have splintered off Esplendor Azteca and Xipe Totec. Newly arrived danzantes who had practiced Conchero or Danza Azteca in Mexico began to participate in the community and draw from alternate Conchero and Danza Azteca lineages than of Manuel Pineda. As noted in the previous chapter, prior to 1978 there was only one Danza Azteca group in Los Angeles that met and practiced weekly; today, there are—by my best approximation—between thirty and fifty groups in the Greater Los Angeles Area that regularly meet, perform, or practice rituals. These groups have become vital spaces for individuals seeking to identify with Mexican Indigeneity, particularly within the urban diaspora. Members of these younger groups often tie Danza directly to the Aztec, and increasingly the Mexica, and many *capitanes*, or Danza leaders, and musicians perform independent research to create meaningful recreations of ceremonies, dances, and songs.

In this chapter, I analyze the artistic perspectives and contributions of Danza leaders in the generations following Lazaro Arvizu. I focus on Adolfo Arteaga, Sergio Ruiz, and Cuezalin, who represent the two generations of Danza leadership following Arvizu. The perspectives of the younger generations of danzantes are heavily influenced by the experience of dislocation, and the challenges of negotiating Mexican identities in diaspora, particularly during adolescence and young adulthood. I suggest that perspectives regarding Indigeneity among the younger generations might best be analyzed through what historian David Gutiérrez has referred to as the “third space” or “Greater Mexico” (1999), in which Mexican and United States social structures have collided.

To explore how each Danza leader has navigated this social space, I detail their life stories and the histories and sources that have subsequently informed their artistic decisions. In addition to these three leaders in the Danza community, I survey the lasting impact of Arturo “Pastel” Mireles, a former member of Xipe Totec, who disseminated a radical politicized version of Danza throughout the United States known as “Danza Mexica Cuauhtemoc.” I suggest that teachings from this strain of Danza have become pervasive and mistakenly construed as broadly representative of the diasporic Danza community, particularly as danzantes adhering to this strain have published and been widely quoted as authorities on Danza.

Drawing on these collective developments in the Los Angeles Danza community, I explore two simultaneously occurring phenomena: The first is a broader pan-Indigenization of Danza that makes Danza more broadly available to the Mexican diaspora by integrating cultural practices from across Mexico. This has particularly accelerated as a generation of new leaders fuse other regional Indigenous heritages with Danza, drawing on their own heritages and interpretations of pre-Hispanic Indigenous Mexican culture. The second phenomenon I explore is a “tribalization” of Danza, particularly through the Mexica Cuauhtemoc groups, that seeks to unite participants as “Mexica” or members of a tribe equivalent to those from Native North America. I argue that these two competing strategies alternately embrace and reject different aspects of nationalism, indigenismo, and mexicanidad, highlighting competing strategies for navigating racial and cultural categories in the diaspora.

### **Authority and Diasporic Danza Leadership**

One of the developments in the Danza diaspora is a significant change in the sources of authority trusted by danzantes. This change is particularly noticeable in the rising reliance on

texts and traditional scholarship in addition to oral tradition. As noted by Edward Bruner in his 1994 article on historical recreations, authority becomes closely intertwined with definitions of what is considered “authentic.” These new sources of authority have resulted in diverse philosophical interpretations of Danza, as they have led to diverse interpretations of authenticity. The oral traditions of the Conchero lineages, such as that of Manuel Pineda and Florencio Yescas, are no longer viewed as the only sources of authority on the histories and meanings of the danzas. Additionally, many in the younger generation of Danza leadership first learned Danza as teenagers or young adults.

The diaspora has accelerated artistic changes and innovation, and the distance between the more conservative Conchero community and diasporic Danza communities of Los Angeles has arguably fueled individuals to seek out other sources and introduce new interpretations of how an Aztec and pre-Hispanic Mexican past may have looked and sounded. The flexibility between Danza as a national and Indigenous form has also resulted in a new phenomenon in the diaspora: As Mexican Americans from communities across Mexico—ranging from the Yucatan, to Oaxaca, to Nayarit—gravitate to Danza as a space of national community, they bring elements of their own localized Indigenous heritages into Danza. As a result, Danza has become a site of mixed Indigeneity and cultural inclusivity as communities re-assemble in diaspora. Nonetheless, certain boundaries remain; for instance, though there are some danzantes who identify as Zapotec and have parents who are Native speakers, in many cases the danzantes who participate represent the first or second generation who have lost the language. One danzante and musician in this position commented that his parents’ confusion regarding his decision to practice Danza and play Indigenous instruments (Personal Interview 2015). Though specialists from Zapotec- or Nahuatl-speaking communities are invited to rituals and events as respected guests, in most of

the groups I danced with there was at most one Native speaker present at any given circle, if any at all.<sup>29</sup>

For many of these younger *danzantes*, their Indigenous heritages are sources for musical materials to integrate into *Danza*, and they tend to be more receptive to integrating new songs based on the studies of texts. This is a substantial philosophical shift from the tradition as introduced by Yescas and continued by Arvizu, as transmission becomes one of several sources that *danzantes* might draw from. Figure 3.1 highlights how these lines of cultural transmission have become increasingly complicated. The chart illustrates the shift in authority as more *danzantes* learn and become leaders of *Danza* circles in the United States. Among younger generations, *danzantes* trained exclusively in the United States are now increasingly considered as trusted sources in the community. Instead of the direct lines and the systematic conferment of authority as would be the case in Conchero—and even more conservative *Danza Azteca* circles such as Arvizu’s—today many circles are started independently by individuals, and they assemble a culture they find meaningful around the *Danza* core. This creates a shared cultural focal point with Mexico and across the *Danza* diaspora; however, the meanings extrapolated from the core *danzas*, and the growing song repertoire, have rapidly diversified. Younger *Danza* leaders and captains may primarily trust one *capitán* or lineage, and at the same time view their *Danza* circle as a space to innovate and cultivate their own form of *Danza* culture that makes it meaningful to them. This meaning can be derived from spiritual, cultural, or communal aspects

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<sup>29</sup> Dance theorist Adriana Cruz-Manjarrez offers a study of Zapotec performances in East Los Angeles for the patron saints of Yalálag, as the Zapotec migrants continue to sustain their home community in Oaxaca, Mexico (2009). Cruz-Manjarrez finds that one of their cultural survival strategies is to continue traditions as if they were still in their village, and she finds these traditions are being passed on (2009:135). Though this is certainly the case for some, others do lose their language and thereby a vital connection to their Zapotec heritage.

of Danza and the surrounding cultural matrix. Additionally, through shared ceremonies, developments in one circle can influence and spread to other circles.

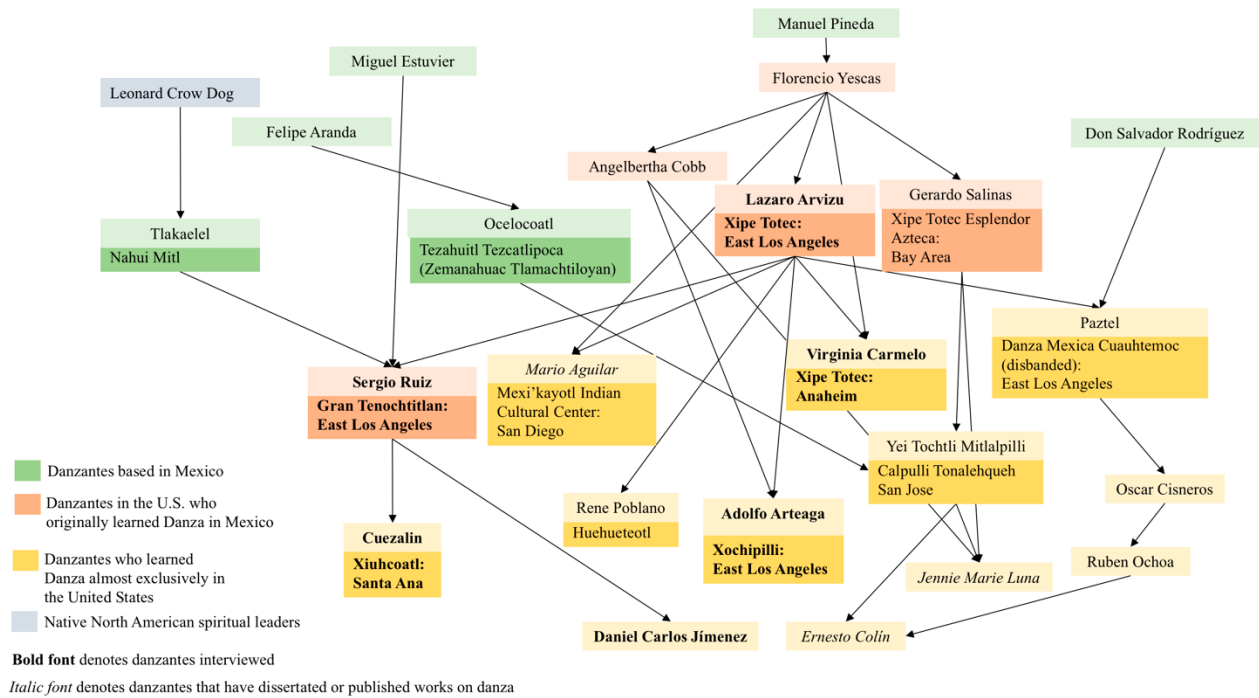


Figure 3.1: This chart depicts the dissemination and spread of Danza from Mexico to Los Angeles. This chart is by no means comprehensive and only includes the danzantes and spiritual leaders most relevant to this study. It was compiled by drawing on oral histories with members of the community and recent research on Danza in California (Luna 2012; Colin 2014). In addition to the interviews conducted, several side conversations occurred with others, particularly at shared ceremonies where I had the opportunity to meet with other prominent leaders in the community. These conversations guided my analysis but did not figure centrally in my research.

### Adolfo Arteaga: Xipe Totec and Xochipilli

Adolfo Arteaga is an example of a Danza leader who has learned the tradition in the United States. Arteaga’s journey to Danza highlights the appeal of Danza and how danzantes began to develop their own artistic and musical visions through Danza. Arteaga was born in San Miguel de Allende, Guanajuato—the city at the heart of the contemporary Conchero tradition.

Arteaga recounts that his hometown was largely culturally mixed, and none of his family spoke Otomí or any of the other local Indigenous languages at the time. Only a few local families served as caretakers of the tradition. When Arteaga was approximately six years old, his father came to the United States to meet his uncle, who was a manager at a textile company. Arteaga and his mother stayed in Mexico during these difficult years, and Arteaga recounts that they frequently went hungry. After two years, Arteaga's father secured them passage to the United States (Personal Interview with Arteaga 2016).

Adjusting to his new environment in El Sereno was difficult, and Arteaga recounts that his world “turned upside down.” In his first year, Arteaga learned to speak English, but he recalls that there was significant bullying in his youth, particularly Chicanos bullying newly arrived students who could not speak English. Starting in junior high, Arteaga recalls that he wanted to be a “cholo,” or a member of gang culture, but his father made it clear that he had not sacrificed so much for his son to get involved in gangs. Arteaga recounts his father stating: “we didn't come here, this far, for you to become a cholo” (Personal Interview with Arteaga 2016). As Adolfo shifted away from cholo culture, he began attending a folkloric dance class, which includes dances from across Mexico including Veracruz and the iconic dances of Jalisco. Initially, he describes the incentive to attend as an excuse to wrestle with one of his elementary school friends on the mats in the gym. Eventually they were given an ultimatum by the instructor: dance or leave. Arteaga decided to dance. During these years, Arteaga became a skilled dancer and by his second year he served as a student aid, a position for which he was paid. Starting high school, Arteaga was no longer paid but taught beginners the basics of folklórico (ibid.).

Recalling his first experiences with Danza Azteca, Arteaga credits a friend for urging him to go see the danzantes. When Arteaga was in eleventh grade (around 1984), his friend asked him to accompany him, but Arteaga resisted because of rumors that the danzantes had a bad reputation as they came from Mexico City. Approximately a year later his friend asked again and Arteaga agreed to go. The evening they went, Arteaga was overcome with the power of the experience that felt like reliving a childhood experience in San Miguel de Allende.

When I got out of the car and I started walking, my heart started pounding, just like the huehuetl, just like the drum, and I was like, wait a minute, what is going on? I started getting nervous, and had the same feeling as when I was in my hometown and my mother took us to see the birthday celebration of our hometown. Everybody comes from different parts of Mexico, and they come and honor our hometown, so there are a lot of Aztec dancers. When my mom took me, I must have been like five years old, and I felt the same feeling. Scared, or feeling the energy, and I became frightened and started feeling the energy . . . As I was getting closer to the gym, my heart started pounding more, and more, and more, until I went in. I saw and it, and it was like, what do you call those little flowers that grow on grass and you blow on? Dandelions? I just went like that. (Personal Interview with Arteaga 2016)

This was Arteaga's first encounter with Xipe Totec, and Arteaga approached Arvizu and asked for permission to join, which he was granted. Arteaga's previous experience in folkloric dancing allowed him to learn the dances quickly.

Arteaga eventually left Xipe Totec for interpersonal reasons. Leaving was a hard decision for Arteaga, and he describes it as having something beautiful ripped away from him.<sup>30</sup> Not partaking in Danza made Arteaga depressed; to cure his depression, his mother took him to San Miguel de Allende where they visited a woman who did *curaciones*, or spiritual cures and cleanses. Arteaga did not feel that it helped. Instead, and despite his mother's trepidation,

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<sup>30</sup> Arteaga recalls a slightly different order of people leaving Xipe Totec than Ruiz, whose account is below. He recalls that the first to leave was Pastel, followed by Arteaga, Rene Poblano, Sergio Ruiz, and Jaime Ayala. Arteaga also notes that in the early years of the split, the emerging Danza leaders would attempt to lure danzantes from the others with promises of feathers or money to help their groups grow, which Arteaga viewed as inappropriate (Personal Interview with Arteaga 2016). See Appendix 5 for brief descriptions of important danzantes and spiritual leaders in the Los Angeles Danza community.

Arteaga felt he needed to visit La Coronela Juan Agallo, who was a powerful healer and *curandera*, or healer, known for her abilities with both white and black magic. La Coronela performed a curación for Arteaga and gave him an *estandarte*, or banner, with permission to come back to the United States and begin a Danza circle (Personal Interview with Arteaga 2016).



Figure 3.2: Arteaga dancing at the 2016 Mexica New Year Ceremony in San Jose (Photograph by Kristina Nielsen).

Upon returning to the United States in 1987, Arteaga and Eva Arteaga—his girlfriend at the time and now wife—began practicing Danza in the park, first with their family and nephews and slowly with more members of the community. Arteaga named his circle “Xochipilli,” since his first regalia had been dedicated to Xochipilli, the spiritual entity associated with arts and music. At the time, the only ceremony in Los Angeles was the Ceremony of Cuauhtemoc.

Arteaga recalls that he was not allowed to dance with Xipe Totec at their ceremony, although he told them that his capitana (La Coronela), had said that blocking people from ceremonies was not permitted in the tradition. Arteaga and his group stood and watched instead and have since created their own ceremonies. In 1999, Arteaga decided to try to integrate the twenty-day Aztec calendar cycle, known as the *veintena*, into Danza. Arteaga and Xochipilli started a celebration of the *veintena* every twenty days (Personal Interview with Arteaga 2016).

Since founding Xochipilli, Arteaga and his family have been actively involved in the community, and today they travel to Danza events and powwows with their booth of homemade arts and novelties. Arteaga attended the first Xilonen Ceremony in Watsonville, California, where they helped the budding circle there with their regalia. Arteaga notes that to date he has only missed one Xilonen Ceremony. The first ceremony Xochipilli hosted was Día de los Muertos, which Arteaga learned from taking part in ceremonies with Arvizu. Although his parents did not have an altar or partake in many aspects of a strictly Indigenous culture, Arteaga notes that, as a Mexican, it is not strange to take the “bits and pieces” back:

Being from Mexico, it has never been something strange. It has always been part of our lives, remembering our grandfathers, remembering our grandmothers, and putting a small altar in our house. And not going all out like dancers, but just remembering and taking those little bits of pieces of what Día de los Muertos, and then knowing the meaning of it. (Personal Interview with Arteaga 2016)<sup>31</sup>

Musically, Arteaga tends to stick to the rhythms of the danzas played on the drums, adding occasional conch shell and flute ornamentation. Additionally, Arteaga sings alabanzas at velaciones where he plays the mandolin. For instance, he attended Ruiz’s Xochipilli Xochiquetzal velación with his mandolin in hand. For ceremonies, Arteaga’s group selectively integrates other music. In the Xochipilli Mexica New Year ceremony that they held at Salazar

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<sup>31</sup> This shared layer of culture is likely a result of the cultural snowballing of culture during the colonial period that is detailed in Chapter 5.

Park, the group included a Zapotec song that he learned from Tlanizpilli, a student of Arturo Meza, who resides in Mexico. The song text was taught to her by an elderly man in Oaxaca, and Tlanizpilli told Arteaga to compose a new melody for it. Arteaga notes that they do sing some Nahuatl songs, but mostly they just practice danzas (Personal Interview with Arteaga 2016).<sup>32</sup>

Arteaga offered the following insight regarding his knowledge of the histories of the danzas:

From what I know, all our danzas are based on the heartbeat. They have been handed down like that . . . I believe that is why it has not changed. We still follow the rhythm of the heart. They might have been changed with the concha, but the rhythm itself has been kept. (Personal Interview with Arteaga 2016)

Additionally, Arteaga does not object to the singing of *alabanzas*, or Catholic praise songs, as some others in the community currently do, and does not want to be only *mexikayotl*, which he defines as the rejection of *alabanzas* and Conchero. He views this as an artificial division in the Danza community that is not constructive for the current tradition.

Although Arteaga and Arvizu have had their differences, the two have increasingly begun to dialogue and Arteaga maintains a deep respect for his former teacher who “taught him love for our culture” (Personal Interview with Arteaga 2016) Arteaga commented that “Lazaro has a Ph.D. in our culture,” pointing out the difference between academic and community sources of authority. Additionally, in recent years Arvizu has begun appearing to support Xochipilli’s New Year’s ceremony, depicted in Figure 3.3, highlighting the advent of a new era of collaboration between the two (ibid.).

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<sup>32</sup> Field recordings of the Xochipilli Mexica New Year celebration can be found on the Internet Archive at <https://archive.org/details/uclaethnomusicologyarchive>. From the main site, search “Nielsen, Kristina” or the collection number, 2017.02. Recordings of the Zapotec song can be heard on DSC\_0693 in the folder “Xochipilli Mexica New Year.”

Arteaga's life and interpretations of Danza highlight several common characteristics of Danza in the diaspora. First, particularly for young men, Danza is considered a communal activity that can counter the appeal of gangs. In the course of my research, several young male danzantes told me that Danza had helped them clean up their act, with one sharing that many of his friends lost their lives to gang activity in the nineties. For these danzantes, saying that Danza saved them is often meant literally. Second, Arteaga's story emphasizes the integration of new historical perspectives into Danza within the diaspora. In addition to the authority of Arvizu—his teacher, who he retains deep admiration for—he also looks to other sources for music and interpretations of the spirituality of Danza that are meaningful to him and the Native identity he performs and connects with through Danza. When asked how he decides what to trust, Arteaga said that he primarily relies on his instinct, which he refers to as his *Tezcatlipoca*, a spiritual entity that translates to “smoking mirror.” When asked where he learned about the meaning of *Tezcatlipoca* and other energies, such as *Huitzilpochtli*, another spiritual entity of the Mexica, he commented:

I can't say books, but just by hearing. I have never been interested in reading books. I have read books where if they are start talking about gods or sacrifices, I just set it down. I don't want to have nothing to do with that. So to me that is not a good book, despite whatever knowledge they have. I have read Arturo Meza . . . I was able to read his books because of the philosophy he has. He doesn't talk about sacrifice. For me, it is very hard to digest that my people did that. When I perform, they [the audience] tell me “You know, the Aztecs used to do sacrifices and had a lot of gods.” And there is a really beautiful story that I tell them. I ask simple questions where I tell them the answers. “Do you know where the U.S. got their military structure? I'll tell you where. They got it from our people. And you know where our people got it from? The ants.” So, having that knowledge that a tiny animal was not able to be killed because of these teachings. For us, there is no possible way that that could have been. And we have always looked at nature to teach us. Even up to now. (Personal Interview with Arteaga 2016)

As highlighted in this passage, Arteaga integrates written sources external to the form of Danza he learned from Arvizu. Teachings, such as those of Arturo Meza, a prominent author in the

community and the leader of Calpulli Toltecatoytl—a center that seeks to uncover pre-Hispanic spirituality and philosophy, inform his interpretation. These teachings draw heavily on interpretations of the codices and practices by contemporary Native communities and have constructed an alternative academy that aims to reject Eurocentrism in Mesoamerican history (Meza 2011).<sup>33</sup>

Arteaga’s thoughts on sources and histories reveals an interesting aspect of the fluidity of regional, Indigenous, and national identities in the diaspora.



Figure 3.3: Arteaga leading a planting ceremony at Xochipilli’s 2016 Mexica New Year Ceremony in Salazar Park on March 5, 2016 (Photograph by Kristina Nielsen).

As mentioned above, Arteaga identifies as Native but not as Aztec; nonetheless, there remains a strong sense of pride in an Aztec-ness that can function as synonymous with Mexican as an Indigenous national identity. The actions of the Aztec are conflated with that of all Indigenous

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<sup>33</sup> The sources and guiding principles for similar organizations, such as the Movimiento Confederado Restaurador del Anáhuac (MCRA) and Zemanauak Tlamachtilyan (ZT), are problematized in depth in Chapter 5.

peoples, including the Otomí or other localized Native communities from whom Arteaga might have descended. When Arteaga speaks historically regarding “our people” —a phrase commonly heard in Danza—it refers to all Indigenous peoples in Mexico, and, in some instances, even across all the Americas. These histories, which will be analyzed in depth in Chapter 5, verge towards being utopic in their portrayals of relationships between Indigenous communities of Mexico prior to the arrival of the Spanish; however, for danzantes in the diaspora, they create a practical way to compose new communities open to anyone who identifies with Mexican or Indigenous cultures in Mesoamerica.<sup>34</sup>

### **Sergio Ruiz and Gran Tenochtitlan**

Sergio Ruiz (“Xiuhcuahtzin”), the leader of one of the largest current Danza circles in East Los Angeles, further highlights how diaspora has complicated interpretations of tradition, authority, and Indigeneity. When Ruiz arrived in Los Angeles in the 1980s, only the one original Xipe Totec Danza Azteca group practiced regularly.<sup>35</sup> Unlike many danzantes who learned exclusively in the United States, Ruiz began dancing when he was five years old in Guadalajara with his older sisters, who participated in a Conchero group named “Itzcoatl” (“White Serpent”) that was led by Miguel Estuvier. Ruiz learned to dance with the slow marked steps of the Concheros. Although he learned the dances of the Concheros with the group as a child, he waited

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<sup>34</sup> I have encountered a few individuals from Central America in Danza, though they are still rare.

<sup>35</sup> I describe Sergio Ruiz as a leader rather than a captain because Ruiz has chosen to move away from the more rigid hierarchies of Conchero and rejects the traditional hierarchical structures of Conchero (Personal Interview with Ruiz 2016). Regardless of title, he is accepted as a source of knowledge and is a prominent and respected cultural leader within a large segment of the Los Angeles Danza community today.

to officially join Itzcoatl until he was older.<sup>36</sup> He describes his official entrance into the circle as entering another world (Personal Interview with Ruiz 2016).<sup>37</sup>

Ruiz came to the United States when he was nineteen in search of work. In the United States, he met with Carlos Estuvier, the son of Miguel, and they began to teach Danza in the Lynwood neighborhood of Los Angeles. The two quickly found that their artistic directions were not fully compatible: Carlos Estuvier only wished to dance for the Virgin of Guadalupe around the twelfth of December, and Ruiz wished to dance year-round. Carlos Estuvier suggested that Ruiz join Xipe Totec, and he accompanied Ruiz to one of the performances on Olvera Street where he introduced Ruiz to Arvizu. Following this introduction, Ruiz danced with Arvizu's Xipe Totec for several years (Personal Interview with Ruiz 2016). The entrance of danzantes, such as Ruiz, who had learned and practiced Conchero and Danza Azteca in Mexico into the tradition laid the groundwork for another shift. Suddenly new lineages of Conchero and Danza Azteca from other cities in the Bajío, the Valley region of Central Mexico, were mixing in diaspora: The early vision and authority of Yescas in the United States was no longer singular as the community expanded and more danzantes introduced their interpretations and traditions.

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<sup>36</sup> Itzcoatl eventually disbanded after the capitán and his family suffered a series of tragedies including the brother of Miguel Estuvier being hit by a car and killed in front of the Danza group at a practice. Most of the family is currently in Los Angeles (Personal Interview with Ruiz 2016).

<sup>37</sup> Field recordings of Gran Tenochtitlan can be found on the Internet Archive at <https://archive.org/details/uclaethnomusicologyarchive>. From the main site, search "Nielsen, Kristina" or the collection number, 2017.02, to find the full collection. Recordings of Gran Tenochtitlan can be seen in the folder "Gran Tenochtitlan Weekly Practice."



Figure 3.4: Ruiz (left) with members of Gran Tenochtitlan at the 2016 Gathering of Nations in Albuquerque, New Mexico (Photograph by Kristina Nielsen).

From the single Xipe Totec Danza group, Ruiz recalls how rapidly the Danza scene grew and diversified in Los Angeles. He recounts that Felipe Esparsa left first and founded a group that continues to this day in Pasadena. Following his departure, Arturo “Pastel” Mireles left and began the Cuauhtemoc groups that had a more political bend, which will be discussed at length below. Ruiz left soon after him around 1989, followed by Chofis and Rene Poblano, who began the circle Huehuetotl, and Arteaga, who began the circle Xochipilli. Although the exact order of groups exiting differs between Ruiz’s and Arteaga’s accounts, the two accounts both emphasize the rapid emergence of new groups with ties to Xipe Totec in the late 1980s and early 1990s.

Ruiz’s departure from Xipe Totec was fueled by a desire to do something new—namely to pursue a more “cultural” form of Danza as opposed to one that he interprets as more “folkloric,” or for presentation. This form of *Danza cultural* has sought to re-integrate pre-Hispanic spirituality into Danza. Around 1989, Ruiz approached Arvizu about leaving the group

and Arvizu was supportive. He founded the group “Gran Tenochtitlan,” named in honor of his father’s town Tepito (Personal Interview with Ruiz 2016). Today Ruiz’s group is one of the largest in East Los Angeles, and Ruiz travels to teach Danza and sells Danza regalia at Danza events and powwows; for instance, he had a booth with feathers, regalia, and trinkets at the 2016 Gathering of Nations in Albuquerque, New Mexico (Figure 3.4).

Ruiz approached his own group very differently than Xipe Totec and previous Conchero organizations. Ruiz’s group does not have the hierarchical structure of the Concheros. Additionally, Ruiz’s group has moved away from Catholicism and towards an interpretation of pre-Hispanic Central Mexican spirituality: Instead of “El es Dios,” danzantes say “Ometeotl,” a term meant to connote duality. In considering the process in separating Catholic and cultural interpretations, Ruiz notes:

Some people from Mexico, when they come here they notice that Danza is very different here. There are many differences. I think that here we have an opportunity to be able to express Danza in a way that our people understand as more cultural. In Mexico, it is very difficult to work the cultural as opposed to the religious [Catholic] since many people prefer the religious dance. Because it is a form that is already made and assembled. One only has to follow. And the cultural version is not assembled. One has to build it and assemble, assemble, assemble. (Personal Interview with Ruiz 2016; translated by author)

Since starting his own group, Ruiz has searched for spiritual teachings to integrate into his ceremonies and practices with Gran Tenochtitlan, and elements such as copal and the altar were reintroduced into every Danza meeting. Ruiz notes these were not used by Itzcoatl in Mexico nor Arvizu’s Xipe Totec at the group’s weekly practices (Personal Interview with Ruiz 2016).

Following Ruiz’s founding of Gran Tenochtitlan, Ruiz was invited by a similar developing cultural group in Guadalajara, Mexico to partake in ceremonies in the mountains at the village of Ajijic, Mexico. Here, Ruiz was introduced to the Lakota Sun Dance and was invited to participate in a *temazcal*, a form of Mesoamerican sweat bath; additionally, there were

workshops on Indigenous history and culture. Ruiz recalls that while he was at Ajijic, the vision for his group in Los Angeles came to him, allowing him to begin assembling the cultural direction for his group in Los Angeles. For instance, he recalls learning from Jesus, one of the leaders of the cultural group in Guadalajara, about a metaphorical umbilical cord that connects all the dancers to the center of the circle and the copal, uniting them. As an extension of this spiritual interpretation, today Ruiz views it as a sacred duty to carefully plant the embers following practices and ceremonies—embers that symbolize this unity and prayers of the group—so that they might grow into being (Personal Interview with Ruiz 2016).

Ruiz's primary approach to pursuing the cultural direction of his group is based on these teachings as well as what feels correct. When discussing a deer ceremony Ruiz is currently developing, Ruiz shares:

I set myself thinking about my things, my ideas—because they are only ideas; I didn't get them from a book or anything like that. An idea comes to me and I think "that is how I want to do it." It may not have been done like that before, but that is how I want to do it. (Personal Interview with Ruiz 2016; translated by author)

Other sources for Ruiz's vision include witnessing a performance at Gran Tenochtitlan's main ceremony in the spring, Xochipilli Xochiquetzal, and the growing repertoire of songs in Nahuatl within the broader Danza community. Ruiz recounted an example he witnessed that inspired him from Xochipilli Xochiquetzal ceremony: At the ceremony, a Chicano singer sang peyote songs with a water drum. As Ruiz heard him play, he said that he recalled thinking "One day we will be able to have all of this united." Today, Ruiz views the integration of peyote music into Danza favorably, seeing it as a pathway for a larger Indigenous revitalization (Personal Interview with Ruiz 2016).

Additionally, Ruiz and other members of Gran Tenochtitlan sing songs in Nahuatl at ceremonies. In the early 1990s, several danzantes interested in what they view as the cultural

aspect of Danza began to unite to study Nahuatl and Mexica or Aztec history together in a group that later became known as Xochimecayahualli. The inclusion of Nahuatl songs has received mixed reception among the community, and Ruiz notes that it bothers many people, who will leave the ceremony to eat when they start singing in Nahuatl (Personal Interview with Ruiz 2016).

The cultural pride that Ruiz promotes among his group differs from that of Arvizu in its emphasis on a renewal of historical Mexican Indigenous culture as it is believed to have been at the time of the Spanish invaded. Ruiz sees himself and other cultural groups as rescuing a near-forgotten Indigenous history stating: “We are trying to rescue our history so that our history can once again have the richness that it had in those times” (Personal Interview with Ruiz 2016; translated by author). Although the emphasis on a mission of historical recovery differs from the slightly more nationalist syncretic form of Arvizu’s Xipe Totec, there remains a shared sense of providing acceptance of Indigenous heritages to Mexicans in the diaspora.

Though the core of Ruiz’s practice centers on the same danzas practiced by Arvizu and Yescas, Ruiz, like Arteaga, is an innovator pursuing his own vision of Danza. Additionally, as with Arteaga, Ruiz relies heavily on his own intuition of what feels historical and traditional. Oral tradition of Danza, therefore, becomes only one source for composing meaningful Indigenous culture and rituals. These recreations in turn shape histories, and danzantes who experience them and find them meaningful commonly accept them as a newly recovered tradition, creating a historical context for new cultural practices. Ruiz’s use of Native American culture as a source for Indigenous recovery also suggests a broader interpretation of pre-Hispanic interactions and what pre-Hispanic music may have sounded like. This approach to musical and ritual recovery implies that pre-Hispanic peoples shared a primordial stratum of cultural heritage,

which will be analyzed in Chapter 5. From this perspective, Indigenous elements as diverse as peyote songs, the Sun Dance and Nahuatl texts, become natural starting places for a broader cultural recovery—a phenomenon that will be explored in depth in Chapter 6.

### **Cuezalin and the founding of Xiuhcoatl**

Cuezalin of the group Xiuhcoatl in Santa Ana offers another perspective regarding how danzantes compose Indigenous identities and repertoires. Cuezalin came to the United States when he was thirteen years old and spent his adolescence in Santa Ana where he attended high school. Cuezalin's ancestry includes Mezcalteco and other Nayarit Indigenous heritages, but he is predominantly Cora-Tepahuan, and his family identifies primarily as Cora. Cuezalin's grandfather used to play the musical bow in the plaza, and although his uncle knows several of the Cora songs his grandfather sang, he refuses to teach them since he perceives them to be in violation of his Christian faith. While one side of his family was Christian growing up, both the Christian side and the non-religious side included Indigenous Cora-Tepahuan customs, such as maize traditions. As a result, he grew up learning Cora-Tepahuan culture even though songs and other traditions were not passed on (Personal Interview with Cuezalin 2015).

Cuezalin began practicing Danza Azteca in 1994 with Ruiz's Gran Tenochtitlan. Cuezalin and other danzantes would carpool from Santa Ana to Highland Park where Ruiz held his practices. Around this time, he began to seek more depth in the tradition that he often felt was lacking since he perceived the focus to be on showmanship rather than spirituality. Additionally, Cuezalin felt that many of the things he was being taught were not adequately grounded in history or Indigenous practices, and he felt that many things were being made up—particularly

as the teachings of Danza Mexica Cuauhtemoc that will be discussed below began to spread (Personal Interviews with Cuezalin 2015, 2016).



Figure 3.5: Cuezalin with Xiuhtecatl at the Noche de Altares celebration in Santa Ana (left), and at the Mexica New Year Ceremony in San Jose (right) (Photographs by Kaj and Kristina Nielsen).

In the 1990s, Cuezalin was involved with the gnostic community in Santa Ana that encouraged participants to learn about Mesoamerican Indigenous culture. In the late 1990s and early 2000s, Cuezalin also participated in Sun Dance and Lakota Sweat Lodge ceremonies where he met other danzantes seeking an Indigenous spirituality they felt was not present in Danza. In the late 1990s, Cuezalin became involved in the study group “Xochimecayahualli,” which Cuezalin translates as “flowery rope,” mentioned above. The study group became a critical site for the creation of new songs—or, from another perspective, ancient songs from sixteenth century texts that were given new melodies—that have since disseminated throughout the Danza

community of Los Angeles and beyond, as will be explored in Chapter 6 (Personal Interviews with Cuezalin 2015, 2016).

Cuezalin's first experience teaching Danza was at the Jerome Center in Santa Ana. At this community center Cuezalin had a handful of students, several of whom knew him through his involvement in Gnosis. Around the same time, Cuezalin also began a student group of danzantes at California State University of Long Beach. Cuezalin only led this group for a year since it is difficult to maintain a Danza circle on campus as students are always changing and the students did not always have space to meet.

The formation of today's Xiuhcoatl began in the early 2000s when Cuezalin began teaching Danza in a shared art studio with a group that was named "Mazatlcihuatl" ("Deer Woman"). The circle practiced there until they lost the space. When Cuezalin got a new art studio space in downtown Santa Ana in 2001, Carolina Sarmiento, one of the leaders of the Centro Cultural de Mexico, came through and urged him to begin teaching classes for the community at the Center. Cuezalin was initially hesitant but agreed, and the group eventually changed its name to Xiuhcoatl. The circle, which identifies as a calpulli, or an Indigenous community, continues to meet weekly in Santa Ana at El Centro Cultural de Mexico and typically draws between fifteen and thirty danzantes any given week (Personal Interview with Cuezalin 2016).<sup>38</sup>

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<sup>38</sup> Examples of Xiuhcoatl performing can be found on the Internet Archive at <https://archive.org/details/uclaethnomusicologyarchive>. From the main site, search "Nielsen, Kristina" or the collection number, 2017.02, to find the full collection. Recordings of Xiuhcoatl can be found in the folders "Calpulli Xiuhcoatl Santa Ana Day of the Dead" and "Xiuhcoatl Hollywood Forever Day of the Dead."

Today Cuezalin is more cynical of gnosticism and what he terms “magical thinkers,” though he still has many friends who ascribe to these views.<sup>39</sup> He and others in the Xochimecayahualli have coined the term “pantheist atheist” to describe their current belief system that acknowledges the spectrum of beliefs at play within the community. The mixture of “magical thinkers” and the “non-magical thinkers” in the community continues, and the broadness of “pantheist atheists” allows for multiple interpretations of spirituality to overlap:

The pan-theists will pray to the water. The pan-theists will pray to the fire and ask for things, while we don't. We recognize that it is sacred and life giving. And we may do things that are identical, that look identical from the outside. But we don't have the same perception of it. (Personal Interview with Cuezalin 2015)

Whether such diversity of perceptions is recognized or not by danzantes at ceremonies and practices, they are subtly and overtly present in most Danza ceremonies or events. Additionally, danzantes can change their perceptions and interpretations of ceremonies; for instance, Cuezalin notes that he used to be such a “magical thinker” but has since become less so.

Cuezalin now focuses on maintaining and growing Xihcoatl, writing songs, and planning ceremonies with Xochimecayahualli. He also no longer participates in the Sun Dance, focusing instead on Indigenous cultural revival within Danza based on research of Indigenous Mexico, particularly the codices and the study of Nahuatl and Nahuatl texts. Within the Xochimecayahualli and his Danza network, he noted that there has been a renewed interest in transitioning away from the integration of and reliance on Lakota cultural practices. For instance, Cuezalin described a powerful experience he had at an *Inipi*, a Lakota sweat lodge ceremony, led by individuals who identify as Lakota in Los Angeles:

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<sup>39</sup> Gnosticism bears close similarities to the New Age movement, which Stepf Aupers and Dick Houtman describe as a movement marked by participants that “draw upon multiple traditions, styles and ideas simultaneously, combining them into idiosyncratic packages” (2014:174). Aupers and Houtman argue that the meanings of these amalgamated religious practices become increasingly personal, which puts them in stark contrast to traditional doctrine that has smaller leeway for personal interpretation (ibid.).

This weekend was really cool because there was a Lakota guy running the Sweat Lodge, and they made the differentiation: “This is an Inipi, it is not a Temazcal.” In that ceremony, it was touching because the leaders of that ceremony said: “We are very thankful to the Lakota people for their generosity in hosting us when we didn’t know our traditions.” It was like a separation. It was a “thank you so much for hosting us while we were finding ourselves, but now we have our ceremonies and we are making more.” (Personal Interview with Cuezalin 2016)

From Cuezalin’s perspective, cultural recovery should be based predominantly on the study of the codices, Nahuatl texts, and contemporary creativity (Personal Interview with Cuezalin 2016). Although Cuezalin pursues a slightly different variant of cultural revival through Danza than Ruiz, he credits Ruiz for boldly opening a new pathway for Indigenous revitalization of Danza in the Los Angeles community. Cuezalin appreciates Ruiz for inspiring others, including himself, to follow suit and build or “re-assemble” an Indigenous cultural context for Danza apart from that of the Catholic Conchero framework to which the Danza of Yescas and Arvizu remains bound (Personal Interview with Cuezalin 2016).

Today, Xiuhcoatl continues as a community-oriented group that has established links to other groups through the Xochimecayahualli study group. Presently, there are three groups that run recomposed ceremonies according to the Mexica calendar as interpreted by the Xochimecayahualli. Cuezalin notes that their interpretations were not accepted blindly, but rather argued to other Danza communities with evidence (Personal Interview with Cuezalin 2016). Hosting a ceremony is no small task for the community, and preparations include food, lodging, the creating the altar. By rotating responsibilities between Danza calpullis, danzantes can attend more ceremonies. For instance, members of the Xochimecayahualli alongside Xiuhcoatl are responsible for hosting the Huei Miccailhuitontli ceremony in a park near Los Angeles, while another group hosts the Tititl ceremony. Currently, the Xochimecayahualli is hoping that a

calpulli Tuscon, Arizona, will join their organization, creating a total of four Mesoamerican ceremonies specific to the calendar that danzantes can attend (ibid.).

As with Ruiz's Gran Tenochtitlan, Cuezalin's Danza circle Xiuhcoatl also says "Ometeotl" instead of "El es Dios." Cuezalin finds "Ometeotl" problematic, but prefers it to "El es Dios." Based on his research, he has found that "Ometeotl" originated with a reading by Miguel Leon Portilla, a Nahuatl scholar, of a word that more likely reads "Ometecuhtli." Nonetheless, he finds Ometeotl preferable to "El es Dios" because it refers to a duality that is extensively documented and distances the practice from Catholicism, permitting ambiguity: Those who view the tradition as Catholic interpret "Ometeotl" as another proclamation of "God," and those who do not ascribe to this view can interpret it as a celebration of duality and Mexican Indigeneity (Personal Interview with Cuezalin 2016).

For Cuezalin, Danza is a pan-Indigenous site, and the identity formulated through participation in Danza is a communal reflection of diaspora and dislocation. Cuezalin is critical of efforts to portray Danza as tribal—particularly as pursued by those who associate it exclusively with the Mexica. Though he does not ascribe to the notion of a tribal Danza identity, for him Danza is an important site in negotiating what this new dislocated Indigenous identity should be in diaspora:

Mexicayotl is a very narrow view of who we are as a people. I think that it is a little ridiculous to believe that there are any Mexicas at all, because the way that we think of tribes and nations is very different from what they were in those days. Once Mexico Tenochtitlan was disassembled and there was no tribal identity of anyone being Mexica, then there is no more Mexicas. It is done. Even if their blood, their lineage, is still there among Mexicans from the Bajío, the Mexica don't exist anymore. Just like many other groups disappeared. Genetically, it could possibly be there, but since we are all so closely related genetically, who cares? I think it is ridiculous, in that sense, to claim blood because I don't think dancers define themselves through blood. They define themselves by the land they occupied and the relationships they had to a certain ethnic background. If Mexicayotl means national identity as Mexicans, then it still doesn't make sense because within that Mexican nationality and identity there are so many other ethnicities that are

just ignored. So being Mexica centered to me doesn't make a lot of sense because it is very limiting and it is very exclusive.

In Xochimecayahualli, we are redefining what it is that we are going to invent as an identity for ourselves. What will be the identity for ourselves? Because, this identity is necessary. This identity is very important for our people because, right now, defining what it is that we are is very important. And Mexicayotl tried to do that. I believe that they tried to give us an identity as a tribalized people . . . but it does not have the philosophical or the historical validity to sustain itself. And it isn't very sustainable now that we have more knowledge. Therefore, we must find ways to say: "what is it that we are?" If we define it as what we are currently, based on the land that we occupy and community, then I think that is going to work. Because that is flexible and that is moveable. If I say: "I am Xiuhcoalca," [meaning of the group Xiuhcoatl] then that is what we are, because we are a community and we recognize each other as part of that community. We have our own bylaws and our own ways of dealing with our identity and our ceremonies and the things that we do. And it is still based on Mesoamerican traditions, so, all the traditions from Mesoamerica are welcome. All those traditions are welcome in order to form what we are. If I have some people who are Mayan, they can bring some of their customs and traditions to enrich who we are as Xiuhcoatl . . . . And I think that way it will work with any group. It will not work, however, if there are people who want to be independent and say: "I am Azteca but I don't belong to any group." It must be community based . . . . It will work like that, but it will not work for those people who do not want to be accountable to any community. It wouldn't happen in Mexico! You must give back to the community if you want to be a part of the community. Either you must send money, or you must go visit every so often in order to be considered part of the community. Otherwise, you are from there, but you are not there. (Personal Interview with Cuezalin 2016)

Cuezalin's approach to constructing a new communal identity bases itself broadly on Mesoamerican traditions; although danzas from the Bajío serve as the core, new elements can be coupled and decoupled in the composition of communal identity, allowing for a community and identity available to all participants. To be Xiuhcoalca is to be a member of a community that is conceptualized as Indigenous, but not necessarily tribal.

### **Interpretation and Identity in the Danza of Arteaga, Ruiz and Cuezalin**

Each of these three Danza captains or leaders has pursued the development of a form of Danza informed by their Indigenous backgrounds, perspectives on Indigenous spirituality, and

the diasporic experience. Additionally, as in the cases of Cuezalin and Arteaga, there are an increasing number of Danza leaders who are not from Mexico City. This shift has contributed to the inclusion of pan-Indigenous materials in Danza. Despite these pan-Indigenous elements, the core spiritual elements of Danza are still interpreted through a Nahua framework that draws on the study of Mexica spirituality and the study of Nahuatl songs, texts, and language. Though they may draw heavily on knowledge of Mexica culture and the Nahuatl language, the visions of Arteaga, Ruiz, and Cuezalin are inclusive of all forms of Mexican— and even in some cases Native North American—Indigeneity. At the same time, national identities also continue to inform the community and impact the Indigenous cultures created in these three Danza circles. To be of Xochipilli, Gran Tenochtitlan, or Xiuhcoatl is to be a member of a community rooted in both these identities.

The rationale underlying the shift in the sources of authority on Indigenous culture and traditions by the younger generations of danzantes becomes clearer in light of these emerging identities. For these danzantes, who are seeking what they believe to be a more Indigenous form of Danza aligned with their interpretations of pre-Hispanic Indigeneity, the layer of Mexican Catholicism must be rejected, including the Catholic heritage of the Concheros, which is interpreted as antithetical to Indigenous spirituality. Arteaga, Ruiz, and Cuezalin have each dealt with this in different ways, selecting musics that fit with their perspectives on Indigenous identities and spirituality. For instance, as noted by Cuezalin, “Ometeotl” and other Nahuatl terminology that permits a wider range of interpretations than the Conchero equivalent “El es Dios” is preferred. Additionally, Arteaga’s integration of a Zapotec song into his Mexica New Year ceremony and Ruiz’s integration of Yaqui and Lakota culture provide other examples of how this desire is manifested musically. These sources are particularly influential in constructing

new song repertoires, which will be explored in depth in Chapter 6. Each of these danzantes have at various points relied on experiences with other Indigenous communities—particularly the Lakota—to recover something of their own desired Indigenous identity that has subsequently become formative to a Danza community identity.

Because of these changes, transmission as taught and understood by Arvizu loses its potency for those who chose to distance themselves from Catholicism, and the strict hierarchies of the Concheros begins to break down among the younger generations. Many in the younger generation have departed from the traditional transmission of authority within the Conchero lineage that requires permission to begin a new circle, and centralized authority has largely disintegrated in the diaspora as individuals outside the Conchero lineage become trusted authorities. Danza circles now frequently come and go, particularly on college campuses, as described above by Cuezalin. Additionally, national pride or, *mexicanidad*, as initially forwarded by Danza Azteca, has been recomposed into a new cultural framework that centers more on the formation of Indigenous-identifying communities with national pride affiliated with it, as underscored by the frequent fluidity between “Aztec” and “Mexican.”

### **Danza Mexica Cuauhtemoc**

In the last two decades, Danza Mexica has been a catalyst for the growth of a tribal Mexica identity through Danza. This branch of Danza emerged in Los Angeles with the groups that separated with Arturo “Pastel” Mireles’ “Danza Mexica Cuauhtemoc,” which is also occasionally referred to as “Danza Azteca Cuauhtemoc.” Pastel, as he is most commonly known in the Danza community, re-interpreted the Danza tradition as a form of resistance and political activism. He led his danzantes in a highly militaristic fashion; for instance, danzantes are said to

have had to earn seedpods to add to their ayoyotes, and those who missed steps were required to complete push-ups or run laps (Personal Interviews 2015, 2016). In an interview available on YouTube, Pastel describes Danza as “a political tool that we can use to participate with our people” (Mireles 2007; translated by author). Additionally, Pastel describes one of the key sources of personal fulfillment in Danza as stemming from the “opportunity to participate in the political organization of my *pueblo*” (ibid.; translated by author). Pastel claimed to have learned Danza in Mexico as a child; however, both Arvizu and Carmelo contest these claims, noting that Pastel received all his training in Danza Xipe Totec prior to his leaving to form his own group after just a year and a half with Xipe Totec (Personal Interviews 2015).<sup>40</sup>

The form of Danza Pastel advocated was highly esoteric; for instance, in his interview on YouTube he describes teaching “physics, chemistry, math, geometry, and astronomy through the movement of the body through dance, in this case Danza Mexica” (ibid.; translated by author). He advocated a Mexica cultural recovery akin to awakening culture from within: “Danza is a method. Danza is a method of teaching for those who already carry within their hearts the rhythms, the form, and the teachings of our ancestors. The only thing one has to do is awaken them” (ibid.; translated by author). He tied this spiritual interpretation to the theme of cultural pride:

The most beautiful and the most wonderful aspect of a human being is to let everyone else be as they are. Respect others in all of their identity and integrity. That is the most beautiful. We are not speaking of multiculturalism. We are speaking of *interculturalism*. Know yourself. Be proud of your identity, your traditions, your culture and your history. With this pride, also accept that of others who also have their identity, their culture, and their traditions. (ibid.; translated by author)

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<sup>40</sup> It was also noted that many children in Mexico commonly wear ayoyotes to celebrate the Virgin of Guadalupe, and Pastel is alleged by members of the community to have used such a photo to falsely portray himself as having performed Danza continuously since his childhood.

Pastel's and his follower's activism was rooted in his highly pan-Indigenous interpretation of history. He relates his interpretation of history and the roots of American pan-Indianism as follows, alleging that the Nahuatl migrated from the Niagara Falls region to Nicaragua:

The relationship between Natives in the Americas has existed for many years, between all the Natives in America, all the natural people of America. For example, many people know that the Mexica Aztecs went following Huitzilopochtli to found what was later called Tenochtitlan. This is partially true. What is not true is that they did not go following Huitzilopochtli as only a deity. Huitzilopochtli means "hummingbird," or "blue hummingbird." The hummingbird accompanied them on their journey, one of the biggest migrations of this continent, following the greatest brothers and sisters that have always instructed us in where to live. These brothers and sisters are known as the monarch butterfly, which migrates from North America to the waterfalls of Nicaragua where they arrived. And they arrived in what is now the state of Michoacan, and they arrived at the large lakes that today are known as the State of Mexico. There our ancestors parted from what today is Niagara [Niagara Falls], which means "where they begin to speak Nahuatl," to what today is Nicaragua, which means "where they no longer speak Nahuatl." Niagara, Nicaragua.

So that is our relationship. We passed through all of that. And when I say "we," I mean as a descendant of the Mexica people, the people "Nahuatl Tlaca Tenochca" [Nahuatl-Speaking people of Tenochtitlan]. So, we walked, my ancestors walked from what today is Canada to Nicaragua. And the relationship we had with the people is profound. Remember that within all of this, there also existed corridors. The corridors of the four circles of connection and communication that formed circles around the Pacific. The circle of the north and the circle of the south. With these we communicated. We knew everything. We knew perfectly well who Christopher Columbus was before he arrived and began the genocide. We knew perfectly well who Hernán Cortés was before his arrival in 1519. We already knew who they were. We knew they were not gods. We knew what they were seeking. We already knew because we had this grand communication, this connection between all of us. This connection between the Navajos, Hopis, Apaches, because we had one constant truth: This earth does not belong to us. We belong to the earth. This is different than how the Europeans think. The Europeans think you can buy and sell the earth. Mother Earth cannot be sold. We belong to the Earth, and this is the grand connection. (ibid.; translated by author).

The framing of the Mexica history and Native peoples in this manner permits a larger argument for recovery as a return to a spiritual connection with other Indigenous communities that was lost through colonization. The use of linguistic analyses—albeit highly inaccurate ones—to assert a Mexica presence in a broader American context parallels earlier efforts, including those of the

*mexikayotl* movement in Mexico City in the 1960s (See Chapter 5), to ground Danza and Mexica history. Such “Mexica-centric” pan-Indigenous histories and analyses of Pastel have endured in the Los Angeles community, and have gained potency in political movements.

According to members in the Los Angeles Danza community with whom I spoke, the Mexica Cuauhtemoc branch of Danza disseminated across the United States rapidly because Pastel encouraged his students to start their own groups following his teachings. Cuezalin recalls that even as far away as New York a Mexica Cuauhtemoc group had begun in the 1990s, further disseminating Pastel’s interpretations (Personal Interview with Cuezalin 2016). Twenty years later, these ideas are now widely diffused and deeply embedded in segments of the community, and many have come to view his interpretation as part of how ritual dances were in pre-Columbian times—hardly an unanticipated response to the historical way Pastel framed his teachings.

Today Pastel is a pariah in most of the Los Angeles and broader Danza community—as well as other Native and Chicano communities—following allegations of child molestation and rape. These allegations began in the 1980s; however, the claims were treated dismissively by his male followers, and members of the community recount that they were even met with hostility by his supporters, who remained fiercely loyal to him. Pastel was investigated by the police and the case went to trial, but the young victims who were pre-teen and younger did not feel comfortable testifying against him and the case did not proceed (Personal Interview 2015; L.A. Defense of Safe and Sacred Spaces 2015a). Pastel later moved to Arizona, where he was subsequently denounced in 2015 because of events in 2010 involving members of Calpolli Teoxicalli of Tlalmanco in Tucson, Arizona (L.A. Defense of Safe and Sacred Spaces 2015b). In April 2015, a letter signed by seventy-seven Danza groups, Native American tribal leaders, and

political activist organizations was posted online requesting that Pastel not be allowed at any future events, ceremonies, or gatherings (L.A. Defense of Safe and Sacred Spaces 2015c). On July 25<sup>th</sup>, 2015, a community notice was released noting that the Los Angeles Police Department would be present at the Slauson Multipurpose Center to ensure that Pastel would not be on the premises (LAdoss Comite 2015). To the best of my present knowledge, Pastel has not been convicted and remains innocent until proven guilty in the eyes of the state; however, the jury of public opinion in the Danza community, as well as partnered associations and communities, largely viewed him as guilty starting in the mid-nineties.

These allegations have created a new challenge for the community, particularly for those who followed him and established Mexica Cuauhtemoc groups, and are now trying to disassociate themselves from his legacy. Several danzantes with whom I spoke recounted danzantes taking extreme measures, including changing the names of their groups or even in one instance burning the regalia they had worn while dancing with Pastel (Personal Interviews 2015, 2016). Changing regalia and the names of groups is a relatively simple task, but separating out Pastel's now widely diffused interpretations of Danza have proven far more difficult. The introductions made by Pastel, and the rapidity with which new materials continuously become traditionalized in the Danza community—as will be discussed in Chapter 6—makes such distinctions, even with additions from within a few decades, difficult. Older generations of the community who are highly critical of Pastel's interpretations question whether it is possible to fully denounce an individual who they believe took advantage of the community while maintaining the practices they introduced. Why should these introductions be trusted as historical, bypassing traditional methods of oral histories? And why, when an individual has been revealed as untrustworthy, do their ideas remain in circulation?

Recent publications and dissertations on Danza provide ample evidence of the endurance of Pastel's influence in many Danza communities in the United States. For instance, those I interviewed in Los Angeles note that the introduction of certain disciplinary measures into Danza Azteca, such as having participants do squats or push-ups for being late as described in the dissertation of Jennie Marie Luna (2010:129), stemmed from Pastel (Personal Interview 2015). The actual origins of this practice are not addressed by Luna, who instead implies direct continuity with Conchero.<sup>41</sup> Furthermore, the political uses of Danza are not problematized as recent changes in the tradition, but instead viewed as an historical role of Danza (Luna 2010; Colín 2014), even though many segments of the larger Danza community in both Mexico and the United States find the mixture of Danza and politics problematic.<sup>42</sup>

The proliferation of a Mexica Danza identity in the diaspora, however, is one of Pastel's lasting impacts that further conflated being *Mexicana* with being *Mexica*. This movement had similarities to the Mexikayotl cultural movements of the 1960s in Mexico that sought to recover Mexica Indigenous culture (See Chapter 5); however, in diaspora, these communities faced other

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<sup>41</sup> Corporal punishment used by the Concheros was generally much harsher, such as administering lashes (Stone 1973:182). Danza groups today, including Arvizu's Xipe Totec, do not integrate any physical punishment. Today, other lighter methods of discipline are used. For instance, Arteaga recounted that when Arvizu found an aspect of his appearance unkempt, for if he had not shaved, Arvizu would comment that it was good Capitán Yescas was not there to see him appear that way. Arteaga said that was enough to get him and other danzantes to shape up (Personal Interview with Arteaga 2016)

<sup>42</sup> The perspective of political danzantes clashes directly with the perspectives of Arvizu and Yescas, as detailed in the previous chapter. The political interpretations of the younger generation persist; for instance, Luna's contends that "by including and making it customary to incorporate Danza at Xicano/a gatherings and events, the community makes a statement that Indigenous origins and ancestors must always be acknowledged, and that the community at large must always be reminded and called upon to regenerate and preserve Indigenous knowledge" (2010:163, 164). Furthermore, she contends that "Danzantes as 'protesters' or part of political movements would be a major trait of Xicana/o danzantes in the U.S." (ibid.:200). Although Danza as a means of political protest seems to have developed concurrently on both sides of the border, as Colín citing Ocelocoatl recalling protests in Mexico in front of the Iraqi embassy to protest the invasion of Kuwait (2014:147), this new political purpose must be analyzed as a significant shift from Conchero and the Danza Azteca introduced to California by Yescas.

pressures. To be Mexican when surrounded by a predominantly white culture pressing assimilation arguably made being “Mexican” feel tribal.<sup>43</sup> Today, even the perspectives of what would constitute the “tribe”—the individual calpulli or all who identify as Mexica—is flexible.<sup>44</sup>

### **Ethnic, National, and Racial Identities in the Mexican American Diaspora**

In considering identities in Danza, the constructed identities maintained by states cannot be ignored since they provide the backdrop against which the younger Danza communities are redefining themselves. Increasingly, the identities composed in Danza challenge both United States and Mexican State constructions of race and ethnicity. This includes the labels “Hispanic” or “Latino” formulated in the United States; and the “Mestizo” or “Indio” designations on the Mexican side of the border—the first connoting a homogenous racially and/or culturally mixed category and the second individuals who retain Indigenous languages and customs (Ewen 2001:114). On both sides of the border, terminology and national discourses aim to homogenize: In the United States “Hispanic” and “Latino” consistently “whiten” the Mexican diaspora, while in Mexico, “Mestizo” is marked by the State’s project of mestizaje and homogenization. In response to these categories, the 2010 census noted a significant uptick in respondents from Latin America marking “American Indian” on the census, reflecting a trend that has been

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<sup>43</sup> By “tribal” I refer to the sense of maintaining loyalty to one’s own social group and culture.

<sup>44</sup> For instance, Colín refers to the sunrise ceremony of Calpulli Tonalehqueh’s Mexica New Year ceremony as intertribal: “The gathering of elders and the intertribal exchange is closely aligned with Calpulli Tonalehqueh’s mission” (2014:53). At the same time, he also refers to the Mexica genetically, noting they are now a minority, while at the same time using it in a national context: “Calpulli Tonalehqueh leaders recognize that modern Mexicas are a minority even in the Mexican-origin community and that many Mexican-origin individuals are disconnected from their Indigenous past. They hope to attract as many Mexicans and Mexican Americans as possible so they may come and reconnect with their cultural heritage. This is in line with *Mexicayotl* ideals” (Colín 2014:57).

attributed in part to increased immigration from Latin American regions with large Indigenous populations in the last two decades (Decker 2011).

The histories of these racial categories further reveal why a younger generation of *danzantes*, as well as others in the Mexican diaspora, do not identify with them. In colonial-era Mexico, the hierarchical delineations of difference were predicated on caste and class—categories that drew on racial phenotypes but were not necessarily defined by them. María Elena Martínez notes that the original idea of race, or *raza*, was closely tied to religion, with the “purest” being those of the oldest Christian families. In contrast, the *casta* system was based on lineage, but not envisioned as racial categories (2009:30). These two systems eventually fused, and Martínez observes that ideas of *limpieza de sangre* or “blood purity” were invoked against individuals of African ancestry in the early 1600s (*ibid.*). In the emerging Spanish colonial framework, those of African, Jewish, or Muslim ancestry were viewed as contaminants that could not be fully absorbed or absolved by Christian lineages (*ibid.*:31).<sup>45</sup>

Following independence and the establishment of the First Mexican Republic in 1824, the nascent nation of Mexico began to dissolve these rigid categories, instead arguing for a shared national *mestizaje* that facilitated national unity. Latin American Studies scholar Lourdes Martínez-Echazábal notes that across Latin America, national discourses of *mestizaje* were “indissolubly linked to the search for *lo Americano*” or “that which constitutes an authentic [Latin] American identity in the face of European and/or Anglo-American values” (1998:21). *Mestizaje* was viewed as a vital platform for national unity, rationalizing the subsumption of culturally diverse regions and ethnic groups into a single nation.

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<sup>45</sup> This led to challenges in maintaining social hierarchy. Martínez describes the observation of inquisitor Diego Serrando de Silva noting “Spain was the only country in history . . . to have produced not just a division between nobles and plebians, but one based on *limpieza de sangre*, which he claimed was undermining the prestige and privileges of the noble estate” (2009:28).

Though a shared national identity of *mestizaje* began in the twentieth century, its role in nation building accelerated following the Mexican Revolution. Despite its pretense of mixture, *mestizaje* favored a European and Indigenous mixture and typically excluded or minimized African and other influences. José Vasconcelos, author of the influential work *La Raza Cósmica* (1929), subscribed to these ideas. As noted by art scholars Ilona Katzew and Susan Deans-Smith, Vasconcelos advocated racist-eugenic “scientific” ideas of the early twentieth centuries:

In his view of the “cosmic race” of Mexico Indians and Spaniards—deemed superior—would naturally seek to mix among themselves . . . In this conceptualization of a voluntary aesthetic eugenization, Vasconcelos’ ideas were not unlike those advanced by the *sistema de castas*—the difference here being that instead of outlining the steps leading to the creation of a superior race of white Spaniards, he proposed a semi-official formula for the attainment of a fundamentally homogenous *mestizo* (Indian-European) nation. (2009:17)

Other populations were similarly targeted for systematic exclusion from “*mestizaje*,” including immigrants of Chinese descent in Mexico.<sup>46</sup> Due to these historical exclusions connoted in the term, Ronald Stutzman defines *mestizaje* as “an all-inclusive ideology of exclusion” (1981:59).

Late nineteenth and early twentieth-century racial hierarchies and policies in the United States contrasted substantially with that those of Mexico; however, particularly in the American Southwest where former Mexicans suddenly found themselves in the United States following the 1848 Invasion of Mexico (Or Mexican-American War), these incongruous systems have become a part of the Mexican American experience.<sup>47</sup> In the United States, eugenic policies policed

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<sup>46</sup> Alan Knight notes the rise of sinophobia in the 1920s and 1930s in Mexico: “Just as nationalism sought to ‘forge the nation’ by integrating the Indian, so it also sought to cleanse the nation by expelling the Chinese . . . Sinophobia was the logical corollary of revolutionary *indigenismo*. And the outcome, in Mexico as in Europe, was discriminatory legislation, ghettoization, and expulsion” (1990:97).

<sup>47</sup> It is also vital to note that that Indigenous peoples never ceded these lands and Mexico never signed any treaties with Indigenous peoples. This is a particularly significant point given contemporary movements to reclaim Aztlan, or the American Southwest that was formerly part of Mexico, that will be discussed in Chapter 5.

whiteness; for instance, in the 1930s the United States changed its census to include the racial category of “Mexican,” effectively reassigning communities a mix-racial identity—even those who had previously identified as white (Stern 2009:151). A new racial category emerged predicated on speaking Spanish and practicing Catholicism (Gutiérrez 2009:183). During this same period, Mexico removed questions about racial categories, instead adding additional questions about language to identify Indigenous communities (Stern 2009:151). These racial classifications of Mexicans in the United States were—and arguably continue to be—in the words of American Culture scholar Alexandra Minna Stern, “as much about demarcating the outer limits of whiteness as it was about managing the unwieldiness of perceived biological hybridity” (ibid.:169).

In the United States, there is presently a variety of terminology used by the government to categorize this outer limit, including the terms “Latino” and “Hispanic.” Ramón A. Gutiérrez notes that prior to the Invasion of Mexico, most Mexicans in what is today the American Southwest identified by region, such as *Californios*, or *Tejanos*. Gutiérrez finds that communities that pre-dated the Invasion of Mexico often attempted to avoid association with Mexico; for instance, *Tejanos* frequently identified as *Latinos* or Latin Americans, while *Californios* continued to identify as Spaniards, Spanish Americans and “Hispanos” (2009:184-186). Today, the United States Census uses the term “Hispanic,” the origins of which are nebulously described as follows:

Hispanic origin can be viewed as the heritage, nationality, lineage, or country of birth of the person or the person’s parents or ancestors before arriving in the United States. People who identify as Hispanic, Latino, or Spanish may be any race. (United States Census Bureau)

The term, therefore, historically represents a leveraging of a connection to Europe. Similarly, the term “Latino” is no less problematic. Suzanne Oboler remarks:

It is difficult to ignore the fact that the term Latino is in many ways as much a neologism as the word Hispanic. For, just as Hispanic refers to a specific population and culture on the Iberian Peninsula, so, too, the word Latin or Latino (originally corresponding to the Latin language)—outside of perhaps the most conservative religious orders—finds little correspondence in contemporary Latin American realities: both terms in fact exclude much of the historical experiences and linguistic traditions of the African, Asian, and indigenous populations of the American continent. (1995:166)

In contrast to exclusive identity definitions, the concurrent problem of inclusion to the point of excessive homogenization, as noted by philosopher Jorge J.E. Gracia, also occurs. Regarding the application of “Latino” as an ethnic or racial marker he remarks:

The case of ethnicity is even more controversial than that of race, for the epistemic criteria applied to *ethne* are very often contextual. Consider the case of Latinos in the United States. What is it that we can use to identify them? That they speak Spanish? No, for obviously many persons regarded as Latinos do not speak Spanish at all, or only as a second language. Food? Again no, for there is food that is common to all Latinos; Cubans and Mexicans, for example have very different cuisines. Music? Not possible, for similar reasons. Religion? Latinos belong to all sorts of faiths, from Roman Catholicism to Judaism and Islamism to voodooism. Lineage? No, because not all Latinos are tied by descent, and many Latinos have no Latino ancestors, being children of non-Latino immigrants to Latin America. So what universal criteria, or criterion, can be applied to identify Latinos? (2011:5)

As García remarks, “Latinos” as an “ethnic” or “racial” category bears little significance for those receiving the label; instead, it is a historical marker of difference from a Protestant, predominantly white English-speaking majority. To be “Latino,” therefore, becomes an identity of intersections as an individual may be interpreted as white or “non-white” in other contexts. As noted by William B. Taylor: “Brown bleeds through the straight line, unstaunchable—the line separating Black from white, for example. Brown confuses. Brown forms at the border of contradiction” (2009:xvii). Several sociological studies have noted that when those defined by the State as “Latino” are asked about their race, they often respond with a nationality (Kissam, Herrera, and Nakamoto 1993 in Rodríguez 2000:124; Oboler 1995:143), underscoring how nationality has arguably become a race: *la raza Mexicana*.

## **Colliding Definitions of Indigeneity in Diaspora**

The land that was annexed by the United States following the Invasion of Mexico currently exists as a space that does not fit the racial and cultural binaries of the United States or Mexico, leading Gutiérrez to refer to it as a “third space” or “Greater Mexico” (Katzew and Deans-Smith 2009:2; 1999). As noted above, in Mexico the distinction between “Indio” and a culturally mixed dominant society is predominantly cultural rather than racial, with Alexander Ewen noting that if United States criteria were applied, approximately ninety percent of Mexicans might be considered Indigenous (2001:114). Although these racial distinctions are constructions of states, the repercussions and consequences of them are real; for instance, a 2005 survey found that fully 90% of Indigenous Mexicans agree that being Indigenous has led to discrimination by a Mexican mestizo majority (National Council for the Prevention of Discrimination 2005 in Medrano 2006).<sup>48</sup>

In Mexico, because of the distinction between Indigenous ethnic heritage and membership in an Indigenous community, it is possible for individuals of the dominant mestizo mixed culture to selectively perform Indigeneity while not identifying as “Indio” or “Indígena.” For instance, Renée de la Torre Castellanos notes that the Zapopan dancers in Guadalajara do not interpret themselves as Indigenous but as mestizos who can choose to invoke an Indigenous past:

There is an awareness of distinction between themselves and “real” or “true” Indigenous people, that is, those who form a part of the ethnic communities today. These people generally live in conditions of extreme marginalization and differ from the urban mestizo population in that they keep up their own languages and rural ways. The notion of the dancers having an Indigenous identity is a vague idea, since being Indigenous is taken to mean forming part of the glorious past of the nation. Hence it is seen as something separate from everyday reality and not simply as a condition of normal life in today’s

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<sup>48</sup> Even these categories exhibit substantial fluidity. For instance, I happened to sit next to a Zapotec on a Los Angeles bus after I recognized it while he was having a phone conversation. In a conversation about my research, I mentioned that I was interested in different forms of identity in Mexico. He noted that he identifies as mestizo, as he believed he had some European ancestry. Hence, even the state’s parameters of culture and language quickly break down.

complex Mexico. To illustrate the point, there is no interaction or solidarity with the Otomí, the Purépecha, or the Huichol, who do participate in the pilgrimage, but not as dancers, only as part of the informal commerce. (Castellanos 2009:40)

As a result, dressing in Indigenous clothing and dancing is not necessarily “Indio,” but rather “Mexicano.” While the United States has effectively policed Indigenous communities out of existence with policies and definitions, such as blood quantum, Mexico has created categories of identification that bypass blood to draw on culture, particularly language, and community.<sup>49</sup>

Mexican understandings of Indigeneity collide with that predominant in the United States, where Indigenous identities are associated with benefits, such as land and tribal sovereignty. In the United States, Indigeneity has regularly been put on trial to gauge its supposed authenticity for access to these benefits.<sup>50</sup> Furthermore, Native communities have witnessed dominant communities usurping already limited resources by strategically claiming Indigenous ancestry. For instance, decolonization theorist Linda Tuhiwai Smith notes that “descendants of settlers” have attempted to redefine “Indigenous” as simply residing on the land for several generations (1999:7), negating the power of Indigenous peoples by attempting to render the term meaningless. Additionally, sociologist Eva Marie Garrouette finds that white people frequently gained Indigenous recognition and were documented on census rolls when there was land to be gained (2003:24). She continues to examine the varying definitions and requirements for Indigenous recognition, pointing out that as of 1978 the United States

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<sup>49</sup> Poverty is also often considered a “trait” of Indigeneity in Mexico, or as put by Eugenio Bermejillo “when an Indian ceases to be wretched, he ceases to be Indian” (Bermejillo in Ewen 2001:113). This creates a problematic situation where improvements in well-being and socioeconomic status negate the Indigeneity of a community in the popular imagination. As will be explored further in Chapter 5, understandings of victimhood and oppression tie into historical understandings of Indigeneity in the Mexican-American diaspora.

<sup>50</sup> For instance, the identity of the Maspée Wampanoag was effectively put on trial in 1977 when the tribe attempted to regain their land rights to Cape Code (Clifford 1988).

government had thirty-three different definitions for Native Americans (ibid.:16). These definitions are no more consistent among the various tribes, and Garrouette finds a wide host of criteria, ranging from the broad Cherokee enrollment criteria, where even those who are 1/2048<sup>th</sup> Cherokee can enroll if their ancestors are on the Dawes Roll; to stringent criteria, such as tribes that require half or a quarter blood quantum for recognition and/or patrilineal or matrilineal lines of descent (ibid.:20, 33). Strict criteria frequently result in situations where fully Indigenous individuals with heritages in several tribes many not qualify for recognition in any of them (ibid.:20). In the United States, this has led to a policing of Indigeneity and “Nativity” distinct from Mexico, where to be identified as “Indígena” or “Indio” remains largely undesirable—a fact upon which all the danzantes with whom I spoke agreed.

The perspective of many in the Danza community that all Native peoples north and south of the Rio Grande are one unified people has led danzantes to look to Native North American culture for inspiration— a decision that will be explored in detail in Chapter 6. Though there are many instances of Native communities in the United States collaborating with danzantes, from the few studies that have been undertaken to date, their general perspective often falls short of ascribing full Indigenous recognition. For example, Sylvia Escárcega describes the sentiments of participants at the United Nations Indigenous peoples summit critical of these danzantes’ claims. She notes that established members of Indigenous communities in Mexico often find the causes championed by politically-oriented Danza communities irrelevant to the immediate concerns of Indigenous communities (2003).<sup>51</sup> As will be explored in depth in Chapter 5, political

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<sup>51</sup> The group criticized by in Sylvia Escárcega’s writing is led by Xokonoschtletl Gómora, who has made it a life mission to have the *penacho*, or quetzal feather headdress, that he and his group allege belonged to Moctezuma returned to Mexico from the Vienna Weltmuseum (2003:13). Regarding the response of Indigenous communities to their efforts, Escárcega relates: ““Who are those Apaches over there? Who do they think they are?” exclaimed to me one Mexican representative the first time she ever saw them in the assembly room. She was referring to the way this Conchero group dresses during meetings: It is certainly

performances of Danza have led to representation problems as groups often position themselves as representatives of a broader community than they necessarily are. It is important to constantly reiterate, as illustrated in the perspectives of the different generations of Danza leadership described in this and the previous Chapter, that danzantes currently have many different perspectives on Danza and its relationship with national and Indigenous identities. All the Danza leaders with whom I spoke about politics in Danza opposed dancing in political contexts (Personal Interviews 2015, 2016).

### **Impacts on Identities in Danza**

These divergent ethnic and racial categories by nation-states create a frustrating situation for danzantes, particularly those who are ethnically fully Indigenous and critical of state projects of modernity, neoliberalism, and assimilation. Without participation and membership in Indigenous communities in Mexico, they cannot be fully considered “Indígena.” At the same time, in the United States, they may interact with communities that are only 25% ethnically Indigenous with no parents capable of speaking the language, while they themselves are fully ethnically Indigenous and may have family members who still speak Indigenous languages. Both have experienced different manifestations of cultural genocide precipitated by nation-states; at the same time, the predominant forces oppressing Indigenous communities—a predominantly white Protestant majority in the United States, and a mixed ethnic and cultural majority seeking a

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an amalgamation of Native American and Indigenous styles. Other Mexican Indigenous representatives only observe them from afar. They discretely laugh about their claims and question their reasons to struggle and for staying in Europe—‘les gustan las güeras’ they say dismissively. They criticize them for the images of the Mexican Indigenous peoples portrayed, their use of Indigenous arts and knowledge, and their lifestyle but, moreover, for the object of their struggle: Moctezuma’s headdress instead of democracy and social justice” (ibid.:13, 14). Most traditional Conchero groups in Mexico would likely take issue with describing Xokonoschtletl’s group as Conchero, as he has pursued reorienting the dances around his interpretation of Aztec spirituality, making it more *mexikayotl*.

national policy of mestizaje in Mexico—still create a delicate distinction between Indigeneity and Indigenous experiences on both sides of the border.

Danza in the United States has emerged against this complex international racial and cultural backdrop. How should ethnically Indigenous Mexicans identify racially when presented with censuses and surveys? Why should categories predicated on the policing of whiteness and a Protestant, English-speaking culture be accepted? And if it is to be rejected, what should replace it to reconstitute a sense of community and origin?

The Danza practices of Arteaga, Ruiz, and Cuezalin each demonstrate ways in which restrictive identities are being countered by new generations of danzantes. For instance, Arteaga now identifies as Native, categorically rejecting United States categories of “Latino” or “Hispanic” that he finds unreflective of his culture and heritage (Personal Interview with Arteaga 2016). Similarly, the amalgamated Indigenous culture Ruiz pursues through his Danza practice that defies categorization. The Indigenous cultural components effectively create the potential for pan-Indigenous identities; concurrently, participants can identify nationally, ethnically, regionally, or simply as Indigenous depending upon preference. And Cuezalin’s vision of the Xiuhcoalca community allows danzantes to draw on a form of localized identity while not conflating nationality with tribe or ethnicity. These evolving Indigenous and tribal identities in Danza disrupt and challenge categorization in the United States and simultaneously disrupt the Mexican mestizaje ideology intent on homogenizing Mexico into a single cultural entity.

In the case of the Danza Mexica communities, embracing a tribal identity is a direct challenge to an inclusive Mexican national identity that strategically employs Indigeneity. These strategies have become a new form of “tribalized nationalism” that asserts and disrupts different tenants of the nationalist project. For instance, it is inclusive and includes all Mexicans under its

aegis, formulating itself around a shared sense of a Mexican national experience. At the same time, new historical narratives, such as the alleged re-emergence of Mexica cultural leaders and critical views of the nation-state and neoliberal economic policies that will be scrutinized in Chapter 5, disrupt the state project of Mexican cultural mestizaje and homogenization.

Overall, the reception of these claims by Native communities of the United States warrants additional study. Problems predominantly emerge with land claims and rights affiliated with these identification movements, particularly those pertaining to the American Southwest and Aztlan, which will be explored in detail in Chapter 5. Furthermore, most danzantes can shift back to identifying with larger communities including that of the mestizo majority that has a history of systematically oppressing Indigenous peoples in Mexico. As noted by Castellanos above, for Indigenous communities in Mexico recognized by the state, these forms of strategic identification are often unavailable. Today, Danza includes participants who take both approaches, including those who view their Indigenous identities in Danza as permanent, and those who view it as a way to connect with their heritage but not necessarily how they identify. As a result, Danza continues to be a site where understandings of national and Indigenous identities are negotiated and reframed through musics, histories, and the diasporic experience.<sup>52</sup>

## **Conclusion**

From Arvizu and Yescas to the younger generation of leadership in Danza explored in this chapter, there has been a significant shift regarding how Danza and Indigeneity within Danza is conceptualized. For the younger generation, what was initially introduced as a syncretic Mexican and Catholic tradition and folkloric art form has become the basis of new forms of

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<sup>52</sup> In one memorable exchange, I asked a danzante who was dressed and prepared to dance publically if she identified as “Indio” to which she emphatically stated she did not.

Indigenous identities, or in the case of the Mexica, even tribal identities. These identities in turn face competing forces that expand access, building a pan-Indigenous culture, and simultaneously those that “tribalize” them, or homogenize them as the basis of a new tribal identity.

Constructions of identity in Danza continuously oscillate between these two poles of national and tribal identities, mirroring danzantes’ interpretations of these overlapping experiences. In all cases, danzantes regularly navigate conflicting identity categories inherent to the diaspora, and it is not uncommon for individuals to identify as Indigenous in one setting and nationally or regionally in another. These shifting identifications are not contradictory, but instead a reality of living in the “third space” (Gutiérrez 1999). In response, younger danzantes navigating this space in diaspora have increasingly turned to other sources outside the immediate Danza and Conchero lineage to compose repertoires, ceremonies, and Danza communities meaningful to them.

## Chapter 4

### The Danzas

Even as the interpretations of the Danza tradition change between the many Danza communities discussed in the previous two chapters, most of the danzas in the collective repertoire of Southern California Danza communities remain the same. The rhythms of the huehuetl continue to provide a common cultural core for all Danza groups in Los Angeles. From this shared musical focal point, subsequent outgrowths of language classes, presentations on history and spirituality, rituals, and other cultural developments having emerged as spokes from this shared cultural hub, particularly from the groups pursuing “Danza Cultural,” Indigenous community identities, or pre-Hispanic cultural recoveries through Danza.

This chapter analyzes the transformation and composition of danzas in the repertoire that provide a common base for danzantes amid their specific spiritual or historical interpretation. As noted in Chapters 2 and 3, these interpretations are highly individual and influenced by the competing interpretations of what constitutes authenticity in the tradition. This sense of authenticity derives primarily from two alternative sources: the tradition as transmitted and maintained through Conchero lineages, oral tradition, and syncretic Catholicism, and that which seeks to re-connect Danza with an Indigeneity deemed less affected by European cultural and spiritual influence. Through a musical analysis, I argue that musical developments in Danza are informed and spurred by community understandings of Indigenous histories and identities. Concurrently, new musical styles in Danza—including the transition from concha strumming patterns to drum rhythms, and the more recent addition of Indigenous melodic instruments—offer new platforms for imagining and re-interpreting the past.

Despite the flurry of recent publications on Danza, none of them have analyzed the music, the relationship between drum rhythms and Conchero strumming patterns, or the musical changes that occurred during its transition to Danza Azteca. Additionally, discussion of composition and the creation of new danzas has been entirely absent, and most analyses performed in Chicano Studies, Native Studies, or anthropology take the collective antiquity of the repertoires at face value. This chapter, along with its counterpart on song repertoires in Danza (Chapter 6), seeks to unpack these recurring narratives of staticism to gain a fuller appreciation of creativity within Danza of Southern California. This analysis provides insight into how music becomes a vehicle for sustaining and composing histories that create meaningful links to recent and distant histories for danzantes.

### **Danza Repertoire Structure**

From observation, there are approximately thirty to forty rhythms that are performed regularly at Danza ceremonies and events. The basic structure of these danzas revolve around alternations between the *base* and the *flor*, also known as the *cambio*. The introduction of the term “flor” into Danza occurred recently, and groups led by the older generation, such as Lazaro Arvizu’s Xipe Totec, still use the term “cambio” (Personal Interview with Arvizu 2015).<sup>53</sup> Cuezalin uses the terms “base” and “flor,” likening the “base” to the stem of a plant that remains consistent and the “flor” to the flowers that change (Personal Interview with Cuezalin 2016).

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<sup>53</sup> I am predominantly using the term “flor” instead of “cambio” since it is the one I have encountered most readily in the circles that I have danced with in the Greater Los Angeles Area; however, when speaking specifically of the danzas of Xipe Totec, I use the term “cambio” to honor their preferred terminology.

This terminology harkens back to the connection between music and flowers documented in codices and iconography from pre-Hispanic times.

In addition to the basic base-flor structure, the base pattern can also feature variations known as the *redoble* that doubles rhythmic values in designated portions of the base pattern (e.g. eighth notes become sixteenth notes). In many cases, these variations are individual to the groups, and drummers who do not regularly practice with the individual groups are prone to miss these small variations, playing the basic base rhythm through the redoubles.<sup>54</sup> The structure of the danzas typically emphasizes the number four, retaining the connection to the four directions of their Conchero predecessors. For instance, a common danza form is outlined in Table 4.1 below. Many of the commonly performed danzas share this basic structure; however, there are a number that do not conform to this strict schema that will be explored below. The flor patterns have become sites of innovation, and many groups and individuals perform their own sequence of flor steps. The flor pattern is selectively accompanied by slight musical changes; for instance, drummers commonly play the rhythm on the rim of the huehuetl to accompany smaller shuffling steps. Therefore, it is imperative to keep an eye on the leader of the danza—an honor that many Danza groups rotate between danzantes selected by the capitanes, or between the capitanes of different groups at larger ceremonies, such as the Mexica New Year Ceremony in San Jose.<sup>55</sup>

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<sup>54</sup> See Appendix 2 for an analysis of drumming techniques in Danza and Appendix 3 for an example of a detailed analysis of a danza.

<sup>55</sup> The biggest obstacle to transcribing rhythms of danzas is the fact that the interplay of the steps of the lead danzantes cannot be fully captured. In theory, the drummer should follow the lead danzante, accommodating their choice of flor (and the correct redoble) and integrating designated variations where appropriate; hence, the transcriptions of the rhythms risks forwarding an oversimplification of the variations that often occur. Additionally, to imply that any single “fixed” version of a danza is “correct” would miss what is currently a major musical characteristic of their performance, since variations follow the steps of the danzantes and their ordering of common flor patterns. Though Danza leaders and capitanes with whom I have spoken insist there is a correct order of the flores—and there very well might have been as recently as the 1980s—current practice indicates that there are a significant number of combinations of steps that danzantes interpret as correct. Therefore, I have chosen to transcribe the most

<b>Drum pattern</b>	<b>Dance pattern</b>
Base pattern	Base sequence left
Base pattern	Base sequence right
Base pattern	Base sequence left
Base pattern	Base sequence right
Flor/Redoble pattern	Flor sequence left
Flor/Redoble pattern	Flor sequence right
Flor/Redoble pattern	Flor sequence left
Flor/Redoble pattern	Flor sequence right

Figure 4.1: The typical structure of a danza.

The danzantes traditionally move to the left first, after which the movement is completed to the right to maintain a balance between the directions—the traditional structure of Conchero. In the California Danza community, even the direction of the steps has become contested with some groups arguing that danzantes should first move right and then left. For instance, Ernesto Colín notes that Calpulli Tonalehqueh argues that danzantes should first move right first because “they subscribe to the idea that Danza has its roots in agricultural and astronomical representations” (2014:111). Arvizu finds such fundamental changes to Danza problematic. For him, this change is highly incorrect and the movement should be in the direction of the rotation of the earth (Personal Interview with Arvizu 2015). Other groups, such as Cuezalin’s Xiuhcoatl,

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basic forms of the flores and bases as I have commonly heard them performed. At large events, such as the Mexica New Year Ceremony where many groups are performing together, however, the redoubles and variations are not as clearly heard since many of the drummers do not know where to place the redouble or the other subtle variations in the flor that danzantes might commonly do with their own individual group.

continue to move to the left first to move with the sun and the stars (Personal Interview with Cuezalin 2016).<sup>56</sup>

### **Musical Transition from Conchero to Danza Azteca**

Today, the Danza repertoire contains several strata of danzas including older danzas from Conchero, younger danzas that have been created by members of the community, and a number in between whose origins are less immediately clear. The danzas currently in circulation in Los Angeles correspond closely with most of the dances documented by Susanna Rostas in the mesa of Santo Niño de Atocha in Mexico City in 2001, who lists a total of thirty-four distinct danzas in her comprehensive appendix (2009:228). Though such correspondence is helpful, it does not resolve questions regarding the origins of danzas; furthermore, by 2001 the Los Angeles Danza community was already exerting influence on communities in Mexico City (Personal Interview with Cuezalin 2015). Currently, there is also confusion regarding the number of danzas since there are the multiple names by which danzas are known in the community. For instance, the danza “Cascabeles” is alternately known as “Ayoyotes” or “Coyoxauhqui” —a name change that invokes the Aztec deity. Dual names, particularly those of danzas with names in Nahuatl, were also documented by Rostas in 2001 (*ibid.*).<sup>57</sup>

Several danzas that bear close similarities to their Conchero predecessors include “El Guajalote” and “El Cojito,” which is more widely known today in Los Angeles as “Tezcatlipoca.” As with all danzas originating from Conchero, these danzas have harmonies that

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<sup>56</sup> A detailed description of a sample danza can be in Appendix 3.

<sup>57</sup> Since many of the danzas are known by different names, danzantes typically signal a desired danza to the drummers by playing the rhythm of the base on their rattle. Nonetheless, there are frequent miscommunications since some of the danzas share similar bases.

are absent without the presence of any conchas.<sup>58</sup> Though the harmonies of Conchero conform to a tonic, sub-dominant, dominant structure, the tunings are fluid, resulting in a distinctly Conchero tonality. Additionally, the significant difference in tempo between Conchero and Danza can obfuscate similarities.<sup>59</sup>

## Guajalote

### Conchero Version

The transcription consists of two staves. The top staff, labeled 'Concha', is in 4/4 time with a key signature of one sharp (F#). It contains a sequence of notes with accents (>) and chord changes: A Major, E Major, and A Major. The bottom staff, labeled 'Cambio', is in 4/4 time with a key signature of two sharps (F# and C#). It contains a sequence of notes with accents (>) and chord changes: D Major, A Major, E Major, and A Major. Both staves end with a double bar line and the instruction 'repeat two times'.

Figure 4.2: Transcription of “Guajalote” as performed with conchas. Transcribed by Kristina Nielsen.<sup>60</sup>

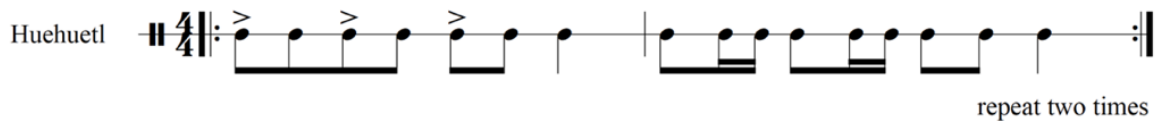
<sup>58</sup> Often at larger events there will be one or two individuals with conchas, however, their playing is almost entirely drowned out by the drums. Several danzantes noted that the concha has itself become a symbol and many people who show up to events with a concha do not have any connection to traditional Concheros or fully know how to play the instrument (Personal Interviews 2016).

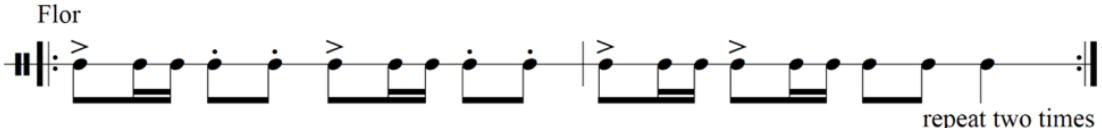
<sup>59</sup> A field recording of “Tezcatlipoca” is available on the Internet Archive at <https://archive.org/details/uclaethnomusicologyarchive>. From the main site, search “Nielsen, Kristina” or the collection number, 2017.02, to find the full collection. “Tezcatlipoca” can be heard on DSC\_033 in the folder “Mexica New Year in San Jose.”

<sup>60</sup> The notes in the transcription represent the root of the chord. The accents can result in a slight dotted feel; however, it is not fully dotted so therefore I have chosen to transcribe them as accented to capture where the stress falls.

## Guajalote Danza Version

Base

Huehuetl  repeat two times

Flor  repeat two times



(Flor variation)  repeat two times

Figure 4.3: Huehuetl pattern of “Guajalote.” Transcribed by Kristina Nielsen.

The Danza version in Figure 4.3 is played on the huehuetl and features small rhythmic variations and sub-divisions that maintain the integrity of the Conchero version. The similarities between the two versions of “Guajalote” remain prevalent. In comparison, the contemporary performances of other danzas are slightly more obfuscated.

## Cojito or Tezcatlipoca Conchero Version

Concha  repeat two times



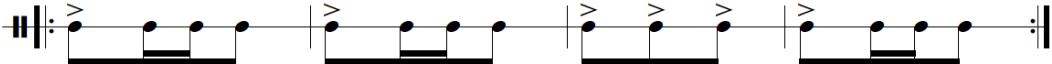
5  repeat two times

Figure 4.4: Transcription of the Conchero version of “Cojito” or “Tezcatlipoca.” Transcribed by Kristina Nielsen.

## Tezcatlipoca Danza Version

Base

Huehuetl  repeat four times

Flor  repeat four times

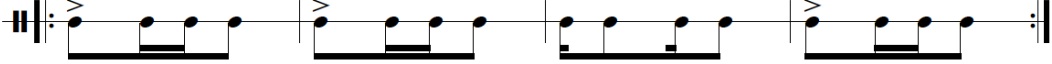
Flor (alternative variation)  repeat four times

Figure 4.5: Huehuetl pattern of “Tezcatlipoca” or “Cojito.” Transcribed by Kristina Nielsen.

In this case, the rhythm has shifted as it was sped up to become a triple meter instead of a duple. Additionally, the choreography has shifted between the Conchero and Danza versions of these danzas. Since the Danza version does not require danzantes to hold and play a concha, danzantes can dance more rigorously.

The origin of rhythmic variations on the huehuetl derived from the original strumming patterns of Conchero creates a bridge between the two genres; however—particularly as can be seen in the case of “Tezcatlipoca” above—the transition from Conchero to Danza still required a degree of interpretation, artistry, and musicality. For instance, though danzas such as “Tezcatlipoca” retain key musical features of their predecessors—in this case a repeating “short-long” figure—a new artistic direction and vision emerges in the Danza versions that distinguishes itself from earlier Conchero versions. Manuel Pineda and the San Miguel Arcángel Danza community are the likely source for the original musical transition since they introduced

the huehuetl as it shifted from Conchero to the nascent “Danza Azteca” style.<sup>61</sup> As noted in Chapter 2, Florencio Yescas was a member of Pineda’s group and therefore a participant in the earliest stages of the transition from Conchero to Danza Azteca. The earliest transition to strictly drum rhythms was likely still slower with deliberately marked beats, more in the vein of how Xipe Totec performs today. This rhythmic overlap made it possible for them to perform their style with other Conchero groups at shared ceremonies, with some strumming and others drumming.<sup>62</sup> This new Aztec performance style appears to have spread from San Miguel Arcángel across other Conchero groups, particularly those based in Mexico City.<sup>63</sup>

Another likely source for rhythmic developments was the staging of folkloric dances, including the Ballet Folklórico of Amalia Hernández. Hernández intersected with Manuel Pineda’s group through Yescas, and Yescas made significant contributions to the Ballet when it was in its nascent stages as the Ballet Moderno de México. As detailed in Chapter two, Arvizu notes that Yescas played a significant role in developing choreography, costumes, and music for Amalia Hernández, making the danzas of Conchero faster, bolder, and more “warrior-like” (Personal Interview with Arvizu 2015). Yescas’ participation in the Ballet Moderno de México occurred approximately a decade after Manuel Pineda’s introduction of the huehuetl into Conchero ceremonies, and the spread and development of an Aztecized style of Conchero was still in progress. Furthermore, through the indigenismo arts movement, the cementation of a

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<sup>61</sup> I have been unable to locate any recordings of Manuel Pineda, although there are plenty of recordings of the contemporary San Miguel Arcángel Danza performances online.

<sup>62</sup> For example, the account of Pineda being barred from dancing by Don Manuel till he put a shirt on illustrates how, in the early phases, the two remained similar and could be performed together (Stone 1973:173). Arvizu, like other students of Yescas, continue in the lineage of Pineda (See Chapter 2).

<sup>63</sup> See Appendix 4 for additional transcriptions of rhythms commonly found in Danza of Southern California.

national Aztec visual and auditory aesthetic was just beginning to take shape in the middle of the twentieth century.<sup>64</sup>

Concurrent developments between Aztecifying Conchero groups, such as that of Pineda, and folkloric dance groups, such as those of Amalia Hernández, are the most likely explanation for the specific musical and choreographic Aztecification processes of danzas in the mid-twentieth century. The circulation of danzantes like Yescas between Conchero groups in the community and the stage created a loop and spurred concurrent developments in folkloric presentations and Aztecifying Conchero circles.<sup>65</sup> Although in most cases the underlying music between the two remained the same, Yescas introduced some new choreography from the Ballet Folklórico in the emerging Danza Azteca style. For instance, Arvizu notes that Yescas developed the “Danza de los Guerreros,” which features a choreographed mock-battle between danzantes; and “Águila Blanca,” also known by its Nahuatl name “Iztaccuauhtli,” that features a danzante in a spectacular plumed eagle outfit (Personal Interview with Arvizu 2015). The mock-battle choreography can be seen in contemporary performances of the Ballet Folklórico’s staging of “Dioses de los Aztecas,” or “The Gods of the Aztec World.” Variations are also performed by Danza circles, including some of the Danza cultural circles I danced with in Los Angeles that will go from individual to paired danza forms. The prevalence of choreography developed by Yescas for the Ballet Folklórico in contemporary Danza Azteca speaks to the lasting choreographic influence of Yescas. Additionally, the nexus of both Aztecified Conchero groups

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<sup>64</sup> Another prominent example of music and indigenismo is Carlos Chávez’s acclaimed *Sinfonía India* premiered in December of 1949—nearly a decade after Pineda began reintroducing the huehuetl and just three years before the Ballet Moderno de México was founded.

<sup>65</sup> As noted in Chapter 2, the Ballet Folklórico de México does not include information or attributions about the founding members besides Hernández. It is likely that Yescas and other early members initially recruited dancers from the early Conchero/Danza Azteca circles; however, this theory requires more study.

and the Ballet Folklórico in Mexico City further intertwined the roots of these dance movements, laying the groundwork for further intermingling nationalism and portrayals of Indigenous histories with an Aztec-centric focus.

### Tempo Changes in the Danzas

One of the primary musical differences between various Danza circles Southern California are the tempos at which they perform danzas. Today, many of the younger groups in Los Angeles perform the danzas much faster than the older Danza Azteca circles, such as Arvizu’s Xipe Totec. Arvizu believes that a slower tempo for the danzas is necessary to maintain the connection between alabanzas and danzas. For instance, he cites the example of “Paloma,” which has a clear interplay between an alabanza and the danza (Figure 4.6).<sup>66</sup> As explained by Arvizu:

Because with every beat we plant our feet on the floor. Every beat of the drum is a step. No more, no less. But today, the young people are playing them very fast, and even I can’t dance to them sometimes. It is because with Danza, to feel it and to mark the steps, one must go slower, like the beating of a heart. (Personal Interview with Arvizu 2015; translated by author)

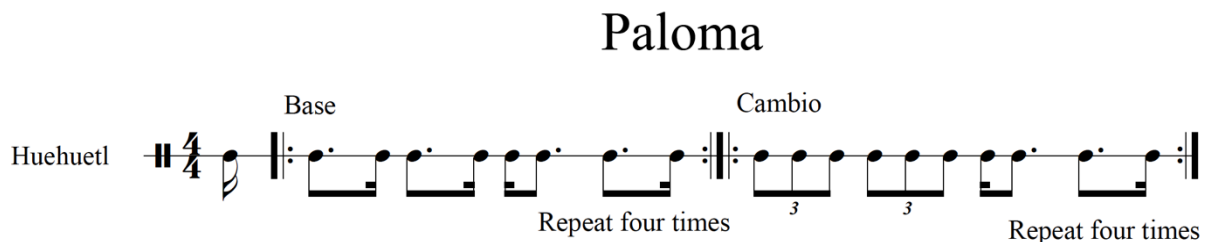


Figure 4.6: Huehuetl rhythm of “Paloma.” Transcribed by Kristina Nielsen.

<sup>66</sup> A field recording of “Paloma” from the Mexica New Year in San Jose can be found on the Internet Archive at <https://archive.org/details/uclaethnomusicologyarchive>. From the main site, search “Nielsen, Kristina” or the collection number, 2017.02, to find the full collection. “Paloma” can be seen on DSC\_0161 in the folder “Mexica New Year in San Jose.”

Danzas at Arvizu's practices are led exclusively by him and several danzantes who have been in the group for a long time, and the danzas retain a consistent structure of bases and cambios. Arvizu views the cohesiveness and unity of the performance as part of its spiritual nature. Arvizu also notes that Pastel changed many of the steps in his Mexica Cuauhtemoc groups, which Arvizu finds to have disrupted the harmony of Danza since there are many variations in the choreography of the flor patterns when danzantes unite to dance together at shared ceremonies and events (Personal Interview with Arvizu 2016). Today, it is critical to watch whoever is leading the danza at a larger event to know which flor to do at which time.

One of the biggest critiques a danzante can level against another is to accuse them of dancing "just for show." Danzantes from the competing factions with whom I spoke defined showy dancing differently. For instance, some deemed that receiving money for dancing or dancing in a professional capacity—a critique commonly leveled by those who interpret Danza through an esoteric spiritual lens—rendered dancing showy or "folkloric." Others believe dancing is showy if it was performed too quickly or seemed like an attempt to show off individual prowess instead of focusing on the harmony of the group (Personal Interviews 2015, 2016). The latter style is closely tied to the current trend of drummers playing the rhythms at extremely rapid tempos and the handful of danzantes who have developed the skill to dance at these exceedingly rapid tempos. In many of the Danza groups with rapid tempos and a wide range of ages and abilities, the steps often become more diversified, as many danzantes are incapable of dancing that fast or executing the more physically demanding steps that some danzantes have integrated. These include jumps with twirls or low squatting movements that require dexterity in the knees.

## “Fuego”: A Case Study of Danza Re-Interpretation

One striking example of the reinterpretation of a Conchero danza is “Fuego,” or the “Fire Dance.” This danza is among the most popular in Los Angeles, and is commonly performed in practices, larger ceremonies, and as a staged performance (Figure 4.7; Figure 4.8). This danza is occasionally danced with fire to create a dramatic effect, particularly when performed for audiences. At its climax in its presentational form, danzantes place their feet or thighs over a burning fire, a feat that awes audiences. I witnessed this danza performed with fire twice at events that leaned towards the “presentational” rather than “ceremonial,” including the Día de Los Muertos Celebration at the Hollywood Forever Cemetery and the Gathering of Nations performances of Sergio Ruiz’s Gran Tenochtitlan.<sup>67</sup>

**Fuego**

The image shows two musical staves for the Huehuetl instrument. The top staff is labeled 'Huehuetl' and 'Base' and is in 4/4 time. It features a sequence of eighth notes with accents, starting with a double bar line and repeat sign. The bottom staff is labeled 'Flor' and also features a sequence of eighth notes with accents, starting with a double bar line and repeat sign. Both staves end with a double bar line and repeat sign, with the instruction 'Repeat four times' written below each staff.

Figure 4.7: Huehuetl pattern in “Fuego.” Transcribed by Kristina Nielsen.

<sup>67</sup> Field recordings of “Fuego” can be found on the Internet Archive at <https://archive.org/details/uclaethnomusicologyarchive>. From the main site, search “Nielsen, Kristina” or the collection number, 2017.02, to find the full collection. The performance of “Fuego” on the Mainstage from the Hollywood Forever Cemetery on DSC\_0070 in the folder “Xihuhcoatl Hollywood Forever Day of the Dead.” Sergio Ruiz’s version from the Gathering of Nations can be seen on DSC\_0170 in the folder “Gathering of Nations.”



Figure 4.8: Sergio Ruiz performing “Fuego” at the 2016 Gathering of Nations (Photograph by Kristina Nielsen).

Arvizu recounted that the origins of this choreographed version of “Fuego” lie with Yescas, although the rhythm originated with an older danza from Conchero.<sup>68</sup> Like others in the community today, Yescas researched and created danzas according to how he envisioned the past. From his research, he created “Fuego” as an interpretation of the Mexica ceremony of the New Fire that occurred every fifty-two years in Tenochtitlan, the capital of the Aztec Empire, before the Spanish arrived. Arvizu further notes that Yescas changed the choreography of other danzas to their most pervasive modern forms, including “Paloma” (renamed “Huilotl” in Nahuatl), and “Aguila Blanca” (Personal Interview with Arvizu 2016).

Arvizu finds it problematic that individuals fail to acknowledge Yesca’s role in developing this choreography (ibid.). Many danzantes instead frame the choreography as ancient

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<sup>68</sup> In her appendix, Rostas lists two different fire dances among the Santo Niño de Atocha Conchero group, including “Fuego” (also known by the Nahuatl names “Tlétl” or “Xiutecutli”), and “Fuego Nuevo” or “Cuatro Vientos” (also known by the Nahuatl name “Malinalli”) (Rostas 2009:228).

and originating directly from the Mexica; however, as noted by Arvizu, the performance represents Yescas' artistry and interpretation of what such a Mexica New Fire ceremony might have looked like, not an ancient anonymous tradition as it is often presented today. Many of these presentations of danzas such as "Fuego" blur the subtle distinction between interpretations of what *might* have been as an artistic reconstruction, and what is concretely known of Mexica musical culture.

In an example of this blurring, when Javier Quijas Yxayotl presented the danzantes who performed on the main stage at the Hollywood Forever Cemetery, he told the eager crowd of several thousand "we will present to you the music and dance of the ancient Mexico like our ancestors played over 2000 years ago." Yescas' version of "Fuego" was among the three dances performed at this event, highlighting the repositioning of the dance with its choreography and music played on the huehuetl and recreated ceramic instruments as ancient.<sup>69</sup> Furthermore, the danza has taken on new ritual meanings that were not in Yescas' initial choreography. For instance, Cuezalin noted that while dancing with Sergio Ruiz, he was instructed that they had to earn the right to dance "Fuego" with fire. Cuezalin and his peers had to find a hill first to perform a ceremony, and the ashes from this ceremony became a part of the Xochimecayahualli sacred bundle (Personal Interview with Cuezalin 2015). The repurposing of Yescas' choreography highlights the fluidity between folkloric and the ritual uses of the same danza rhythms. Though the two are consistently viewed as oppositional within the community, current practices by

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<sup>69</sup> A field recording of Xavier Quijas Yxayotl's comments to the audience can be found on the Internet Archive at <https://archive.org/details/uclaethnomusicologyarchive>. From the main site, search "Nielsen, Kristina" or the collection number, 2017.02, to find the full collection. His commentary can be seen on DSC\_0068 in the folder "Xiuhcoatl Hollywood Forever day of the Dead."

danzantes suggest substantial fluidity between these two depending on the location, audience, setting, and the aim of the dance.

### **Los Angeles Danza Compositions**

In addition to rhythms originating straight from the Conchero tradition, there are also danzas that have been composed by danzantes in the last fifty years, often recombining different bases and cambios. These danzas have become accepted as equally traditional to their Conchero predecessors. “Mayahuel” is one such example of a more recently composed danza that originated in Los Angeles in the 1980s (Figure 4.9).<sup>70</sup> Virginia Carmelo, who leads another branch of Xipe Totec, notes that this danza was formed by placing a new base with a redoble of the cambio from another danza. Carmelo recalls that eventually Xipe Totec decided the danza needed a name, ultimately deciding on “Mayahuel” (Personal Interviews with Carmelo and Arvizu 2015, 2016). This compositional framework has provided a common process by which the Danza community has grown the danza repertoire—a process Cuezalin likened to “remixing” (Personal Interview with Cuezalin 2016). Although “Mayahuel” has a relatively recent origin in the Los Angeles community, its origins are now widely ascribed to an unidentified body of ancestors. Furthermore, it is now commonly found in Mexico City, as Rostas documented it

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<sup>70</sup> A field recording of Arvizu’s Xipe Totec performing “Mayahuel” can be found on the Internet Archive at <https://archive.org/details/uclaethnomusicologyarchive>. From the main site, search “Nielsen, Kristina” or the collection number, 2017.02, to find the full collection. “Mayahuel” can be seen on DSC\_0633 in the folder “Celebration of the Virgin de Guadalupe.”



song of Nayarit, his home state (Personal Interview with Cuezalin 2016).<sup>72</sup>

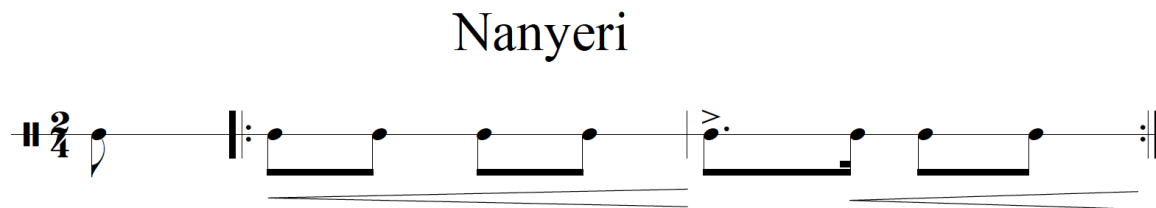


Figure 4.10: Huehuetl rhythm for “Nanyeri,” composed and choreographed by Cuezalin. Transcription by Kristina Nielsen.

Cuezalin describes his compositional and choreographic process as follows:

I wanted to encourage other people to represent their states, their ethnicity, or their pueblo. In Mexico, all the states have a state song . . . In fact, my state has a few, but there is usually one that is recognized as the state’s song . . . My state is called Nayarit, which comes from the Nayeri people, who are the Cora and my ancestors. They call themselves Nayeri and the state is Nayarit . . . The reason why I chose this rhythm, besides it being the state’s song, is because the Cora are people that are very happy and they like these rhythms that are very “dancy” round rhythms. Danza can be very hard, like “Apache” [playing example]. It is not very round, it is very rigid and hard. But this one, the rhythm is very circular and it makes you want to move . . . My family is from the coast and they are like that. They like to dance, they like to be happy. It is a warrior dance, but it is very playful also. All the movements are about holding weapons, fighting, or attacking, or defending, or setting yourself free. I included some of the movements that I know from martial arts. (Personal Interview with Cuezalin 2016)

In this example, the rhythm of another song provided the basis for a new danza, mirroring the earlier compositional process through which alabanza rhythms were reformulated into danza rhythms performed on drums without melodic instruments. Danza rhythms, such as Nanyeri, further situate Danza as a pan-Indigenous tradition, coupling the core of Danza with personal heritages, experiences, and artistic preferences—and in this case even including training in

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<sup>72</sup> Field recordings of “Nanyeri” and “Macuil Xochitl” by Cuezalin can be found on the Internet Archive at <https://archive.org/details/uclaethnomusicologyarchive>. From the main site, search “Nielsen, Kristina” or the collection number, 2017.02, to find the full collection. In the folder “Cuezalin Demonstrating Songs and Dances,” “Nanyeri” can be found on DSC\_0009, and “Macuil Xochitl” can be found on DSC\_0004.

martial arts. This coincides with Cuezalin’s goals detailed in Chapter 3 for his Danza circle to become a fluid pan-Indigenous community united in their Danza community as “Xiuhcoalca” rather than as members of any specific tribe (Personal Interview with Cuezalin 2016).

The other example composed by Cuezalin is the danza “Macuil Xochitl,” or “Cinco Flores” for which he created the rhythmic motive from scratch (Figure 4.11). This danza functions as a game that requires significant concentration on the part of the danzantes and drummers to not miscount. Instead of the usual formula of paired movements, the danza alternates a different number of bases between the flores, adding one each time until it reaches five (“Macuil” in Nahuatl, as indicated by the title of the danza), at which point the cycle restarts and begins and one again.

## Macuil Xochitl

The musical notation for the Huehuetl rhythm in 2/4 time is presented in three lines. The first line shows the first three cycles: Base (1) (4 beats), Flor (3 beats), Base (2) (4 beats), Flor (3 beats), and Base (3) (4 beats). The second line shows the fourth cycle: Flor (3 beats) and Base (4) (4 beats). The third line shows the fifth cycle: Flor (3 beats), Base (5) (4 beats), and Flor (3 beats). The notation uses a treble clef, a 2/4 time signature, and a double bar line at the end of each cycle. The rhythm is composed of eighth and sixteenth notes with accents.

Figure 4.11: Huehuetl rhythm for “Macuil Xochitl,” Composed by Cuezalin. Transcription by Kristina Nielsen.

The rhythm forces danzantes and drummers to be alert, transparently revealing when either party loses concentration and counts incorrectly. Cuezalin described his inspiration and compositional process as follows:

Our community is Mesoamerican, and so we have people from all over the place and the dances and the songs come from all over the place too. And we understand that Danza is a living culture that we need to add, to give, to create, to keep it going. The way that I try to do that is by researching, by reading, by seeing the different things that are going on in the contemporary world, what the Native communities are doing and how they express themselves. I have created a few danzas that we do here based on that idea, the knowledge and the songs that we have recreated and what has been passed down to us in terms of movement and rhythms. This one dance I created because I saw that a lot of new danzas were being created, but only based on the rhythms that already exist. So they would mix Apache and Tonantzin for example, but that is more like remixing rather than making something new. I decided to play with numbers and really go out and create a sequence that was something that our ancestors *could* have done, but I don't know if they did. But it is based on our archaeology, on our mythology. I thought "well, we have this dance about fortune and luck, and in reality, what is chance?" If you know the variables, then your chances become better of achieving a certain thing. In reality, chance is simply not knowing the variables, not having control of them. But if you have control over all the variables, you are more able to make something happen. Which for some people may look like chance, might look like luck . . . And so similarly, since in dance we are representing the universe and everything that is in different dances, I decided we needed a dance for chance. And chance is Macuil Xochitl, the lord of games and the lord of chance. For this reason, the dance is the progression of numbers. If you lose track of the numbers then you fall off, you don't know what is next, you get lost. But if you keep track of all the numbers, then you are able to finish it, to finish your objective. At the same time, you are playing with the numbers of the universe because everything is like that, everything is numbers. And so the movements of the dance have to do with different games that are played on the street. (Personal Interview with Cuezalin 2016)

Through this compositional process, Cuezalin is attempting to build further on the repertoire by moving away from the "remix" structure and towards a more repertoire that reflects his and other Indigenous heritages within the Xiuhcoatl community. As he composes for the present, however, his vision continuously intersects with the past and interpretations that reflect what Mesoamerican ancestors might have done.

### **Re-harmonizing the Danzas**

Recently there has been a growing movement to introduce Indigenous melodic instruments into Danza, including ceramic flutes, whistles, and ocarinas, that re-introduce a desired Indigenous melodic element back into the danzas. The instruments are not drawn

specifically from the Aztec cultural area, but instead from an array of Mesoamerican cultures, and even occasionally Native North American cultures.<sup>73</sup> Javier Quijas Yxayotl, mentioned above, has been central to the reintegration of Indigenous instruments into danzas, and today he is among one of the most respected players of Indigenous ceramic instruments in the Southern California Danza community. He regularly performs at some of the largest Danza events, such as the Mexica New Year Ceremony, where he and an assistant played continuously for the two days of danzas. Until recently, Quijas lived in Southern California, and he has released several compact discs that have provided inspiration to the community. Additionally, he has YouTube videos featuring his renditions of danzas with added Mesoamerican instruments.

Musically, the structure utilized by Quijas in the addition of melodies to danzas closely follows the structure of bases and flores in the danzas. These phrases usually repeat themselves with slight variations, and though they can alter between the base and flor, many times they continue a repeated motif atop the drums. For instance, the rendition of “Fuego” performed by Quijas’ ensemble in the San Jose Mexica New Year ceremony featured a short, repeated phrase with variations occurring largely independent of the base and flor shifts. Others have followed the lead of Quijas in introducing instruments into Danza; for instance, Carlos Daniel Jiménez, an Aztec musician of Oaxacan decent, has developed his own style of instrumental accompaniment in which he attempts to shape a narrative with the Danza rhythms. His artistic approach draws on narrative structures that overlie the danza rhythms:

At the Fundación de Tenochtitlan, you are talking about the beginning, them being great people . . . Then they play Guerreros, or Chimale, which is very fast [sings the rhythm], and so, when they are playing that, I try to push that. For example, I play the jaguar whistle because I imagine that they are fighting, they are defending the territory. So you emphasize that, you play a little more aggressively. A little faster. A little more energy. (Personal Interview with Jiménez 2015)

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<sup>73</sup> Borrowings of Native North American culture are much more prevalent in the parallel body of song repertoire that is developing, which will be explored at length in Chapter 6.

Jiménez and other musicians are increasingly supplementing Danza and creating a new layer of experience of a “historical present” for danzantes. By drawing on their interpretations, they create a new auditory portrait of an Aztec past.

While there is no officially standardized music for the Indigenous instrumental parts currently, conversations with Jiménez and observations of instrumentalists accompanying Danza suggest that a nearly standardized structure for accompanying Danza is emerging (Figure 4.12). For instance, a similar structure of instrumental accompaniment over danzas were featured in the performances of Javier Quijas at the Hollywood Forever Cemetery and at the Mexica New Year Ceremony in San Jose; Xolotl at the Fundación de Tenochtitlan in Salinas, California; Daniel Carlos Jiménez at their New Year Ceremony at Baldwin park; and Martin Espino at the Virgen de Guadalupe play at the Cathedral of Our Lady of Los Angeles. In each of these performances, the performers draw on similarly repeated phrases, interspersing repeated melodic motifs with death whistles or instruments for effects. Since the community of Aztec instrumentalists is currently small, these musicians hear and interact with each other, contributing to the emergence of stylistic similarities.

When talking to Jiménez, I commented on the reemerging repetitive structure I had observed. Jiménez said he had noticed the same thing; however, he suggested that this was the result of the constraints of the structures of danzas. Repeated patterns are especially prominent in the *permiso*, or permission, that is performed at the beginning and conclusion of each danza.

I think you can incorporate a lot of things, but I always wind up playing some of the same things because it is repetitive, and the danza is repetitive, so you kind of get stuck there. Sometimes I try to vary, but at the end of the day, the drum makes the rhythm, so obviously, you follow that. You are bound, especially when you play ceremonies, you are bound to whatever they are playing. You are like background music. You cannot fully blossom because you are still bound to that sound. It is different when you play by yourself, when you create your own rhythms and not necessarily Danza rhythms. Although most of them are related, it is very interesting to see that when you do that, then

you can incorporate other things. You can go in different routes and you can do different things because you are not bound to that one sound, or one time. It has a timing, it is four front, four back, turn, the other way. Four on this side, four on that side, so it is all counted already. I think that is a limitation when you are playing the flute . . . Javier Quijas has done that too, where when it is the *permiso* he plays a certain rhythm on the flutes. And I do that too. And I think that it is becoming a repertoire. (Personal Interview with Jiménez 2015)

Though artists such as Jimenéz and Quijas may have their own distinct aesthetics, the inherent limitations of the structure of danzas has resulted in similar structures.

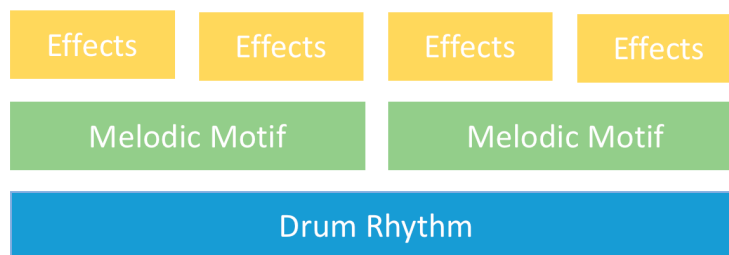


Figure 4.12: The typical layering of Danza music with melodic instruments. The full style utilizes pitched or unpitched drum rhythms under melodic motif that are supplemented with effects. Occasionally melodic motifs are sung, but most often they are performed on ceramic ocarinas or flutes. These various layers can come in or fade out, but the basic structure of three distinct layers of sound remains constant.

In addition to the “harmonized” rhythms, a budding new genre is growing in popularity that might best be labeled as ambient Aztec music. These ensembles have seen modest commercial successes. One of the most respected among the community is “Grupo Tribu” that has performed in the Greater Los Angeles region on several occasions: Their most recent 2016 tour included seven performances at cities in California including San Jose, Salinas, Ventura, Sacramento and Stockton. The music of Grupo Tribu draws on influences besides the danzas, and their shows integrate singing, wind instruments, drums, and an array of percussion instruments. A key part of their aesthetic is its rehearsed sound. Since the group does not typically accompany danzantes, the musicians can also take additional rhythmic latitudes. During

our interviews, Jiménez mentioned Tribu as one of his influences and he views them as pioneers of a new genre within the Aztec cultural sphere: Music that draws on the core of the Danza rhythms, instruments, and aesthetics, but actively composes new music (Personal Interview with Jiménez 2015).

### **Histories and Narratives of Survival**

The danza rhythms are increasingly historicized homogenously as a collective repertoire with a single historical source rooted in antiquity. For instance, as noted above, the choreography of Yescas is frequently portrayed as ancient, homogenizing his contributions into a single pre-Hispanic repertoire. Additionally, popular subversive narratives of survival have developed, mirroring other narratives of cultural resurgence that will be explored in the following chapter. Key to these subversive interpretations is the assertion that Nahua speakers from Central Mexico hid rhythms in Conchero to protect them from the Church. Though some rhythms from Central Mexico may have entered the Conchero repertoires of the Bajío, or Central Valley of Mexico during the early colonial era, other sources are equally— or even more likely—including the many Indigenous communities that resided in the Chichimec region, and particularly the Otomí, as will be explored in the following chapter.

Jennie Marie Luna is among those who forward this narrative of historically subversive narrative of rhythmic transmission, and in her dissertation, she states: “the Spaniards viewed the new stringed instrument (a Spanish adaptation) as acceptable. The mandolin or concha became the instrument upon which Nahua peoples were able to remember and preserve the original beats of Danza rhythms” (2012:115-116). Though stringed instruments replaced other Indigenous instruments, there is no evidence to support the argument that the rhythms in Danza are

preserved rhythms from Nahuatl speakers. Such a history of the rhythms is temptingly subversive; however, it ignores key pan-Indigenous histories within the development of Conchero.

A similar narrative that today's *danzas* are surviving fragments is forwarded by Ernesto Colín in his 2014 publication *Indigenous Education through Dance and Ceremony: A Mexica Palimpsest*. In his book, he asserts that “a vast majority of the songs that accompany dance and music pieces have disappeared over time” (2014:127).<sup>74</sup> Through such historicization, *danzas* are portrayed as survivals from a pre-colonial past—fragments that are not as they were, but rather all that remains following colonization. Similarly, Colín states that “it is said that there are more than 365 dances, at least one for every day of the year. Dances represent creatures (coyote, rabbit, frog, eagle), natural phenomena (rain, wind, sun fire), or other concepts (human memory, wisdom, willpower, children's laughter)” (2014:123). None of the *danzantes* with whom I spoke are aware of 365 *danzas*; furthermore, the symbolic interpretations of *danzas*, and the gestures and choreography within the *danzas*, appear to be highly individualized among the groups that identify more closely with re-constructed pre-Hispanic spirituality.

None of the *danzantes* with whom I spoke doubt that the core of the *Danza* tradition is Indigenous (Personal Interviews 2015, 2016). The conflation of “Indigenous” with “ancient,” —and by extension “authentic” —however, becomes particularly marked in the groups pursuing *Danza* cultural or a Mexica variant. As noted by Comaroff and Comaroff in *Ethnography and the Historical Imagination*, history and ethnography are inextricably linked (1992), both informing and creating each other. In *Danza*, the link between these two spheres has become apparent as one of the central appeals of participating in a number of groups is the connection participants

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<sup>74</sup> A similar theme of musical re-emergence is present in Roberto Rodríguez's descriptions of *Danza* (2014:146).

establish with a history that is affirmed through communal performance. The composition of repertoires in Danza, both the individual danzas and the entire repertoires of local groups and the whole community, sustain historical narratives, such as those above, by coupling more recently composed repertoires with those of unknown origins. For instance, the choreography of Yescas, Conchero rhythms, and “remixes,” such as “Mayahuel,” are coupled together as one single repertoire imbued with a collective communal history. The process of anonymization quickly resituates all musical and choreographic elements as ancient, and in a number of cases, Mexica. The histories contained in the music and choreography of Danza in Southern California become reflective of Southern Californian diasporic histories that include a variety of historical and colonial experiences. As will be explored at length in Chapter 5, these historical layers are recomposed into larger narratives, where, as with the music, elements are coupled and decoupled as new communities form. The result of these historical and artistic forces is that danzas become vessels for interwoven interpretations of histories and Indigenous identities.

The recent developments in Danza detailed in the previous two chapters and the composition of danzas detailed above highlight that Indigeneity and folkloricization co-exist in contemporary Danza. Analysis of the compositions of danzas further suggest that the impact of institutions on Danza may frequently be overstated, and as Judah Cohen suggested in his *Ethnomusicology* article (2009), oral and institutional traditions should be considered developing in parallel (ibid.:321). Yescas represents a prime example of this parallel development as he moved choreography and music between the Conchero and Danza circles and institutional spheres that have traditionally been interpreted as “less authentic.” Though the Ballet Folklórico accelerated changes and widely disseminated and nationalized a sound and choreography of “Aztecness,” the initial vision and musical form of the danzas originated with Concheros,

particularly Manuel Pineda. Danza challenges rigid boundaries between the “folk” and “folkloric,” and the “performative” and “ritual” as developments in choreography and music have moved in both directions: Ritual has been folkloricized, and, in turn, the folkloric has been ritualized.

## **Conclusion**

Danza continues to be a site of composition and creativity in which histories and musics are composed and leveled to meet new communal needs. There are continuities in the creative process that carry over from Conchero, suggesting some structuralist processes of musical development (Sahlins 1981); however, at the same time, the diaspora and the growing pan-Indigenous nature of the repertoire also suggest that the structure itself has changed as new communities form. Contemporary performance styles, such as the shift from the concha to drums, the increased speed of the dances, the increased vigor of the choreography, and the more recent re-harmonizations of the rhythms in Danza, provide glimpses into various lenses of interpreting the past—and by extension the present—and the evolution of these interpretations of history and the identity of a *danzantes* over half a century. The interpretation of the drum rhythms and accompanying song repertoires of individual Danza circles are tied to how *danzantes* interpret their own relationship to national and Indigenous heritages, their interpretations of colonial histories, and the histories they ascribe to the *danzas* and song repertoires.

Despite these musical and choreographic developments and changing interpretations, the core repertoire offers a critical site for connecting as a broader community. The exact meanings of the *danzas* do not have to be established for them to be performed in larger rituals, nor does a

specific understanding of how the community is identifying itself need to be aggregated upon, as this identity can be simultaneously national, tribal, or pan-Indigenous. The huehuetl provides a range of possible interpretations that can be specific to the individual and their Danza community while facilitating a vital connection to a broader diasporic community.

## Chapter 5

### Histories in Danza

The histories of Danza can be approached as compositions into which individual fragments of diverse Indigenous histories are first connected, and then woven into meaningful group and personal histories that interpret the past through the lens of the present. In the Los Angeles Danza community, danzantes increasingly reconcile these histories with colonial metanarratives that have influenced danzantes' interpretations of Danza's history, including its origins—both cultural and geographic; the processes of its transmission during the colonial era; the spirituality imbued within it; and the implications of performance for Indigenous, Chicano, Mexican, and Mexican-American identity politics. This chapter unpacks these histories by first examining the historical processes that have contributed to the appeal of Danza to the broader community that now participates in the tradition; and second, by scrutinizing how contemporary interpretations of colonial histories within the Los Angeles Danza community impact interpretations of the music and dances performed by Danza groups.

The prevailing narrative of colonization in Danza remains one of Indigenous cultural erasure. While there are many documented instances of Indigenous erasure and cultural repression, this chapter examines key instances of collaboration and co-authorship that come to light through a revisiting of the early colonial period. Analyzing these histories of co-authorship and adaptation provide useful insight into pan-Indigeneity in Danza and the underpinnings for its later nationalization. These histories highlight its appeal and cultural relevance to danzantes from regions with otherwise limited Indigenous connections to the Nahua of Central Mexico. I suggest that the formative negotiations between Nahua speakers from Central Mexico and the Spanish clergy in the early colonial period provide insight into the historical dissemination and current

prevalence of Nahuatl and Mexica-centric histories that are commonly found in Danza communities.<sup>75</sup>

### The Nahuatlization and Christianizing of Music and Dance

The conversion of Nahuatl-speaking peoples in Mexico began immediately following the 1519 arrival of the Spanish, led by Hernán Cortés, who called on the Church to facilitate conversion efforts. In 1523 Fray Pedro de Gante arrived among the first Franciscan friars to the ruins of Tenochtitlan, the former capital of the Aztec Empire, in the Valley of Mexico. De Gante rapidly established a school with the support of Ixtlilxochitl, an ally of Cortés and the *cacique*, or ruler, of Texcoco—a city-state that bordered Tenochtitlan (Figure 5.1).



Figure 5.1: Map of key places in the development and dispersal of Nahuatlized Catholic forms referenced in this chapter. Note that not all the locations noted existed contemporaneously (Map created by Kristina Nielsen based on image from CC-licensed image from the Wikimedia commons).

<sup>75</sup> In this chapter, the terms “Nahuatl” or “Nahuatl people” refer to Nahuatl speakers from Central Mexico, following Louise Burkhart’s use of the term (1996).

In 1524, De Gante's school began instructing the sons of Nahua elites in the former palace of Nezahualcoyotzin before its relocation in Mexico City in 1527 (Heller 1979:24). By the year 1589 this school alone oversaw the instruction of approximately one thousand students (ibid.:25). The emerging class of Nahua elites that were trained in Pedro de Gante's school and others established shortly thereafter gained a special status as cultural interlocutors as they interpreted, wrote, and translated evangelizing materials that drew on Catholicism and their Nahua cultural framework. As noted by Louise Burkhart, their positions permitted a reorientation of Catholicism to encompass a Nahua-centric interpretation of Christianity:

They [the Nahuas] helped the friars render Christian teachings intelligible—or as intelligible as possible—in Nahuatl. They also sought to represent Nahua culture in a manner intelligible to non-Nahuas, to reduce an entire civilization, with all of its ongoing changes and variability, to a compilation of pictures and written texts. That from this standpoint as interpreters on both sides the collegians should arrive at not only a somewhat Europeanized version of native culture but also a “Nahuatized” version of Christianity is hardly surprising . . . It was not that European elements were added to Nahua ones, or vice versa. Rather, the Nahua scholars constructed their own models of both, based on their upbringing, education and experiences. And the two models were accommodated to one another in a manner that provided, taken as a whole, at least some degree of coherence. They understood their past in light of their present and they understood their present in light of their past. (Burkhart 1996:67)

These Nahua models provided the Catholic archetype that would spread through contact with “non-Nahuas” to whom the foreign Nahua culture was still more culturally similar than that of the Spanish invaders.

Burkhart further notes that both the Nahua and Spanish frequently misconstrued each other as a result of assuming equivalencies that did not exist, and “mutual misconstructions of the other became institutionalized in a manner that perpetuated the cultural differences while promoting an illusion of sameness” (ibid.:41). Many similarities between Indigenous and European theater, dance and ritual forms could facilitate such misconstructions.



Figure 5.2: Depiction of dance from the Tovar Codex (c. 1585). The musical accompaniment includes a two-toned drum known as a *teponaztli*; a log drum known as the *huehuetl*; and rattles in the hands of the dancers (Courtesy of the John Carter Brown Library at Brown University).

For example, both cultures include celebrations that correspond to specific calendrical dates, such as the Saints' Days and Corpus Christi celebrations of the Julian calendar and the many year-cycle celebrations in the Nahua calendar. Furthermore, surviving descriptions of pre-Hispanic, Indigenous Nahua theater indicate that performances included a variety of interchangeable pieces including poems, songs, dances, mock battles and even farcical skits (Ravicz 1970:21). For instance, the Tovar Codex describes a performance in the patio on the feast day of Quetzalcoatl, one of the primary Nahua spiritual entities, in which there were a variety of dances and farces, such as participants feigning various illnesses and asking for healing. The Tovar Codex description notes that the entire celebration concluded with a *mitote*—a broad term for Indigenous dance derived from *itotia*, the Nahuatl word for dance—and the description from the Codex is accompanied by an illustration of the dance featuring an eagle and jaguar warrior, drummers, and dancers (Figure 5.2) (ibid.). The superimposition of Nahua ritual and theatrical structures onto Catholic structures, including Mass, might account for the ubiquity

of mitote performances following Mass on the patio outside the Church in the colonial era, and Mass could be interpreted as simply one component of a larger ritual.

The friars quickly realized that the regulation of music and dance was critical to achieving their objective of Christianizing Indigenous communities in the Spanish colonies. Religious songs and dances dedicated to Indigenous spirituality and calendrical festivals were harshly repressed, although the extent to which they were pursued and the harshness of punishments for their performances varied substantially dependent on the time period and philosophy of the friar tasked with enforcement.<sup>76</sup> In their place an assortment of “Indigenized-European” dances—such as the *danzas de conquista*—and “Christianized-Indigenous” dances—such as the mitote—were syncretized and instructed under the watchful eye of the Church through institutions like the school founded by de Gante. In his 1558 letter to King Philip II, de Gante reveals some of these early processes utilized to reorient Indigenous music and dance towards Catholic symbols, describing how he provided costumes and got the older songs to conform with Catholicism:

and as I saw this and all of their songs dedicated to their gods, I composed very solemn meters about the law of God and the Faith . . . and around two months before the birth of Christ I gave them liveries to paint and dance in, because they used these, adapting the dances and the songs that they sang. (de Gante 1558 in Torre Villar 1973:24)

In addition to his own compositions noted in the quote above, de Gante translated verses from the Catechism in Nahuatl and set them to Indigenous melodies (Heller 1979:25), contributing to

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<sup>76</sup> For instance, the 1571 Inquisition aimed to find Jews who had come from Spain to Mexico (Gibson 1967:78-79; Schwaller 1978:52-53). Despite the general exemption of Indigenous communities from the Inquisition, events such as the personal Inquisition led by Fray Diego de Landa (1524-1579) against the Maya in the town of Mani in 1562, where harsh interrogation methods were utilized, still occurred and continue to shape popular narratives of the Inquisition in Mexico (Timmer 1997:478). A later inquiry into the events found that more than 4,500 Maya had been tortured with 157 dying of the inflicted injuries (Clendinnen 1982:34). De Landa’s personal Inquisition to extirpate Maya “idolatries” was not officially sanctioned and violated the typical Inquisitorial protocols that were highly regulated, although brutal, and systematic in their application (ibid.).

the growing body of Nahuacized repertoire by reinscribing Nahua melodies with Catholic significance.

Another such “Christianized-European” dance form was the reorientation of the Nahua mitote to include Christian symbolism, resulting in the conflation of Christ and Moctezuma.<sup>77</sup> Mitote dances are documented in texts and pictorial sources in Central Mexico during the colonial period following Mass or religious dramas in the Church patio where they could take place under the watchful eye of the clergy (Figure 5.3). The clergy interpreted the mitote favorably; for instance, Jesuit Fray José de Acosta (ca. 1540-1600) found it to be an acceptable dance for “recreation and rejoicing” in his *Historia natural y moral de las indias* (1894) — echoing the sentiments of Dominican Fray Diego Durán (1539-1588), who argued that dance was intrinsic to good governance (Scolieri 2013:140). Similar arguments about the harmlessness of the mitote were also made by Jesuit Fray Andrés Pérez de Ribas (1575-1655), who offered a carefully constructed defense of the mitote performed in Mexico City describing it as a dance that had been successfully reformulated for Christian values (de Ribas 1999:714).

Despite the widespread agreement among the clergy of the colonial period regarding the favorability of the mitote as a Christian performance, there appears to be less agreement on what exactly constituted a mitote. A variety of structures and musical forms are documented and described as “mitote” dances including both circular and processional dance forms, as well as an assortment of instrumentation indicative of substantial musical variability within the mitote. Furthermore, harps, vihuelas (or other lute-like instruments), cornets, bassoons, and the *teponaztli* drum—a two-tone drum that was widely distributed across the Mesoamerican cultural

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<sup>77</sup> While the “Nahua mitote” designation may appear redundant, it is necessary to specify who was performing as the “mitote” designation became widely applied in the later colonial period to dances with little semblance to the dances performed in the patios of Central Mexico during the earlier colonial period.

area prior to the arrival of the Spanish—are depicted in biombos, such as that from Santa Anita Ixtacalco (Figure 5.3), or alternatively described in various consorts at mitote performances (de Ribas 199:714; Acosta 1894:226).



Figure 5.3: 1690 Biombo from Santa Anita Ixtacalco depicting a mitote dance in the church patio accompanied by a harp and a lute (Courtesy of Los Angeles County Museum of Art).

An account from Fray de Ribas from the mid-seventeenth century provides one of the most thorough colonial period descriptions of such a mitote performance with a *teponaztli* drum, and his observations provide insight into the European lens through which the clergy interpreted Indigenous performances (ibid.:715). De Ribas likened this component to a Spanish *sarao*, a form of entertainment that featured dances such as the *cavallero*, *turdión*, and *danza de hacha* (Muñoz 2008:20; Esses 1992:503). He describes three musical parts in this performance of the mitote of the Emperor Moctezuma in Mexico City. The first portion is a slower section with just hymns and little or no instrumental accompaniment. The second portion is described as another stately dance in which the *teponaztli* serves centrally to create the beat. De Ribas relates that the

syllables “tocontín” provide an additional name for the dance and imitate the rhythm and pitch of the teponaztli drum. In this instance, he specifically compares it to the Spanish danza de hacha (Le Moal 1999). In the final portion of the mitote, the dancer representing Moctezuma dances alone accompanied by the *ayacachtli* rattles held by the other dancers, the teponaztli drummer who simultaneously sings, and a chorus hidden behind a curtain (ibid.:714-5).<sup>78</sup>

From the components described by de Ribas, it appears that the “mitote” is not simply a dance, but rather a performance comprising several musical and choreographic components that might in themselves be considered independent parts. Just as the Nahuas were interpreting and misconstruing European culture according to Indigenous cultural frameworks, so too were the Spanish interpreting Indigenous music and dance through the lens of European Renaissance music and dance performance, such as likening the structure of the mitote to a sarao and the structure of one of the dances to the danza de hacha. The ambiguity of the musical, structural, and cultural components of the mitote to the friars becomes even more pronounced in the labeling of dances outside the Nahuas cultural area. For instance, de Ribas provides an example of this ambiguity when he designates a description of the Indigenous Zuaque dances in Northern Mexico as a “mitote.” This alleged “mitote” starkly contrasts with his earlier Christianized description in Mexico City, as he relates that after a squad of Spanish soldiers was captured, “the Indians cut off their heads and later used them for their mitotes and dances” (1999:108). In this instance, the dances described are neither Nahuas nor Christian; instead, the application implies

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<sup>78</sup> The exact description recounted by de Ribas is as follows “Y por combinar con mas gusto a los Indios a las espirituales, en San Gregorio suelen representar esos días los Colegiales algunos coloquios de materias santas; en su lengua Mexicana, y otros Mitotes y bailes acompañados de música, y canto, que son de mucho entretenimiento, y por ser de muy particular gusto a la esta; y nuevo para España y aun a otras Naciones el Sarao Mitote, que llaman del Emperador Moteçuma, el que en sus fiestas celebrauan los Seminaristas del San Gregorio y lo principal por estar ese sarao, que antes estaua dedicado a la Gentilidad, ya dedicado en honra del que es Rey de Reyes Jesu Christu nuestro Señor, y fiesta ya Christiana, la escribiré aqui” (de Ribas 1645:639).

that any Indigenous dance could be conceptualized and labeled a “mitote” by the clergy. A similar application of the term in Texas nearly a century later by Fray Gaspar José de Solís further supports this categorical flexibility, as Solís labels the Indigenous dances he witnessed in 1767 among the Taranames, Tamiques and Piquianes as mitotes (Forrestal 1931:11). The diversity within the Nahuatl mitote of Central Mexico and the variety of dances described as mitote dances by clergy suggest that the designation could encompass broad categories of Indigenous dance that varied in form, origins and purpose. Additionally, they highlight the “Nahuatlized” framework through which the Spanish continued to interpret other Indigenous dances they encountered as they embarked north into the American Southwest.

### **Development of the Danzas de Conquista**

While the mitote designation as applied to Nahuatl dances represents a nebulous category of Christianized-Indigenous dance, the danzas de conquista are an equally nebulous category of Indigenous-Christian dances. This broad category of dances is thought to have its origins in the dance representation of the battles in Spain between Christians and Moors (González Torres 2005:20); however, many mock-battle genres existed in Central Mexico prior to Spanish contact and might have impacted Indigenous interpretations and performances of similar European genres (Ravicz 1970:21). The Christians and Moors battle was commonly structured as a *loa*, or a short dramatic form consisting of one hundred to three hundred verses that is seldom longer than twenty-five minutes (Correa and Cannon 1958:8). The *loa* structure commonly includes dance, music, choruses, and hymns, making it another theatrical structure with interchangeable parts into which Indigenous materials could be integrated strategically. Instead of the *loa* and danzas de conquista serving as rigid “pre-composed” categories, they featured a malleable

narrative of conquering Christian forces defeating an opposing force, such as the Moors or other un-Christian forces. In Mexico, these hostile forces could represent Indigenous communities—such as the Mexica of Tenochtitlan—who were integrated into the adversarial forces in the 1539 Mexico City performance of the “Conquest of Rhodes” (Harris 2000:127).

If the *danza de conquista* is indeed European in origin, then why are the many versions in Mexico so different from their supposed European predecessors? In dance scholar Gertrude Kurath’s comprehensive cross-cultural study of Christians and Moors dances, she finds that “no one dance in the New World corresponds exactly to any one in the Old World. Originality is evident to the eye witness in costume, in occasional formations, above all, in steps. Music alone has acquired an entirely sixteenth century flavor” (1949:100). Kurath attributes a significant portion of the diversity to transmission during different artistic periods that reflected European stylistic developments, noting that Central Mexico received the dance tradition earlier than Northern Mexico (*ibid.*).

While this observation may account for a small portion of the diversity, a “Nahuacization” of the *danzas de conquista* in the Valley of Mexico and their subsequent diffusion provides a simpler explanation that can account for most of the discrepancies between European and Indigenous performances of *danzas de conquista*. While Christians and Moors battle re-enactments have taken place in Spain since at least the middle of the twelfth century (González Hernández 1999:25), the first documented instance of a full Christians and Moors performance utilizing small dramatic texts, costumes, music and dance took place in 1533 in Toledo, Spain (Checa and Soto 1998:266). Further supporting this loose form of the Christians and Moors in sixteenth-century Spain is the parallel diversity of Christians and Moors dances that developed in Europe, where Rodney Gallop remarked in his study of the English Morris

dances that also developed from the Spanish *danzas de conquista* that “no single feature is common to all the dances bearing the name *Morisco*” (1934:125)—a conundrum similar to that noted by Kurath in her puzzlement regarding the diversity of dances in the former Spanish colonies (1949).

Like other pre-Hispanic and European theater and dance drama structures of the time, the Christians and Moors structure provided another loose framework into which Indigenous elements could be inserted. The *danzas de conquista* in Mexico developed from the parallel Christians and Moors narrative that was reinterpreted to accommodate local experiences and the continuing Catholicization of the Spanish colony. These initial interpretations of *danzas de conquista* could serve as adaptable models; for instance, in 1598 Juan de Oñate is said to have performed a reenactment of the conquest of Tenochtitlan on the Rio Grande, complete with the characters of *la Malinche*, Cortés’ Indigenous interpreter and lover; the Tlaxcalan allies; and the twelve original Franciscan friars (Harris 2000:161). In such performances, the *danzas de conquista* and dance theater could be tailored to newly contacted Indigenous populations to integrate them as characters in the ongoing conquest narrative. Additionally, Oñate’s marriage to Isabel de Tolosa Cortés Moctezuma, the emperor’s great-granddaughter (Chipman 2005:106), would have already made such performances familial and reflective of the conqueror’s role within the unfolding drama of Spanish expansionism.

By interpreting the Spanish Christians and Moors dances and *danzas de conquista* as malleable narrative structures rather than fixed dances and choreography, the Central Mexican versions that emerged in the early sixteenth century might better be interpreted as co-authored Nahuatl and Spanish dance-drama structures. A notable example of this Nahuatl editorial role occurred the 1539 staging of the Conquest of Jerusalem. In this staging, the disgruntled

Tlaxcalans, who were among Cortés' earliest allies, cast Cortés as the Sultan of the Moors utilizing their editorial position to highlight their own interpretation of political events and dissatisfaction with their treatment (Harris 2000; 137; Restall 2003:121). While the Spanish ruling class and clergy regulated the development and performance of dances, Nahuatl and other Indigenous performers retained significant editorial latitude within these narrative frameworks because of their malleable structure.

From the concurrent Christianizing and Nahuatlizing processes that created the Christianized mitote and Nahuatlized danza de conquista, a distinctly Central Mexican proselytizing dance and music prototype emerged. Given the sheer diversity of Indigenous communities the Spanish would encounter as they began expanding their territorial holdings in the early 1530s, the already established prototypes of acceptable Indigenous dance provided a model for the Spanish regarding how to Christianize the other Indigenous dances they encountered. The vagaries of what, in fact, constituted a "mitote" or "danza de conquista" likely favored Nahuatl and other Indigenous survivals, as these designations provided certain latitudes regarding their performance. The performance of these Christianized dances was celebrated as signals of success in converting the Indigenous population; however, it is important to note that Christianizing music and dance was not necessarily synonymous with Europeanizing Indigenous culture. The Spanish had an interest in maintaining cultural differences between themselves and their new highly skilled protégés to prevent equal status, which required a delicate balance between instructing European arts and permitting Indigenous manifestations of Christianity that indicated that their Christianity was inferior (Burkhart 1996:78). This could concurrently justify their exploitation of Indigenous resources and labor, while at the same time proving their own alleged success in Christianizing the population to remain relevant (*ibid.*). In this capacity,

Indigenous music and dance in the colonial period could further validate the alleged moral and artistic superiority of the Church, juxtaposing performances inside the Church with the Indigenous manifestations of faith that occurred in the Church patio, ultimately providing the clergy with a powerful incentive for permitting Indigenous performances to continue.

### **Diffusion of Nahuacized Culture**

Shortly after the fall of Tenochtitlan, the Spanish and a number of Nahuatl participants initiated new invasion campaigns to expand the boundaries of New Spain that resulted in the further diffusion of Nahuacized Catholicism. As the syncretic Nahuacized-Catholic cultural system spread, newly colonized Indigenous cultures re-syncretized the materials, integrating the Catholic teachings with local customs. This process of cultural snowballing was further facilitated by an Indigenous presence in these Spanish campaigns. The Spanish led these campaigns that in many cases included a significant number of conscripted Indigenous soldiers. As the Spanish expanded their colonial empire, they continued to draw on Nahuatl understandings of their surroundings including topography and place. For instance, Nahuatl place names can still be found in areas such as highland Guatemala, where the local languages were Mayan (*ibid.*).<sup>79</sup>

The motivations of the Nahuatl speaking soldiers partaking in these campaigns varied. Some campaigns were brutal for both the invaded peoples and the Nahuatl soldiers. For instance, Nuño Beltrán de Guzmán (c. 1490-1561) began a bloody campaign when he began to push north into the Bajío region in 1530, effectively beginning the Chichimec Wars (1531-1585) (Carrillo Cázares 2000:43). Guzmán used extortion and intimidation to coerce loyalty from his

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<sup>79</sup> Even “Guatemala” is thought to be derived from the Nahuatl “Quauhtlemallan,” meaning “the place of many trees.” This had been the Nahuatl name for the region prior to the arrival of the Spanish (Goetz and Morley 2003:195).

approximately ten to fifteen thousand conscripted soldiers. To maintain his power, Guzmán kept lords and nobles in chains to prevent soldiers loyal to their Indigenous lords from escaping. Additionally, Guzmán abused these high-ranking Indians to remind his forces of his power (Warren 1985:228; Hoig 2013:22). Guzmán was ultimately arrested for his cruelty and returned to Spain; however, his campaign had a lasting impact on the Native cultures he encountered in Northern Mexico.

While the tactics employed by Guzmán were unusually brutal for the participating soldiers, it was more common for expeditions to offer incentives to potential Nahua participants including the Nahua-speaking Tlaxcalans. These incentives included exceptions to tribute payments, some autonomy and separation from other communities, and the right to be identified as *hidalgos*, although these terms were not always honored by the Spanish (Gibson 1967:183). The promised incentives were particularly enticing for early Tlaxcalan colonists, and approximately four hundred Tlaxcalan families moved north in 1591. Historical records indicate that the Tlaxcalans and Chichimec intermarried, achieving the desired Spanish goal of pacifying the region and converting the population as the offspring of these marriages considered themselves Christian (*ibid.*). These combined Tlaxcalan-Chichimec towns were the impetus for additional colonies in territory to the north including Tlaxcalan soldiers in Texas and Santa Fe, New Mexico (Gibson 1967:187-189). Through this process, Nahua culture and customs from Central Mexico were widely diffused over a large geographic area.

The cultural impact of these predominantly Tlaxcalan colonies expanded as colonies integrated new Indigenous cultures, replicating their initial intermingling with the Chichimecs, and spawned additional colonies further into still uncolonized Indigenous territories. Historian Sean McEnroe describes the ramifications of this cultural diffusion:

The Tlaxcalan model of colonization was applied to frontier regions of northern New Spain for more than two centuries. Though all such efforts began with the Tlaxcalan colonies of 1590, the long history of subsequent exploration and settlement extended Tlaxcalan influence far beyond the first generation of colonies. The Tlaxcalan communities of Nuevo León were the first progeny of earlier colonies near Saltillo and San Luis Potosí. These daughter colonies of Tlaxcala eventually became mother colonies to other more distant settlements, spreading the web of Tlaxcalan towns farther and farther from the original Nahuatl heartland. In the eighteenth century, the Neoleonés settlements seeded more colonies in Coahuila, Texas, and Nuevo Santander. The geographical dispersion of the Tlaxcalans diluted their numbers, creating concentric rings of colonization with even-smaller populations of ethnic Tlaxcalans in each community. However, though their numbers decreased, their influence did not. The Tlaxcalan-Chichimec pueblo was a versatile political organism that reproduced itself and its distinctive type of indigenous colonial citizen. In the eighteenth century, the Tlaxcalan-Chichimec pueblos of Nuevo León sent out citizen-soldiers to create new settlements in neighboring territories. At these sites, local Indians were drawn into the same civic environment now shared by Chichimecs and Tlaxcalans throughout the north.

The later colonies, however, differed from their predecessors in one important respect. In colonizing Texas, Coahuila, and especially Nuevo Santander, Spanish officials studied the characteristics of the old Tlaxcalan-Chichimec towns, codified them, and applied them more systematically. They now drew not just on Tlaxcalan colonizers, but also on Spaniards, mestizos, mulattos, and “civilized” Chichimecs. By the mid-eighteenth century, a regional civic culture was emerging based on the Tlaxcalan precedent. Planned towns of soldiers-settlers now dotted the landscape, mixing different ethnic populations and functioning as sites of conversion, colonial acculturation, and shared governance. (2012:118-119)

It was through this primarily Tlaxcalan-Nahuatl web that diverse Indigenous communities in the north were integrated into pueblos. As noted by McEnroe, in the later colonies, such as in Coahuila and Nuevo Santander, the cultural forms and structures were instructed with minimal presence of Nahuatl speaking populations, such as the Tlaxcalans: Indigenous communities with no significant cultural connection to Tlaxcala beyond historical circumstance were effectively learning the Nahuatlized Christianity established nearly two centuries prior in Central Mexico.

The cultural composition of the new pueblos in the northern portion of the Tlaxcalan network was highly diverse; for instance, the baptismal records from the church of Casas Grandes Viejo in Chihuahua indicate that seventeen distinct tribes and an additional number of

unspecified tribes were in the vicinity from 1688-1723 that included diverse Apache groups, Janos, Sumas, and New Mexico Indians (Griffen 1991:149). Earlier records from 1683-1686 from the Valle de Allende in Chihuahua identifies “Mexicanos” as a tribe along with Apaches, Conchos and thirteen other distinct tribes (ibid.:116). While these records are indicative of the local Indigenous diversity, tribal designations became categorically problematic as designations like “Apache” became a catch-all category, and children with parents of unknown heritage were often recorded as Apache even though many likely came from other tribes (ibid.:150). William Griffen remarks of the cultural outcome:

Concurrent with this great amalgamation of peoples and cultures, and partly as an outgrowth of it, came the development of a common, widely shared colonial “Indian” subculture (and low social class, according to the *casta* system). As the native patterns broke down through a process of cultural leveling in the various aspects of the native culture (e.g. belief and ritual) the replacement patterns generally followed Hispanic models, although some alternatives were no doubt on occasion available. Indian customs were eroded away in a process of cultural leveling in aspects of the native life for which alternative models were eventually presented. One example of this pattern would be what seems to have happened in the religious sphere. When native curers and ceremonial specialists were by and large unattainable at the mine or hacienda, or when native practices were pushed underground, the Indians either learned to go without the benefits of the rite sought, or they learned to recur to a religious specialist not of their own culture—whether this was another Indian, a folk curer of the developing colonial Hispanic cultural system, or a priest of the formal Spanish religious system. In any event, these social units afforded the opportunity and the necessity for the Indians to learn a new *modus operandi* and eventually to forge a more or less common culture. (ibid.:167)

Two important points stand out about Griffen’s assessment: First, the “Hispanic cultural system” around which this pan-Indigenous culture developed was likely that of the Nahuacized-Catholic system developed in the sixteenth century and disseminated through the Tlaxcalan colonial network. This point is further attested to by the dispersal of distinctly Nahua-centric symbolism, including the presence of Moctezuma and la Malinche as far north as New Mexico in the danza

de conquista *matachines* dances (Harris 1997:108).<sup>80</sup> The second point worth noting in Griffen's analysis is the process by which these Indigenous cultural components were integrated together: If cultural practices from one's own community were no longer available, the practices of another could be used in their place. Collectively, the constructed *modus operandi* integrated these local practices around a new core of Nahuacized Catholicism.

Confraternities established across this colonial web proved crucial sites for local interpretation and teaching of these Nahuacized Catholic forms, and Pedro de Gante, who established the first Spanish school of music, is thought to be the first to have founded a confraternity (Burkhart 1996:82). These Catholic brotherhoods were key to the continuation of music and dance traditions and served a vital role in establishing new communities to replace those disrupted by displacements, particularly from industries, such as mining (Rostas 2009:172). By 1585 there were over three-hundred confraternities that grew to include men, women, and children in their activities, and these experienced varying degrees of latitude in their cultural practices (ibid.:173). In addition to the Nahuacized-Catholic structures that were introduced—including Mass, confraternities, Saints, and the Julian and Gregorian calendars—the newly Christianized Indigenous populations also learned the categories of dance that had met the Church's approval as adequately Christian. For instance, Susanna Rostas has found that the Christians and Moors dance was among those that were most commonly staged by the confraternities (2009:175). As discussed above, the form that these dances took in the Americas

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<sup>80</sup> The endurance of these Nahua-centric ideas are further supported by legends recorded by the Pueblo Indians. In the late 1800s accounts from the Pecos, Cochiti, and Jemez Pueblos believed the Moctezuma would return and free them from the Spanish. Teresa VanEtten records a story from San Pueblo in which Moctezuma asks dancers to dance the *matachines* to remember him: "His people still look to the east when they dance. They hold their hands up, looking to the east, and wait for Montezuma's return" (VanEtten 1985:53-60; Harris 1997:110). The Moctezuma family connection in the Southwest may be further important in this performance context as Juan de Oñate, who had married Isabel de Tolsa Cortés Moctezuma, became governor of New Mexico in the early 1600s (Chapman 2005:114).

was likely the result of a Spanish-Nahua co-authoring process rather than a direct transplantation of European choreography, and as these dances moved north, new Indigenous authors could adapt the Nahuacized-Catholic forms to reflect their own heritage. As tools of conversion, the continuing adaptation of dances to local contexts would have proven expedient in communicating the central themes of Catholicism—just as they had during their initial adaptation in Central Mexico in the sixteenth century.

### **Conchero: A Case Study of Otomí and Chichimec Syncretization of Nahuacized Catholicism**

Conchero, the direct predecessor of *Danza Azteca*, is one such *danza de conquista* from the Christians and Moors tradition (Rostas 2009:95; Warman 1971). Conchero is attributed to the area of Mexico known as the Bajío, the high plateau in Northern Central Mexico that includes the contemporary states of San Luis Potosí, Querétaro, Guanajuato, parts of Zacatecas and Aguascalientes (Figure 5.1). Traditionally, these regions were occupied by a number of tribes, including the Otomí and a diverse coalition of tribes such as the Pames Guamares, Zacatecas and Guachichiles, who are referred to collectively as the Chichimec (Jackson 2013:28). Both the Otomí and the Chichimec are included in narratives regarding how Conchero began. The first narrative hinges on the 1531 battle of Sangremal. In this origin story, the cross descended from the sky during the battle, causing the Chichimecs to stop fighting and fall to their knees (Stone 1975:198). Other renditions of the battle also include the cross descending with Santiago de Matamoros, after which the Chichimec are said to have danced around the cross shouting “El es Dios” — a central proclamation in the Conchero tradition (Rostas 2009:167). Alternatively, Susanna Rostas draws on a document from a confraternity in San Miguel de Allende that

suggests that the tradition began when Otomí from the mountainside of Palo Huerfano discovered a Christ figure in an abandoned monastery in present-day Morelia in 1539, offering a possible source of the Christian apparition narrative (ibid.:170).

While the Tlaxcalan colonies had not yet been founded at the time of this crucial battle, the Nahua influence was undoubtedly present in these earliest campaigns. For instance, the battle at Sangremal was part of Nuño de Guzmán's campaign, which he waged with his Tlaxcalan and Mexica soldiers (Carillo Cázares 2000:43). These soldiers took dances with them, as recounted by Don Francisco de Sandoval Acacitli of Tlalmanalco. Acacitli provides a rare description of dance in the 1541 Mixtón War, where on Christmas Eve there were dances and songs, and the various participating ethnic groups, including the Tlaxcalans and Mexica, each took a turn dancing in their battle regalia (Schroeder 2007:16). Several accounts by Conchero dancers in Martha Stone's 1975 ethnography testify to the Tlaxcalan-Nahua presence and impact on the tradition. For instance, one of the *danzantes* told Stone that the first *palabra*, or word of permission to form a dance group, originated in Tlaxcala and dancers in the Bajío would travel to Tlaxcala to seek permission to dance and form new groups (1975:198). Stone additionally suggests the source of the dance as a Christian performance for Saints may have been the approximately four hundred Tlaxcalan families who colonized the Chichimec region in 1591 under the Viceroy Luis de Velasco (ibid.:199). Both these narratives indicate a vital cultural connection between Tlaxcala and the Bajío Conchero tradition.

Conchero dancers have traditionally interpreted their performances as unequivocally Catholic and have transmitted the tradition through groups, known as *mesas*, that are typically passed down through families (Warman 1971; Rostas 2009:22). The Conchero *mesas* usually adhere to the older regimented structures that follow stricter hierarchies with positions equivalent

to those of military structures. These positions include the *jefe*, *capitán*, and *general* who play different roles in the mesa organization. The Malinche, *sahumadora* or smoke bearer, is also a key position in the Conchero tradition, highlighting its connection to the narrative of Spanish conquest in Central Mexico. The oldest records of these organizations go back to the mid-nineteenth century. Among the oldest documented mesas are the “Mesa Central Chichimeca de Nuestra Santísima Madre de la Cruz de Santiago de Querétaro,” which was founded in 1872 by Atilano Aguilar and continues to this day under the direction of his great-great-grandson Margarito Aguilar (Benítez 2012); and the Conchero lineage passed down through the confraternity in San Miguel de Allende, with J. Jesús Morales (1818-1905) documented as the first “General of Generals” (Rostas 2009:171). These more recently written histories of the Conchero mesas do not reflect centuries of previous transmission described in oral histories, such as those above, and highlight the problem of an overreliance on text to confirm historicity. Anthropologist Susanna Rostas suggests that transmission of the dances and rituals likely occurred within the confraternities before these more recent Conchero histories were documented (ibid.). There, transmission could draw on the Nahuacized-Catholic and Catholicized-Nahua forms mentioned earlier while integrating local Indigenous music and dance performances, resulting in highly diversified local dance forms.

Although the Otomí and Chichimec are central in the narrative of Conchero’s development, the performance structure of Conchero has often been compared with the Mexica dances from Tenochtitlan described in the pre-Hispanic codices. For instance, Mexican dance scholar León Altamirano determined that Conchero conserves some of the most marked details of pre-Hispanic origins and “seeing them transports our imagination back to centuries past. Effortlessly the pages of the old chronicles that speak enthusiastically yet briefly of the arietos

and mitotes, and particularly the very solemn mitote or ‘gran baile’ that the Mexica performed’ (1984:107; author’s translation). Likewise, while Portia Mansfield drew heavily on accounts of Mexica customs in her analysis of the tradition, she acknowledged that most of the Concheros she danced with were Otomí (1953:60, 88). Mansfield continued to acknowledge Conchero as an “inter-tribal” dance (ibid.), yet the predominant comparative tilt towards Mexica and Nahuatl sources has led to a devaluation of the role of other Indigenous cultures, such as the Otomí and other Chichimec peoples, in creating the Conchero dance tradition.

While Nahuatl speakers from Tlaxcala and the Valley of Mexico appear to have played a pivotal role in the formation of the Nahuacized-Catholic Conchero tradition, the variations in “Conchero” styles suggest that even Conchero was interpreted locally as a flexible danza de conquista genre. Historical photographs and video, including those of Capitán Daniel Muñoz and Capitán Real Gabriel Osorio Ávila featured in Yolotl González Torres’ publication (2005:140), attest to this diversity at the turn of the twentieth century, which likely was a result of its initial pan-Indigenous origins. Additionally, Conchero is closely affiliated with other overlapping dance organizations, including the Arco y Flecha (Bow and Arrow) brotherhood, Apaches, Danza Chichimeca and other danza de conquista organizations. Collectively, these organizations operated with a brotherhood system in which members were obliged to reciprocate attendance at the rituals of others (González-Torres 2005:48). Gertrude Kurath even noted in her 1946 study that Conchero dancers occasionally called themselves “Los Apaches,” indicating fluidity between these organizations (ibid.:387).<sup>81</sup> Each of these brotherhoods has its own interpretation

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<sup>81</sup> The broadness of “Apache” identity and culture has caused additional contemporary confusion as a result of postmodernist ideas of identity construction (Giddens 1991). For instance, in Renée de la Torre Castellanos chapter “The Zapopan Dancers” in *Dancing Across Borders*, she examines the “Apache traditions in Chichimeca lands” critically, rounding dismissing their dance as appropriating “to themselves the mass media images of American-style ‘natives’” (2009:39). While a number of groups may currently conceptualizing “Apache” through the lens of the Native North American imaginary, the

and styling of the dance (González-Torres 2005:49), and participation in shared rituals within the brotherhood created new platforms for cultural exchange among diverse Indigenous groups through a Nahuacized danza de conquista medium.

Variances between these Conchero organizations are likely a result of how tribes interpreted the Nahuacized-Catholic dances and their subsequent syncretization with local traditions, dance and costume aesthetics. This diversity is particularly obvious in the forms of dress utilized by these diverse Conchero groups, as some traditionally wore simple white embroidered tunics and pants and others wore leather and fringe—a style Gertrude Kurath attributes specifically to the Chichimec (1946:388)—while others dressed in a Europeanized tunic style reminiscent of the stylization of the dancers in the biombo de Santa Anita Ixtacalco (Figure 5.3). Additionally, the types of headwear vary, including headdresses with beading and ostrich feathers or simple white hats. The 1931 silent film *¡Que Viva Mexico!* by Sergei Eisenstein offers insights into how these diverse groups interacted, as well as the theatrical, celebratory, and performance contexts of Conchero dances in the early twentieth century. The film includes a festival celebration of the Virgin de Guadalupe and depicts diverse Conchero groups with *estandartes*, or banners, for the Virgin. These diverse groups dance together in a festive plaza with other individuals dressed as Spanish conquistadors, devils, and skeletons, indicating that dance and theatrical performances shared celebratory space. Furthermore, the diverse Conchero and danza de conquista traditions represented in the video highlights the contexts in which these brotherhoods would have interacted, permitting the exchange of songs and dances. A structurally similar celebration of the Virgin de Guadalupe takes place in East Los Angeles every December in the Archdiocese of Los Angeles' annual Our Lady of Guadalupe

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historicity of a Mexican Apache culture warrants caution before summarily dismissing cultural practices on the premise of contemporary Indigenous ethnicities and national boundaries.

Procession (Figure 5.4), which has been held each year since 1931 (Archdiocese of Los Angeles). The 2015 procession featured approximately twenty Matachin and Arco y Flecha groups, eleven groups of Aztec dancers from churches and diverse groups in the Los Angeles area, one Apache group and two Danza Conquista and Danza Azteca hybrid groups in which the Aztecs were paired with individuals in European dress.<sup>82</sup>

Musically, the Conchero tradition includes both *danzas*, or dances without singing, and *alabanzas*, which are a category of praise-song that may or may not include dancing.<sup>83</sup> Most characteristic of the Conchero dance is the *concha* instrument, from which the tradition is said to take its name. The songs and dances follow a Western harmonic structure with tonic, subdominant and dominant chords, although the resulting aesthetic is distinctly Indigenous. There is little historical documentation of the concha prior to the twentieth century, but depictions of stringed instruments, such that in the mitote depicted in the Santa Anita Ixtacalco biombo (Figure 5.3), testify to the production and Indigenization of European instruments during the seventeenth century.<sup>84</sup> Furthermore, the biombo highlights the use of instruments, such as the concha and harp, in mitote dances that were likely initially only accompanied by drums, such as in the descriptions provided by de Ribas and Juan de Acosta discussed above (de Ribas 1999:714; Scolieri 2013:140). Although substitutions of Europeanized instruments for

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<sup>82</sup> The Apache group “Apache Danza Tzidada” from Queretaro wore plains-style headdresses and carried tomahawks, indicating their likely affiliation with the Apache groups mentioned by Renée de la Torre Castellanos chapter “The Zapopan Dancers” in *Dancing Across Borders*” (2009:39).

<sup>83</sup> I have been told by one capitán that such distinctions between the dances and dances with song are largely artificial; however, from my observations, although there is fluidity and alabanzas can merge into danzas, today in most groups in Los Angeles there are often stark differences between the two.

<sup>84</sup> One oral history provided in Martha Stone’s ethnography includes a Conchero dancer with a concha in the initial encounter between the Chichimec and the Spaniards (1975:198). This account is unverified in other sources, but it does connect the concha to the symbolic battle of Sangremal and subsequent Christianizing of the Chichimec.

Indigenous instruments could take place, the teponaztli drum was documented in Conchero circles as late as the 1950s (Mansfield 1953:213), possibly indicating a relationship with colonial period mitote dances.



Figure 5.4: Aztec dancers walk parallel to conquistadors in the 2015 Our Lady of Guadalupe Procession on Cesar Chavez Boulevard in East Los Angeles on December 6<sup>th</sup>, 2016 (left). In another Aztec dance group in the same procession, a dancer carries the estandarte for the Virgin of Guadalupe (right) (Photograph by Kristina Nielsen).

Nahuacized Catholic elements are still readily discernible in Conchero. For instance, the four cardinal directions, or four winds, continue in contemporary practices and are syncretized with cross symbolism (Rostas 2009:59); however, it is difficult to say with certainty how the four winds of Nahuatl speakers might have compared to the pre-existing cosmological structures of Indigenous communities of the Chichimec region. One particularly Nahuacized-Catholic trait in the Conchero tradition is that of the pilgrimages to sites representing each of these four directions. The most significant among these are the northern site of the Basilica de Guadalupe, commonly associated with Toci—the Mexica spiritual entity loosely affiliated with motherhood (Peña 1998:62); and el Señor de Chalma in the south, which was previously a site for cave rituals

affiliated with Oztoctéotl—the Otomí version of the Mexica *teotl*, or spiritual entity known as Tezcatlipoca (Stone 1975:66).<sup>85</sup> Pilgrimages to these sites are a key part of the tradition and harken back to before Spanish incursions. Other notable Nahuacized-Catholic elements are symbolic of the initial encounter of the Mexica in the Central Valley and the Spanish, including the symbolic presence of la Malinche, the translator who is now recast as the bearer of the ritual smoke.

Determining specific Otomí-Chichimec musical contributions to the tradition is significantly complicated by the dearth of ethnographic sources on customs in the Chichimec region prior to Spanish incursions. This has resulted in extensive searches for similarities with Nahuatl cultures, particularly the Mexica and Tlaxcalans, which are among the most documented Indigenous cultures in Mexico. As a result, the tradition is often over-attributed to the Nahuatl, while other Indigenous contributions are more difficult to recognize and have received less attention. The seedpod rattles, commonly called *ayoyotes*, that are strapped to the ankles in Conchero and contemporary Danza circles are an example of a likely Otomí or Chichimec contribution. While *ayoyotes* are absent from many early photographs of Conchero dancers and depictions of Mexica dancers in sources such as the Tovar Codex (see Figure 5.2), they appear frequently in documentation from the early twentieth century. For example, in a photograph of Captain Daniel Muñoz dated from 1930 featured in González Torres' book (1999:140), Muñoz appears with a single line of seedpods strapped around his ankles—a sharp contrast to the approximately four stacked lines of seedpods commonly found on Danza Azteca *ayoyotes* today. Dances in Tenochtitlan occasionally included golden bells around the ankles, but these are

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<sup>85</sup> Susanna Rostas finds that the mesa La Gran Tenochtitlan danced for Huitzilopochtli at Chalma (2009:114), indicating some variation in how mesas may have syncretized Indigenous and Catholic symbols.

notably absent from colonial period descriptions of dances and mitotes.<sup>86</sup> The use of seedpods therefore likely reflects one such tribe-specific musical and aesthetic addition to the Nahuacized Catholic core of the tradition.

The song texts of several of the alabanzas in the Conchero repertoire commemorate the arrival of Christianity from a Chichimec-Nahua perspective including the alabanza “Cuando nuestra America fue conquistada,” which Susanna Rostas suggests likely originated in the late nineteenth-century (2009:253).<sup>87</sup> Individuals and events referenced in the text include Hernán Cortés, Cuauhtemoc, who was briefly king after Moctezuma, and the baptism of la Malinche. These references collectively highlight the diffusion of Nahua-centric interpretations of the conquest. Despite these Central Mexican elements, the stanza of the alabanza commemorating the battle of Sangremal and Chichimec conversion conveys a Chichimec perspective of the conquest:

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<sup>86</sup> See, for instance, descriptions of bells around the ankles in Florentine Codex Book II on “Feasts and Ceremonies”: “And then he went placing his bells on both sides, on his legs. All gold were the bells, called *oyoalli*. These [he wore] because they went jingling, because they went ringing; so did they resound” (Sahagún Anderson and Dibble trans. 1982:69). Mario Aguilar relates that before the 1940s performers did occasionally utilize metal bells on their leggings and that these have since been almost entirely replaced by seedpod rattles (2009:154), but he does not provide his source.

<sup>87</sup> Rostas also notes that the belief that Conchero dances originate from an Aztec past is a recent development in the Mexican Conchero communities (2009:192).

Cuando nuestro reino  
fue conquistador  
los indios Chichimecas  
fueron bautizados,  
En ese Santiago,  
Santiago de Queretaro,  
el año de mil  
quiniento treinta y tres.  
En ese cerrillo,  
cerrillo de Sangremal

When our kingdom  
was conquered  
the Indian Chichimecas  
were baptized  
In that Santiago,  
Santiago of Queretaro  
The year of  
Fifteen thirty-three  
On that little hill  
Little hill of Sangremal

(Transcription and translation by Portia Mansfield 1953:169-170)

While this alabanza contains a rather explicit reference to the Chichimec experience and vantage point, the Nahuacized elements remain much more readily accessible. Without the same detailed ethnographic sources for the Chichimec as are available for the Nahuatl speakers of the Central Valley of Mexico, it remains difficult to discern how cultural misconstructions similar to those in the initial between the Spanish and Nahuatl may have unfolded: The most tangible evidence of a lingering Chichimec and Otomí authorial presence in the tradition is the diversity that resulted from the Nahuacized-Catholic forms they received.

### **Continuing Legacies of Nahuacization and Pan-Indigenous Authorship in Danza Azteca**

The cultural diversity in the Los Angeles Danza community reflects the diffusion of this Nahuatl cultural core that contributed to the new *modus operandi* for Indigenous cultures noted by Griffen (1991:167). This new cultural core provided the foundation for a common Mexican nationalism centered around Mexico City. As has been highlighted in the previous chapters, today Maya, Purapecha, Nahuatl, Zapotec, and even Tongva participants from the Native Californian community participate in the tradition, and the Nahuatl traditions that diffused across Mexico and the American Southwest during the colonial period now serve to unite these diverse

Indigenous heritages around a shared Indigenous, syncretic, cultural core. From my interviews and conversations with dancers in Los Angeles, many of the participants are one or two generations removed from the last generation in their family that lived in an Indigenous community and spoke an Indigenous language, although a significant number of participants, particularly from urban centers such as Mexico City, no longer remember how many generations have passed since an Indigenous language was last spoken in their family (Personal Interviews 2015, 2016).

As noted by Griffen, the substitution of other Indigenous materials for those no longer available in one's own culture was integral to the development of a shared culture (ibid.). This function is still served by Danza, where Nahuatl culture can still offer an Indigenous cultural source for those who have experienced recent culture loss. One such example is Cuezalin, whose ancestry includes Mezcalteco and other Nayarit Indigenous heritages, but he is predominantly Cora-Tepehuan, and his family identifies primarily as Cora. As noted in Chapter 3, Cuezalin does not have access to Native Cora-Tepehuan music and songs as his uncle refuses to teach them as he perceives them to be in violation of his Christian faith (Personal Interview with Cuezalin 2015). While Cuezalin likely will not receive the Cora songs because of his uncle's decision, his involvement with creating new songs in Nahuatl, particularly creating melodies for texts from the *Cantares Mexicanos*, a collection of Nahuatl songs compiled following conquest (See Chapter 6), has given him another outlet for creativity and a means to engage with his Indigenous heritage.<sup>88</sup> Similarly, Los Angeles area Aztec musician and dancer Carlos Daniel

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<sup>88</sup> The *Cantares Mexicanos* is a collection of ninety-one Nahuatl songs that are believed to have been composed slightly after the arrival of the Spanish, although some have, with further study, been dated to the pre-conquest period (Bierhorst 1985). The songs are attributed to the area around Mexico City and Azcapotzalco, and they are written in highly esoteric Nahuatl that John Bierhorst speculates was intentionally employed to hide their meanings from missionaries (ibid.:3-4). Other texts include *Veinte Himnos* in the *Florentine Codex* that was compiled by Bernardino de Sahagún and Nahuatl scribes. The

Jiménez shares this experience of Mexican-American diaspora. Jiménez is originally from the Zapotec pueblo Macuil-Xochitl, meaning “five flower” in Nahuatl, in Oaxaca, Mexico. He moved to the United States when he was fourteen years of age and began participating in Danza while in college. While Jiménez’s mom still speaks Zapotec, he was not taught the language. Despite the language loss in their family, he grew up with many Zapotec Indigenous traditions that his family has continued.

Jiménez offers an example of how diaspora impacts the decision to identify with Nahua culture and participate in Danza. While his older brother understands the appeal of Danza, his parents, and particularly his father, do not understand why Jiménez has chosen to participate in Danza. Jiménez relates that this confusion over the appeal of Nahua, or “Aztec,” culture to an individual of Zapotec ancestry is fairly common:

A lot of people ask me “where are you from?” and I say “I am from Oaxaca.” Then they say “there are not Aztecs over there” and I say, well, no and yes. “No” because originally my people were Zapotecos, but “yes” because the name of my town is Macuilxochitl, so, obviously it was conquered by Aztecs, or at least they were an influence. (Personal Interview with Carlos Daniel Jiménez 2015)

For Jiménez, the historical connection between his town of Macuilxochitl and the Nahua speakers who ruled the Aztec Empire provides an additionally meaningful cultural link that connects his heritage to that of a Nahua cultural heritage in Danza.

For both Cuezalin and Jiménez, Danza provides a forum for performing Indigeneity that is no longer available through family heritage due to both historical and recent culture loss that is in this case accelerated due to diaspora. In response to this loss, both continue to actively create new music within the Danza repertoire informed by their own heritages, the Danza tradition and Nahua culture, creating a new but traditionally situated repertoire for a twenty-first century

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melodies, performance contexts, and metaphorical meanings of many portions of the poetic texts remain unknown.

*modus operandi*. Despite Cuezalin and Jiménez’s diverse Indigenous backgrounds, the shared access to Nahua culture facilitates their collective performance with others in a new, Indigenous cultural context. This pan-Indigenous form has become one of the hallmarks of Danza, making it an open space for individuals of any number of backgrounds. From this perspective, the histories of Conchero—and now Danza—provide a model for reconstituting Indigenous fragments into one tradition and practice. This model has arguably been re-employed in the diaspora.

### **Implications for Syncretism in Danza**

Traditional models of syncretism in Mexican dance studies have argued for a Hispanic-Indigenous blend (Huerta 2009:9) or hybridization (Kurath 1946:398); however, the exclusive application of these binary syncretic models results in an overstatement of Hispanic cultural influence, as much of what was spread as “Hispanic” or “colonial” in many cases already bore the influence of Nahua intermediaries. Furthermore, the diversity of cultures summarily classified as “Indigenous” results in a broader homogenization of Indigenous cultural contributions to dance traditions, such as Conchero, and inadvertently facilitates other simplistic Hispanic-Indigenous readings of the colonial period that are explored in the second part of this chapter. As a result, the diffusion of Nahua culture is in itself a paradox. Nahua culture is indisputably Indigenous to the Americas and integrated with other local practices as it moved with Spanish Nahua allies and colonizers; concurrently, although Indigenous, Nahua culture can simultaneously be interpreted as colonizing and therefore “other” in relation to the local Indigenous cultures that were instructed in these Nahuacized-Catholic forms. This dual status as a colonizing-colonized culture has complicated contemporary interpretations, as both extremes

of the spectrum can be politically or academically tantalizing but offer an incomplete narrative without equal contemplation of the other.

The complications that arise from these histories are further amplified in the Los Angeles Danza community, where the added intricacies of diaspora and culture loss—both tribal and national—and the politics of identity and representation further muddy the water. The second portion of this chapter examines the composition of subaltern histories in Danza resulting from these distinct challenges and the subsequent impact of these histories on the interpretation of music and the Danza tradition.

### **Subaltern Histories**

In recent years, subaltern publications of Danza history have appeared in scholarly works on the Chicano experience and Danza including those by Ernesto Colín (2014), Roberto Rodríguez (2014) and Master's and Ph.D. students, including Jennie Marie Luna (2012) and Raquel Hernández Guerrero (2010). These publications mirror the histories related in Danza calpulli both in Los Angeles and the transnational Mexico-U.S. Danza community to counter Eurocentric histories taught in public schools. These subaltern histories are compelling; however, as noted by John and Jean Comaroff, subaltern histories are no more inherently truthful than those of their hegemonic counterparts, and the two overlapping histories—colonizing and colonized—must instead be considered in relation to each other (1992:17). As Comaroff and Comaroff additionally point out, “for historiography, as for ethnography, it is the relations between fragments and fields that pose the greatest analytical challenge” (ibid.). This is further accentuated in Indigenous studies, as Linda Tuhiwai Smith notes that “the idea of contested stories and multiple discourses about the past, by different communities, is closely linked to the politics of everyday contemporary Indigenous life” (Smith 1999:33). In Danza, it is not just

historiographers and ethnographers wrestling with how to connect fragments, a process James Clifford refers to as “historical realism” (2013:7), but the practitioners themselves.

Danza circles have become focal points for the diffusion of subaltern histories, including a number of histories that reject European colonial-era sources and instead rely exclusively on different forms of oral tradition. Since present-day Danza groups are a mixture of any number of Indigenous cultures originating predominantly from Mexico, there is no single “tribal memory” repository available given the diversity of past and present colonial experiences. The geographically and culturally diffuse nature of the Danza community has complicated traditional Indigenous concepts, such as the “elder” and “oral tradition,” as more people claim exclusive knowledge of traditions and authoritative roles within Danza. This is further complicated by the shifting sources of authority trusted by generations detailed in Chapters 2 and 3. The transnational and geographical spread of the tradition has resulted in many of these discussions taking place online and there is no council or designated body to refute dubious claims. The geographic and demographic diversity of the Danza has additionally created a number of overlapping ways for participants to conceptualize the boundaries of their own Danza communities as well as the Danza community as a whole. These modes of conceptualizing the community include envisioning the Danza *calpulli* as a tribe, or as a tradition available on the basis of nationality, likely as a result of the underlying diffused Nahuacized-Catholic cultural core.<sup>89</sup> As noted in Chapters 2 and 3, the sources trusted for transmission and authority on Danza

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<sup>89</sup> Examples of these overlapping modes of conceptualizing the community in recent literature include Ernesto Colín’s description of the Mexica New Year Ceremony that highlights a tribal quality (e.g. “the gathering of elders and the intertribal exchange is closely aligned with *Calpulli Tonalehqueh*’s mission” (2014:53)); the broader Chicano and Mexican unity highlighted by Jennie Luna (e.g. Danza “ultimately redefined an ‘alter-Native’ (Gaspar de Alba 2003) cultural identity within both the Mexican and Xicana/o community” (2012:3)); and the national character also highlighted by Ernesto Colín (e.g. “*Calpulli Tonalehqueh* leaders recognize that modern Mexicas are a minority even in the Mexican-origin community and that many Mexican-origin individuals are disconnected from their indigenous past. They

have diversified as younger generations increasingly interpret Danza outside of the Catholic Conchero and Danza Azteca framework. Today, elders who are trusted with historical interpretations can be specific to one or a few calpulli—as is case with the Huitzilmazatzin (Chapter 3); or they can overarch national borders—such as the late Tlakaelel and Ocelocoatl, who is currently widely influential in Mexico City and Northern California Danza calpulli (Colín 2014:165).

In *How Societies Remember*, Paul Connerton notes of memory and pasts that:

Concerning memory as such, we may note that our experience of the present very largely depends upon our knowledge of the past. We experience our present world in a context which is casually connected with past events and objects, and hence with reference to events and objects which we are not experiencing the present. And we will experience our present differently in accordance with the different pasts to which we are able to connect that present. (Connerton 1989:2)

Danza is no exception, and histories draw on themes and fragments of cultural destruction, resilience, and Indigenous solidarity, collocating present experiences with fragmented pasts. These contemporary experiences include the ongoing frustration experienced in Chicano and Mexican-American communities regarding failures to achieve meaningful immigration reform and deportations that split families. Additionally, continuing cultural repression by dominant white American culture—from banning ethnic studies to rampant police brutality against members of Chicano and Mexican-American communities—has linked these contemporary events with historical ones, such as the Spanish conquest and destruction of Tenochtitlan, into a single narrative of oppression (Figure 5.5).

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hope to attract as many Mexicans and Mexican Americans as possible so they may come and reconnect with their cultural heritage” (Colín 2014:57)).



Figure 5.5: Mural from Chicano Park in San Diego conflating Spanish conquistadores with the San Diego Police (Photo by Kristina Nielsen).

Such actions have contributed to the circulation of historical metanarratives of European brutality and Indigenous/Chicano/Mexican solidarity. These narratives often ignore the historical circumstances that have resulted in the cultural, political, and economic marginalization of Indigenous communities in Mexico by a culturally mixed majority during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries (See Chapter 3). These histories are not in themselves fully “untruthful,” but they do systematically obscure other truths and complexities in their most common formulations, creating a skewed—albeit politically expedient—narrative of solidarity.

Many of these histories originate with the *Mexikayotl* or *Mexicanidad* movement from Mexico City. This movement gained momentum in the 1960s in Mexico City to “recover” Mexican Indigenous culture, particularly those of the “Raza Nahuatl,” or Nahuatl speaking peoples (Nieva 1969:20). The movement is loosely defined as a recovery effort of the Indigenous traditions practiced prior to the arrival of Cortés, although it can overlap with other Mexican nationalist sentiments—particularly those rooted out of Mexico City. The cultural practices

utilized in these Mexikayotl organizations are frequently attributed to the Mexica; however, under closer scrutiny, the repertoire includes songs and traditions from an array of Indigenous communities currently within and outside the borders of Mexico. These “Mexicacized” interpretations emanating from Mexico City first gained wider influence in Los Angeles in the 1980s and 1990s since the initial introduction of Danza occurred through Florencio Yescas, who, as discussed in Chapter 2, was affiliated with Conchero and Ballet Folklórico rather than the Mexikayotl movements in Mexico City.

The Mexikayotl movement resulted in the establishment of several significant institutions between the 1950s and 1980s in Mexico City, including the Movimiento Confederado Restaurador del Anáhuac (MCRA), which was founded by Roberto Nieva and María del Carmen Nieva; and the later Zemanauak Tlamachtilyan (ZT) that was founded in 1977 by Miguel Ángel Mendoza, Ignacio Romerovargas Yturbide, and María del Carmen Nieva López—known widely as Izkalotzin—among others. (Colín 2014:19-21). These institutions taught dance, theater, language “and the restoration of native ceremonies” (ibid.:20). The blossoming of a new era of “Aztec-ness” was of prophetic significance to the members of these organizations because of a mandate supporters believe Cuauhtemoc gave when the fall of Tenochtitlan became inevitable. Cuauhtemoc is said to have given this speech—known by a number names including the *consigna de Anahuac*, *consigna de Cuauhtemoc*, *último mandato*, or simply *mandato*—that is said to have inspired the secret transmission of Mexica culture:

Our beloved sun has disappeared and has left us in total darkness. But we know that it will again return, will again come out and will come anew to shine upon us. But while it stays there in Miktlan (region of eternal repose). We should rapidly gather and embrace ourselves. And in the center of our heart we will hide all that which our heart appreciates and considers a treasure. And we know like a great jade we will destroy our Teokalwanzintli (houses of youth), our Kalmekawanzintli (universities), our Tlachkowanzintli (ball courts), our Telpochkalwanzintli (houses of young men), and our Kwikakalwanzintli (houses of song.) That our roads may remain deserted and that our

homes may preserve us. For now we do not know until when our new sun will come out. That the fathers and the mothers may never forget to teach their children. The fathers with the boys, the mothers with the girls. And that they teach their children while they live precisely how good it had been; that which has been until today, our beloved Anahuac! The refuge, the protection and the care of our energies. And as a result of our customs and the behavior that our venerable elders received and our venerable parents with effort sowed in our essence. Now we deliver the task to our children that they guard our writings and our knowledge. From now on our homes will be our Teokalwanzintli, our Kalmekawanzintli, our Tlachkowanzintli, our Telpochkalwanzintli, our Kwikalwanzintli. And do not forget to inform our children intensely how it will be. How we will rise! And exactly how its destiny will be realized and how it will fulfill its grand destiny. Our beloved motherland Anahuac. (Tlapoyawa 2000:43)

This mandate is said to have been passed from the Council of Elders from Colhua in Xochimilco to several early members of the Mexico City “Movimiento Confederado Restaurador de Anauak,” (Movement to Restore Anahuac) including Tlakaelel, who gained international fame as a Toltec Wisdom Keeper; and Rodolfo Nieva Lopez, who collaborated closely with María del Carmen Nieva López (Mexika Resistance 2014). This mandate provides a call to action and shifts a Mexica/Aztec cultural re-emergence into a prophetic act, as the return to Mexica practices coincided with the advent of the sixth sun in July 2000 (Ríos).

In addition to the institutions founded to support this mission, the philosophy was further diffused through literature, particularly the writings of Rodolfo and María del Carmen Nieva López. Susanna Rostas notes that these books were not widely read in Mexico at the time of her research (2009:201), yet presently they warrant revisiting since the central themes of profound cosmological knowledge, European ignorance, and Nahuatl and Mexican exceptionalism still ruminate in corners of the Danza and related cultural revival communities. Additionally, these writings appear to have gained traction in the California Danza community, as literature by Nieva López (Izkalotzin) is on the recommended reading list of Kurlly Tlapoyawa’s publication *We Will Rise* and is presented without problematization in Colín’s recent publication on Danza as a form of Indigenous education (2000:120; 2014:19).

The impetus for cultural recovery in Nieva's book *Mexikayotl* is Nahua cultural exceptionalism and the loss of key cosmological knowledge because of European ignorance. Her history describes Nahua speakers sailing to Africa, Asia, and Europe and instructing their cultures in how to advance (1969:39). Nieva even includes an etymology of the word "Atlantes" to substantiate her claim, alleging that it came from "atlantike," meaning "we came from the sea" (ibid.), supporting the idea that Atlantis was in the Americas as argued by José Vasconcelos in *La Raza Cósmica* (1925). As such, she credits the Nahua people with the Egyptian pyramids and sculptures, and argues that these mythical Nahua contributions spread to Greece and later to Europe and "even after so many centuries, the Europeans continue practicing Mexican ideas, highlighting the ingenuity of the Mexican contributions to European culture" (ibid.:40; author's translation). The cosmic knowledge of the "Anauakah"—meaning those from Anahuac or the continental Americas—that was given to the "the white race" was subsequently lost through adulteration of the Nahua teachings (ibid.).<sup>90</sup>

Deciphering the influence of the Movement to Restore Anahuac is further complicated by the historic secrecy surrounding the movement. Alicja Iwanska attempted to study the organization in the 1970s, and although she was permitted access to their monthly publications and was permitted to attend several ceremonies, none of the organizers wished to speak to her

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<sup>90</sup> The presence of such claims of cultural origins and exceptionalism are not unique to Mexico. Apart from the obvious histories of Eurocentrism, another example of a community following these trends of historical appropriation and nativist exceptionalism is a growing segment of the African American community that has made unsubstantiated claims regarding an Indigenous African root in the Americas. Their argument has been largely predicated on features in Native art they claim appear African in origin, particularly the Olmec heads, which was a theory forwarded by Ivan van Sertima in his book *They Came Before Columbus* (1976). Though largely discounted by academics, van Sertima's narrative was recently given more credence in the Los Angeles community at the "Where Black is Brown" exhibit at The Museum of African American Art in East Los Angeles that forwarded van Sertima's theory of an early African American presence in the display.

about their organization or activities (1977). In her analysis of the MCRA, Iwanska felt that the movement was ultimately utopian in nature.<sup>91</sup> Remarking on the MCRA's framing of history,

Iwanska noted:

Ideologies try to provide an interpretation of the past and present that will be not only acceptable to the group for which it was designed but that will build the morale of the group as well. And they try to formulate a vision of the future which will be, at the same time, obtainable and desirable to the group in question. (ibid.:76)

Iwanska discovered in the *Izkalotl* publication from December 1967 that the group rejected Marxism as an “ideology unsuitable for America because of its European origin”; instead, the publication claimed that their vision was based on the scientific principles of the Nahua sages (ibid).

Iwanska additionally noted the complex interplay between a culturally Mexican and Indigenous identity within the MCRA in the 1970s:

The leaders of the Movement are themselves culturally Mexicans—they are only ideologically Nahuas. In order to maintain the Movement, they must deal with both the ‘uninitiated’ Mexican elites, and the largely deculturated rural Nahuas. They act as Mexicans on some occasions, and as Nahuas on others. Because of the secrecy and vagueness resulting from their dual operations, it is sometimes difficult to distinguish the ideological from the real, to draw the line between their dreams, plans and accomplishments, or even to assess the number of leaders and converts to the Movement. (1977:84)

As a result, participants continued to distinguish between those who are “permanently Indigenous” as a cultural and social class, and those who at least maintain the ability to move seamlessly into elite circles in Mexico City. This finding is further supported by Iwanska's observation at a ceremony regarding how Indigenous identities could become performative:

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<sup>91</sup> In contrast the “Utopians,” Iwanska also studied a parallel movement that she labeled the “Realists.” The Realists included Indigenous scholars from Indigenous communities who had become part of the academy and power structure in Mexico City. Iwanska found that the Realists, as opposed to the Utopists, viewed some Indigenous culture loss as one of the trade-offs necessary for Indigenous social justice (1977:5). This division highlights some of the continuing divides regarding approaches to Indigenous cultural survival and revitalization.

Women have their hair done in a formal way: usually they have permanents and sometimes their hair is tinted red or blonde. Gathering all my courage I asked one of the Movement's women why "being Aztec" she did not wear an Indian hair-style. Not in the least embarrassed by my question, she answered that at home she had a very nice wig made out of her own long, straight dark hair which she used for ceremonies. This was her Aztec hair-do, but in her daily life (she was a school-inspector) this permanented hair was much more comfortable. (ibid.:64)

The ability to choose how to identify—a possibility facilitated by their social standing, language, and residence in Mexico City—provided them with opportunities not available to those socially marginalized as "Indios." As noted in Chapter 3, this phenomenon also occurs in Danza, as many danzantes do not necessarily see themselves as "Indígena." Indigeneity can be performed without being a permanent identity.

The cultural recovery efforts undertaken by the MCRA and ZT are highly problematic; for instance, Conchero was one such tradition that was "recovered" even though the tradition was both vibrant and Indigenous at the time of its supposed recovery. The MCRA and ZT established relationships with dancers, including the Conchero dancer Felipe Aranda, who led Conchero dance ceremonies for the ZT community (Colín 2014:145; Rostas 2009:201). These collaborations created a bridge between mexicanidad movements and emerging Danza Azteca practices as separate from Conchero.

The mexicanidad movement bears similarities to early twentieth-century salvage ethnography projects, particularly in its emphasis on recovery and preservation—a motive that implies an otherwise eminent extinction. For instance, in the recent dissertation by Luna (2012), she offers the following explanation of "mexicanidad" and the recovery goals of the mexicanistas:

La Mexicanidad was a new movement within Danza that saw itself as part of a larger struggle to Mexicanize México. This Mexicanization was more accurately an Indigenization of México. Cultural workers and intellectuals worked together to recover what was lost due to European invasion and utilized both preserved (codices and sacred

sites) and living Indigenous knowledge as the basis for re-building a new cultural identity. While some viewed this new leaning as an attempt to re-invent an Indigenous past, Mexicanists saw it as simply returning to and acknowledging an already lived reality. (Luna 2012:156)

“Recovery” as a concept and cultural process is left uncomplicated in Luna’s dissertation and other writings on mexicanidad and Danza (Guerrero 2010; Colín 2014). Furthermore, the “Indigenization of Mexico” ignores the reality that many continue to live Indigenous lifestyles complete with Indigenous traditions, rituals and songs. These communities are still often marginalized and discriminated against by a culturally and racially mixed majority that includes those, such as the MCRA and ZT, now credited with attempting an “Indigenization” of Mexico.

Similar approaches to recovery, as noted in Luna’s work above, are discernible in Ernesto Colín’s recent publication *Indigenous Education through Dance and Ceremony* (2014). Colín credits rural communities with preserving the calpulli structure—a claim that is highly questionable and includes no citations or further analysis (ibid.:83).<sup>92</sup> The primary Danza calpulli analyzed in Colín’s study is Calpulli Tonalehqueh from the Bay Area. The elder key to this group and its ceremonies, including the Mexica New Year Ceremony, is Ocelocoatl. Colín provides a brief biography of Ocelocoatl that reveals the problematic approach to cultural recovery within the contemporary Mexikayotl practice. Ocelocoatl was born in Mexico City in 1958, and was sent to live with his grandparents in rural Tlaxcala where he learned Nahuatl and learned Indigenous teachings from his grandparents (ibid.:145). Once a teenager, he returned to Mexico City, where he became involved in the ZT. Ocelocoatl proposed a dance group become established in conjunction with the ZT, separate from that led by Felipe Aranda, and he was

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<sup>92</sup> Indigenous communities certainly retain Indigenous community structures, but to interpret their organizational structure as a “calpulli” through a Mexica and Nahuacized framework is problematic. These small semantic details further entrench the notion that Indigenous communities can serve as a site of Mexica cultural recovery.

tasked with preparing it (ibid.). To prepare, Colín relates that Ocelocoatl “received much in the countless ensayos and talks with generals, where he learned dances, songs, and took note of how ceremonies were executed. He gathered invaluable advice from generales and elders” (ibid.).

The mechanisms of Indigenous transmission were thereby disrupted through these recovery processes of the ZT, as ceremonies, dances, songs and traditions that were formerly passed down through families were extracted from the historical transmission process. Instead of learning from one general, capitán, or elder, the new generation of leaders—including Ocelocoatl, Tlakaheel, and others—integrated ceremonies, songs and dances from any number of dance lineages, like the approaches describe in Chapter 3.

Critical questions about this recovery process have been repeatedly side-stepped in literature on Danza; for instance, from whom have materials been taken and have the origins and sources been properly attributed? Who benefits culturally and financially from these arrangements and accumulations of Indigenous knowledges? Do those who share Indigenous traditions do so with permission from their communities or the communities in question? Or is it an individual decision unreflective of the community’s wishes? The repeated bypassing of these key questions in Danza literature, paired with the continuing re-authoring of Danza history as almost exclusively Mexica, has resulted in a problematic historical narrative that subsumes and marginalizes other Indigenous cultures integral to Danza’s development.

### **Impact on Interpretations of History**

Since the late 1980s and early 1990s, several of these problems have come to the fore in circles in Los Angeles, particularly with the foundation of the Mexica Cuauhtemoc branch of Danza by Pastel. The histories transmitted in these circles bear similarities with subversive

micronarratives as described by Arjun Appadurai, particularly in their reliance on the internet and other transnational forms of communication (1996:11). A number of followers believe Pastel received permission to found the first Mexica Cuauhtemoc calpulli from Don Salvador Rodríguez who allegedly claims to be a direct descendant of Cuauhtemoc.<sup>93</sup> This claim of heritage is unverifiable and coincides with a larger trend of claiming to be a descendent from key Central Mexican historical figures—most notably Moctezuma, Cuauhtemoc, or Nezahualcoyotzin—to add authority to interpretations of Danza and Indigenous spirituality, as well as to assert a Mexica lineage for the dance.<sup>94</sup>

The advent of the internet and new transnational dance networks, particularly between San Francisco, Los Angeles and Mexico City, have facilitated the dispersal of these histories. Furthermore, transnational sites of cultural exchange, such as Facebook and YouTube threads, have made these histories more readily accessible to danzantes, decentralizing historical narratives as danzantes piece historical fragments together themselves from histories related both within and outside of their dance group. These narratives have directly impacted interpretations of the music and drum rhythms now central to the tradition. Jennie Luna provides an example of the impact of the attribution of music that results from this shift in historical interpretation:

The Spaniards viewed the new stringed instrument (a Spanish adaptation) as acceptable. The mandolin or concha became the instrument upon which Nahua peoples were able to remember and preserve the original beats of Danza rhythms. While this European-influenced instrument may have replaced the drums, it became the only way that songs and beats were recorded in the memories of danzantes . . . Through using an instrument

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<sup>93</sup> A painting of Pastel available on Etsy includes a description that reads “after being given permission by Don Salvador Rodríguez, a direct descendant of Cuauhtemoc, the last *tlahtoani*, or leader, of the Mexica people, he established Danza Mexica Cuauhtemoc in the Los Angeles area during the 1980s” (Arte Yolteotl 2015).

<sup>94</sup> These assertions share an interesting overlap with the concept of blood memory, which Chadwick Allen finds to fuse “racial identity and narrative” (2002:16, 178). By claiming these heritages, individuals can claim authority for their interpretations through blood.

acceptable to the Spanish, they were able to appease them, while preserving the songs and beats for future generations to continue Danza today. (2012:115-116).

No citation is provided for this assertion nor are concrete musical examples offered to demonstrate how drum rhythms would have been hidden in the concha repertoire. Though Chapter 4 highlights how drum rhythms have in many instances drawn on Conchero strumming patterns, the narrative of hidden rhythms and subversion are unsubstantiated. Furthermore, the preservation is credited to the genius of the Nahua, echoing the exceptionalism of Mexica and Nahua speakers in texts such as Nieva's *Mexicayotl* (1969). This narrative of the Nahua hiding the rhythms for future generations highlights a dominant historical interpretation currently in circulation among the dance groups that parallels historical accounts by the ZT and MCRA of Mexica revelation and Indigenous recovery. Such attempts by Mexica-leaning Danza circles to re-attribute Conchero and Danza Azteca to exclusively Mexica or Nahua speakers abound; however, such contentions are deeply problematic and deny authorship and ownership to other Indigenous cultures critical to the development of contemporary Danza practices.

In histories such as that offered by Luna above, Danza and musical transmission become symbols of Indigenous preservation and a subversive act of resistance. These narratives of Danza as resistance to Europeanization and colonization have become particularly pervasive in California and the American Southwest. For example, professor of Mexican American studies Roberto Rodríguez's description of the history of Danza in the Chicano community in his 2014 publication *Our Sacred Maíz is our Mother* describes Danza as a portion of a larger cultural movement that he refers to collectively as *tradición*. He defines *tradición* as including "dance, ceremony, ritual, story and intellectual pursuits that all have the primary aim of conserving Indigenous knowledge" (2014:145). Rodríguez categorizes two parallel suppressions of

Indigenous culture: that of Catholicism, and that directed by Cuauhtemoc as result of the consigna de Cuauhtemoc. Regarding the founding of Conchero, Rodríguez relates:

The Conchero danza tradition can be traced to 1537 when a group of “warriors” disguised as dancers were charged with assisting the church in the conversion process. This had come on the heels of the purported apparition of the Virgen de Guadalupe on the hill of Tepeyac where Tonantzin or Mother Earth had been venerated for generations. However, the oral tradition about danza says that it formed also to hide the culture and traditions of the Nahuatl-Chichimeca peoples, transmitting and communicating them, in a hidden form, via dance, song, and oral traditions. That which was embedded or encoded was ancient knowledge related to origins and migrations and ceremonial and astronomical knowledge . . . For many Mexicans, Central Americans, and Chicanas/Chicanos who follow Indigenous traditions today, the idea of syncretism is the idea of living the Mandato, of preserving the culture, knowledge, and traditions and continuing to resist. It is dancing in the Zócalo 365 days each year to “knock down the Cathedral” that sits atop the temple of Quezalcoatl, another example of hidden transcripts: danzantes in Mexico City commonly tell people that they dance so that their vibrations will knock down the Cathedral. (ibid.:146, 147)

The oral traditions to which he refers, such as the Mandato, appear to be from the ZT. While the ZT and MCRA are not mentioned in his history of Danza—nor the book as a whole—elements of their mission and approach closely coincide with the Danza history he relates, highlighting another instance of bypassing the problematic recovery process to emphasize the antiquity of the dances and songs in the tradition (ibid.).

These histories have created a challenging situation for both the Danza and academic communities, as past and present political aims, particularly those from the 1960s onwards, continue to influence the interpretation and composition of Danza and its histories. In the case of the ZT, as well as the wider proliferation of self-appointed elders in the tradition, the adage “power is knowledge” has become “the perception of knowledge is power”: Regardless of what knowledge individuals may or may not possess, their revelation of exclusive knowledge to the wider community has created its own irrefutable power. These knowledges of the ZT as well as other organizations have become dogmatic as there is no room for questioning the questionable

sources without falling into the trappings of arguing about the veracity of the oral traditions underlying them. The consigna of Cuauhtemoc is one such example: to accept the consigna is to whole-heartedly trust the ZT and the handful of individuals who claim to have received it, which Chicano studies scholars such as Roberto Rodríguez, Jennie Luna and Ernesto Colín have done (2014; 2012; 2014); to refute the veracity of the consigna is to risk being labeled colonialist and unwilling to consider traditional Indigenous modes of knowledge.<sup>95</sup>

### **Hegemonies of Solidarity**

Politics impact these subaltern histories, and they have become interwoven into Danza histories in the American Southwest, bridging the past and the present. These histories highlight how historical fragments can be reconstituted to achieve a narrative of solidarity that requires a certain degree of historical homogenization as well as the prioritization of certain voices—and histories—over others. Presently, Danza groups in Los Angeles vary substantially in their reactions to the introduction of politics into Danza, with some groups embracing the fusion of Danza and politics as empowering, while other danzantes view the marriage of the two as disruptive, unnecessary, and even disrespectful (Personal Interviews 2015, 2016). Among the politically oriented Danza groups, the compositions of histories are intended to maximize their political aims and intersect with political organizations like the Mexica Movement, which began

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<sup>95</sup> Jennie Luna's criticism of Susanna Rostas' analysis of the divide between mestizos and Indigenous dancers in Mexico City is one example of how criticisms of the mexicanidad movement are cast as colonialist. Luna argues that Rostas ignores the self-ascribed identities of the dancers and upholding colonialist systems, a critique intended to undermine the importance of her observations of continuing class and cultural divisions in the Mexico City tradition: "Rostas still negates peoples' own claims to their Indigeneity, and imposes her own frame of reference (coinciding with the state) as to what constitutes authentic Indigenousness. In doing this, both Rostas and the state deny people a right to their self-determination, even as Indigenous Mexicans are taking a critical look at the state cultural nationalism project which promoted a mestizaje identity" (2012:141). This criticism overlooks important distinctions between those who can, in fact, choose how to identify and be identified and those who cannot.

in Los Angeles in 1992 (Mexica Movement); and the Brown Berets, which began in Los Angeles in 1967 (Brown Berets). Social media has become instrumental in the dispersal of these histories, particularly from the Mexica Movement, where catchy texts can accompany memes with inflammatory photos on social media sites such as Facebook.<sup>96</sup> Many of these histories echo those of the Mexikayotl movement out of Mexico City, including the idea that Europeans are culturally inferior.<sup>97</sup> These memes can easily receive nearly one hundred shares, so even those not affiliated with the movement, but friends online with someone who supports it, are exposed to their historical narrative. From my interviews and conversations with danzantes, most Los Angeles danzantes do not identify with these political movements; however, these political movements have arguably affected the community because of some loosely overlapping political objectives, namely decolonization, and crossover between certain Danza calpulli and political organizations. For instance, the Brown Berets aided in the security efforts of the Mexica New Year ceremony organized by Calpulli Tonalehqueh and were also present at the San Diego days in Chicano Park, raising the flag right before the danzantes took the stage. Additionally, the

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<sup>96</sup> For instance, a Mexica Movement meme posted September 17<sup>th</sup>, 2015 features a drawing of conquistadors stabbing Indigenous peoples accompanied by the text “Endless Evil: True evil faces of the Europeans!” with a text stating: “for over 500 years the Europeans have had no boundaries, no limits, no laws to obey, no sense of decency, no civilized behavior as to their invasions, thefts, murders, massacres, holocausts, genocides, enslavements, destructions, rapes, land thefts, kidnappings, extortions, resource thefts, corruption, savagery, dehumanizations, greed, immorality, lies, and just plain evil” (Mexica Movement). The Mexica Movement has two different Facebook pages with one totaling nearly 3,500 followers and the other approximately 2,900 as of November 2015; however, these numbers have more than doubled and as of October 2016 the primary Mexica Movement page posts nearly 7,500 followers, and the other rapidly approaching 5,400. This increase is likely connected to the particularly contentious election.

<sup>97</sup> For instance, in a discussion on such a historical meme, the Mexica Movement Liberation Education page posted “We must understand that Europeans were the last people to acquire civilization via other ancient cultures. The Nordic Anglo race in particular were the last people to acquire this, they have historically been the least educated, the least ethical, the ones who have behaved quite savagely, and brutal” (Mexica Movement Liberation Education Facebook Page, September 18, 2015). This echoes the history of European inferiority and backwardness relayed by Nieva in *Mexikayotl* (1969).

Mexica Cuauhtemoc Danza calpulli that rapidly proliferated in the 1990s actively eroded many of the boundaries between Danza and politics. As a result, it is difficult for Danza groups committed to a purely spiritual practice divorced from politics to distinguish themselves from those who utilize Danza for political and spiritual purposes. The histories of these political organizations mirror those of the MCRA and ZT, highlighting how historical narratives, such as Nieva's, can gain traction in a new political environment, particularly when they might serve to unite people in solidarity to a shared oppressor.

Within the Los Angeles Danza community, these politicized forms of Danza are contentious because of the representational problems they create. What is the identity of the "Aztec" or "Mexica" community? Furthermore, many participants perceive political uses as a form of interference with the spiritual intent derived from Conchero that many Danza circles in Los Angeles continue to honor. Virginia Carmelo summed it up thusly when asked about political participation:

We might go to the protest individually dressed in our daywear, but not in regalia because it is disrespectful. It is an abuse of the established protocols of the tradition because if you step out and your fully dressed in traditional regalia, you are representing a people, and logically the question would be "who gave you that authority to represent us?" Nobody is the answer. Nobody gave you that authority. And that is the point of disrespect. (Personal Interview with Carmelo 2015)

The power to represent the community continues to devolve as more danzantes claim individual expertise and the authority to interpret, utilize and practice Danza. As a result, authority and the power to represent the community—or any segment of it—have become similarly diffused; however, since outsiders are unaware of these undercurrents, the whole Danza community is problematically interpreted as one. This benefits those who are politically motivated by giving the allusion that the community, opinions, and policy positions they represent are more supported than in actuality.

The immigration debate provides an excellent example of these politics of representation and how Danza histories and overlapping conceptualizations of the community as a tribe, larger Chicano community, or national heritage have been recast for political leverage. For instance, the Brown Berets claim Aztlan as their homeland in the American Southwest in the following terms:

All this land belongs to Natives. By “native” we don’t mean “native born” Whites, Blacks, or Asians, we mean the Native People who inhabited this land for thousands of years before any other human set foot on this continent or hemisphere. Chicanos lay a claim to this land in the indisputable fact that Native blood runs through our veins. Our ancestors are Mexica, Maya, Tolteca, Yaqui, Navajo, Lakota; thousands of Native tribes that were hunted, destroyed and pushed to the edge of extinction by European invaders; Spaniards and Portuguese in the South, British and French in the north. We emerge now as a new breed, a mixture of all Native Nations and tribes. Out of many we are One, we are the Chicano Nation! With this we claim our Birthright, Aztlan is our Inheritance!” (National Brown Berets “Our Nation Aztlan”)

In the Brown Beret narrative, the divisions between the tribes are broken down and they are subsumed into one pan-Indigenous community composed of “a mixture of all Native Nations and tribes” (ibid.). The “tribal” mode of envisioning of the Indigenous communities further facilitates the blurring of politics and spirituality. For instance, an image featuring a danzante and a Native from the United States in regalia further spread this conceptualization of solidarity and equivalency with its proclamation “Northern and Southern tribes are all one people.” The Mexica Movement also has numerous posters that include tags such as “we are the Indigenous people of this continent! This is our land! We are not immigrants!” and “we are Indigenous with the right to migrate everywhere on our continent” (Mexica Movement). The nuances of Indigenous localities and territories prior to the arrival of Europeans and formation of modern national boundaries are written out of these histories. Additionally, the role of Indigenous “colonized colonizers” in the American Southwest, particularly from Central Mexico, are ignored to create a homogenous narrative of solidarity and cultural repression.

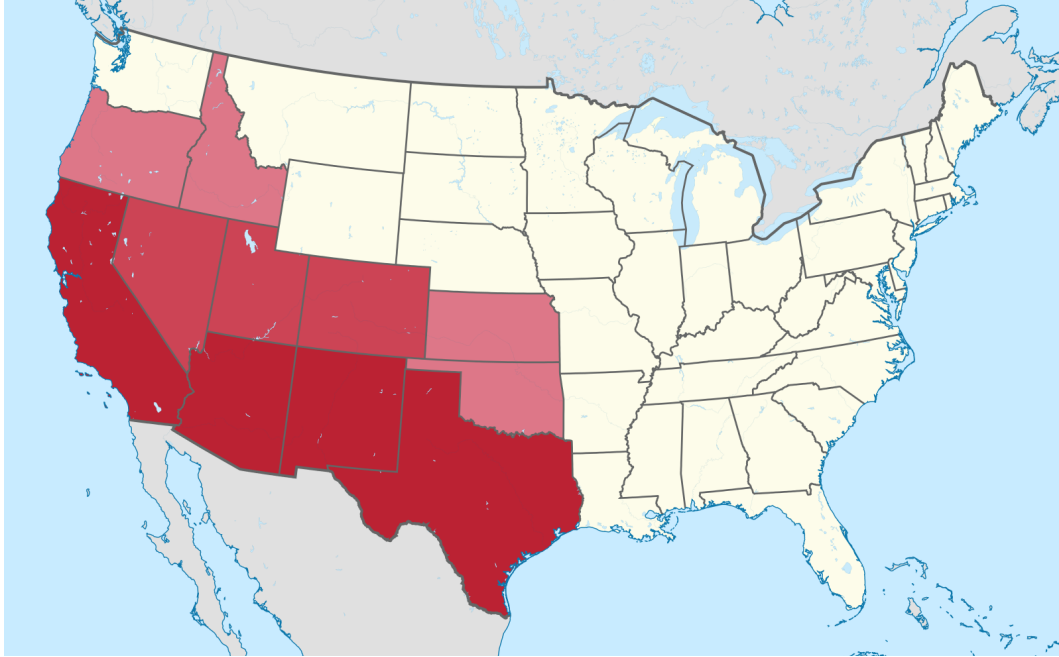


Figure 5.6: A map of the states considered part of Aztlan. Image a CC-licensed image on the Wikimedia commons.

The parallels between the histories relayed by these political organizations and some Danza calpulli are often highlighted in powwow performances, where Aztec dancers speak directly to a Native American audience. For instance, at the Hawaiian Gardens powwow on August 9<sup>th</sup>, 2015, the representative of the Aztec dancers highlighted the pan-Indigenous participants. Then, he offered the following words to emphasize historical and contemporary parallels between the Danza Azteca community and the Native North Americans in attendance:

A lot of people think that Aztec Dancing, that you are looking at Aztecs, but really what you are looking at is Indigenous people on this continent from different nations from different identities. We are not all Mexica or Aztecs . . . we have different nations represented here. We also have Purepecha, which is from the state of Michoacan. We have these different people, also people of Maya decent, and we gather, we come to this type of tradition because it gets us close to our Indigenous roots . . . We teach our children what our grandfathers taught us. We teach our children to stay close to creation and to learn the lessons all around us . . . We are trying to take back what was taken from us. I don't know if you guys are aware that strange people came to this continent and took everything, I don't know if you know about that (laughter). The same thing happened all over America. Just like it was experienced here, we experienced it and, just like many of you are regaining that connection to your ancestry, so are we. And we are

proud to do it and we are proud to be here, and thank you very much. (Field Recording 2015)

These histories and conceptualizations of the Danza community as an Indigenous recovery or larger tribe differ from many documented interpretations of Danza in Mexico. Rostas notes that many of the participants in Danza Mexica in Mexico are urban and culturally mixed, and have often been largely unsympathetic to the problems facing Indigenous communities (2009:202). Similarly, as noted Renée de la Torre Castellanos in the previous chapter, in Mexico these performances of Indigeneity are often temporary rather than a performance of a permanent social identity (Castellanos 2009:40). These parallel modes of identification and interpretations of Danza performance further complicate contemporary political efforts among Danza groups and scholars to recast the dance as an expression of political solidarity on the northern side of the U.S.-Mexico border.

Danzantes can integrate multiple histories ranging from these metanarratives to more localized histories. Furthermore, the participation of danzantes from Los Angeles in shared spaces, such as the Mexica New Year Ceremony in San Jose spearheaded by Calpulli Tonalehqueh, further disseminate these histories within the community. As noted in Chapter 3, there is a strong sense that the community needs to reconnect with its history; however, pinning down what exactly this single historical narrative might be is more elusive as individuals with different tribal and regional experiences of colonialism and diaspora join and contribute to Danza communities.

## **Conclusion**

The overlapping and colliding histories of diffused Nahuacized culture, pan-Indigeneity and colonization are variably experienced, interpreted, mythologized and politicized. They have

created complex layers and interconnected webs of meanings for the identities, dances and songs performed within Danza circles where the music and dance material itself becomes imbued with historicity because of the various historical lenses through which it is interpreted by the danzantes individually. As a result, the Danza performances can be interpreted in any number of ways including as a pre-Columbian spiritual practice; a Catholic practice for those who integrate Catholic teachings; an act of resistance, as highlighted in the writings of Jennie Luna and other Mexica-leaning scholars (2012); or simply a community activity that brings personal joy and satisfaction.

The reliance on the “Indigenous-Colonizer” binary by Mexikayotl institutions and politically oriented Danza groups is politically expedient but colonizing at the same time, as Indigenous cultures become further ethnically, culturally, and historically homogenized to achieve a message and historical narrative of solidarity, and frequently find themselves subsumed under a “Mexica” framework. The presence of a shared underlying national culture that draws on Nahuacized forms that diffused in the colonial era has facilitated such arguments, reframing these Nahua elements as a pan-Indigenous culture that pre-dated European arrival (e.g. Ernesto Colín’s reference to the calpulli system continuing in rural areas mentioned above (2014:83)). These interpretations of pan-Indigeneity lay the groundwork for justifications for integrating materials from other Indigenous cultures, particularly traditions from Native North American cultures, as will be examined in the following chapter.

## Chapter 6

### Transmission and Composition in Danza Song Repertoires

Song repertoires in the Danza community draw on two primary modes of historicity and authenticity: One connects to the historical lineage of Conchero through the *alabanzas*, and the other seeks to reach back further than the syncretized Catholicized traditions of Conchero to recall an aesthetic from a pre-Hispanic past. These parallel repertoires provide insight into how members of the Los Angeles Danza community, as well as the growing national and transnational Danza communities that regularly interact with the Los Angeles community, interpret Indigenous identities and aesthetics.

Presently, danzantes in Los Angeles and the transnational community may do any combination of the following:

1. Perform *alabanzas*, or praise songs, from the Conchero tradition, or “Aztecicized” *alabanzas* with the overly Catholic references removed;
2. Perform songs from Indigenous communities in Mexico;
3. Perform songs from Native North American communities;
4. Draw on Native North American musical styles, particularly those from the Lakota Sun Dance, *Inipi* or Lakota Sweat Lodge, and the Native American Church, to create new songs; or
5. Compose entirely new songs with aesthetics based on archaeological research and studies of primary sources that utilize new or older texts in Nahuatl.

This chapter examines each of these musical choices in Danza and explores what each reveals regarding danzantes’ perspectives on Indigenous cultures, identities, and histories.

## **Authenticities in Danza**

Because of the recent changes in repertoires of Danza communities outlined in this dissertation, questions of authenticity have come to the fore. What constitutes an authentic Indigenous performance and song? Does an immutable Indigenous authenticity lie within Indigenous songs and rituals, or can authenticity be corrupted by bypassing traditional forms of transmission or changing performance contexts? These questions are of growing importance as danzantes and participants in affiliated Indigenous, cultural, revival movements continue developing pan-Indigenous, Aztec, or Mexica aesthetics through the study of books, archaeological artifacts, and contemporary Indigenous practices.<sup>98</sup> The result has been a plurality of authenticities and perspectives regarding the validity of these repertoires, their sources, and the historical narratives that render them meaningful.

There are several categories of authenticities that are useful in considering the significances of these repertoires to danzantes. These significances draw on both recent and more distant histories, including pre-Hispanic histories that bridge the present with a desired Aztec past as a focal point for a broader Indigenous revival. One critical source for this historical bridging, termed “folk” authenticity by Regina Bendix, is authenticity based on anonymity and inferred historical depth, which is opposite “authorial” authenticity in which the composer or creator is known (1997:47). In the Danza repertoire, anonymity provides a key opportunity for

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<sup>98</sup> Within the Danza community, “Aztec” is frequently employed as synonymous with either “pan-Indigenous” or “Mexica,” meaning the tribe that governed the Aztec Empire at the time the Spanish arrived in 1519. Furthermore, the conflation of “Mexica,” the historical tribe, with “Mexican,” the nationality, makes the applications of this terminology in Danza even more confusing. In this dissertation, I employ the term “Mexica” to distinguish those who view the ongoing cultural efforts in Danza as a revival of a specifically Mexica tribal culture, and “Aztec” to connote those who take a broader pan-Indigenous view of a desired cultural revival.

historical interpretations, and even songs that were recently composed can be reinscribed with new histories and significances.

Another form of authenticity, “experiential authenticity,” is described by Michelle Bigenho as the entirety of the experience created through synesthesia, or “when one sense experience, by contiguity, draws an associative relation with another sense experience” (2002:17). This form of authenticity is particularly powerful in invoking a historical present through rituals, such as the Fundación de Tenochtitlan discussed in Chapter 3. Additionally, Bigenho suggests a related category of “cultural-historical authenticity,” which she describes as an “always slightly imperfect representation, as it purports a continuity with an imagined point of origin, situated in a historical or mythical past” (ibid.:18), expanding on Richard Handler and William Saxon’s observation that living history requires exact simulation, or acting out the past (1988:243). For many *danzantes*, connections to documented Aztec or Mexica rituals, such as calendar and new fire ceremonies described in the Florentine Codex, have become key to the *Danza* experience; many of these *danzantes* strongly identify music and *Danza* with the pre-Hispanic past and its reemergence. The significance of this source of authenticity is further accentuated among *danzantes* who view *Danza* as the hub of a prophetic cultural re-birth for Mexica culture, particularly those who believe in the *Consigna de Anahuac* (See Chapter 3).

In contrast to these perceptions of Indigenous musical authenticity as that which most closely replicates pre-Hispanic practices, those who continue to sing *alabanzas* and practice *Danza Azteca* as it was taught by Florencio Yescas view the continuity of oral transmission as the primary source of Indigenous authenticity. From this perspective, stringed instruments and traditions that originated in the *danzas de conquista* are not interpreted as at odds with Indigeneity, but rather as components of manifold Mexican, Indigenous, and syncretic identities.

Collectively, these competing sources of authenticities have led to the diversification of repertoires and their attributed histories that will be explored below.

### **Alabanzas and Oral Transmission**

Within Danza, the alabanzas remain among the oldest continuously performed songs in the tradition. The alabanzas were transmitted orally from Conchero, and their continued performance reinforces the link to the Conchero tradition. This repertoire is traditionally accompanied by individuals playing the *concha*—a stringed instrument commonly made out an armadillo shell or gourd—and mandolins. Harmonically, the alabanzas utilize western tonal harmonies, though with Indigenous tuning modifications, and they predominantly use only three chords: the tonic, sub-dominant, and dominant. Furthermore, alabanzas typically have Spanish texts and the subject matter is predominantly Catholic with syncretic Indigenous elements, such as tributes to the four directions. In addition to the syncretic Catholic alabanza texts, several alabanzas recount the history of Conchero, including key events such as the battle of Sangremal (See Chapter 3), preserving the oral histories of the Concheros through song.

Historically there was significant variation between the versions of alabanzas passed down by different Conchero organizations, known as *mesas*. Recently, the Conchero tradition of oral transmission has been affected by efforts to inscribe the tradition in booklets, leading to standardization and the perception of “correct” versions of alabanzas (Rostas 2009:218); however, the booklets have also permitted broader dissemination of the songs, facilitating their performance by communities in the Mexican-American diaspora. Additionally, alabanza compilations published in the United States include texts of classic alabanzas from Mexico, and newer alabanzas that immortalize the arrival of Danza to the United States. *Cantos y Alabanzas*

*de Danza Mexi'cayotl* compiled by Mario and Beatrice Aguilar of Danza Mexi'cayotl in San Diego is one such example of a collection published in the United States (2009).

The alabanza repertoire has continuously developed to reflect the histories and historical interpretations of Conchero and Danza communities. In particular, several significant changes occurred in the alabanza repertoire during the twentieth century in Mexico City as Conchero groups became urbanized and began drawing connections to an Aztec past (See Chapter 3). Anthropologist Susanna Rostas remarks in her analysis of Conchero that changes in the lyrics of alabanzas during this time reflected a desire to resituate the origins of the tradition in Mexico City rather than the Bajío, as the valley to the north of Mexico City is commonly known. For example, she highlights a key change in the lyrics of “Cuando nuestra America fue conquistada” in which references to the Bajío and Chichimec people were replaced with Aztec references by 1969; by 1990, she notes the appearance of a new version of the alabanza with six verses concentrating on the fall of Tenochtitlan (2009:217-218). This historical reattribution within Conchero was separate from parallel movements in the 1960s, such as the *Mexicayotl* movements detailed in Chapter 3, since Concheros continued to sing alabanzas while other contemporaneous *mexicanidad* movements transitioned to other repertoires (ibid.).

Today, the nationalistic themes and historical repositioning that emerged in alabanzas during the twentieth century in Mexico City allow for a common repertoire shared by disparate segments of the Los Angeles Danza community. For example, the alabanza “Mi sangre es guerrera,” meaning “my blood is of a warrior,” reinforces prevalent historical interpretations among segments of the Danza community pursuing Indigenous cultural revivals through its references to Anahuac and the conflation of “Mexica” and “Mexican” identities.

Mi sangre es guerrera  
de raza Mexica  
y amo a mi tierra  
que siempre predica  
la gloria y la paz

Aunque la invadieron  
con muy gran infamia  
nunca la vencieron  
mi gran patria Anahuac  
siempre viverás

My blood is that of a  
warrior  
of the Mexica race  
and I love my land  
that always expounds  
glory and peace.

Although they invaded  
with grand infamy  
they never defeated  
my native land Anahuac  
may it live forever.  
(translated by author)

This alabanza was sung to commence the celebration of the 690<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the founding of Tenochtitlan in Salinas, California, which included danzantes from a wide variety of perspectives. The alabanza highlighted the unifying purpose of the event by commemorating the fall of Tenochtitlan through song before the beginning of a ceremony that created a cultural-historical authenticity through the Danza experience. Together, the alabanza and subsequent danzas created a historical present for the danzantes, invoking Tenochtitlan through the narrative of the song text; the altar structured as a pyramid from Tenochtitlan; and the pre-Hispanic sounding music of Xolotl, a Californian Aztec musician performing on ceramic flutes to the accompaniment of the huehuetl drums. In a diasporic performance context, the idea of unity connoted by a shared Mexica ethnic identity (“Raza Mexica”) in the alabanza gains additional meaning as it can simultaneously signify a Mexica Indigenous heritage or a Mexican national identity—a point further reiterated by the presence of Mexican national flags and emblems among the danzantes participating in the commemoration.



Figure 6.1: A young woman recreates the scene of the Virgin of Guadalupe's apparition to Juan Diego (Photograph by Kristina Nielsen).

In contrast to the nationalistic and historical alabanzas, the overtly Catholic alabanzas are prominent in the Danza community leading up to Holy days in the Catholic calendar, particularly the celebrations surrounding the Virgin of Guadalupe's day on the twelfth of December. In Los Angeles, a significant number of danzantes unite exclusively to celebrate the Virgin of Guadalupe, and these groups temporarily alter the Danza landscape when they make their annual appearance (Personal Interview with Arvizu 2015). One of the largest events for these Danza groups is the annual Our Lady of Guadalupe procession (See Chapter 2).<sup>99</sup> This procession prominently features the alabanza "La Guadalupana" that Danza and church groups in the procession sing behind elaborate floats featuring young women and men posing as the Virgin of

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<sup>99</sup> Field recordings of the 2015 Our Lady of Guadalupe procession can be found on the Internet Archive at <https://archive.org/details/uclaethnomusicologyarchive>. From the main site, search "Nielsen, Kristina" or the collection number, 2017.02, to find the full collection. The recordings of the procession can be found in the folder "Virgin de Guadalupe Procession."

Guadalupe and Juan Diego. These groups are interspersed between the Matachin, Arco y Flecha, Conchero, Danza Azteca and Apache groups in the procession (Figure 6.1).<sup>100</sup>

As noted by Lazaro Arvizu in Chapter 2, the older generation that continues to perform alabanzas and maintains Danza as introduced by Yescas does not interpret Catholicism as necessarily at odds with Indigeneity; instead, danzantes such as Arvizu view Catholic and Indigenous cultures and histories as inextricably intertwined in Danza.<sup>101</sup> Among members of the older generation, attempts to remove Catholicism from the tradition and its music become a disruption that threatens to rupture lines of transmission, affecting the integrity of the tradition. From this perspective, the concept of authenticity within the tradition lies not in what may have been historical or Indigenous at the time the Spanish arrived, but instead in maintaining the repertoire as it was transmitted to them by Yescas and other Conchero dancers. Transmission is itself viewed as crucial to the authenticity of the tradition, and to stray from the tradition as passed down through oral tradition is to risk corroding an aspect of its Indigenous integrity.

Arvizu and others who share his perspective are not opposed to the creation of new songs as they also see the tradition as dynamic; rather, they are concerned about the disruptiveness of changes to the underlying attributions and histories of Danza (Personal Interviews 2015, 2016). These have become particularly noticeable in the Los Angeles community as many Danza circles reattribute the danzas choreographed by Yescas to a pre-Hispanic past—a repositioning that often uses song repertoires in Nahuatl to bolster the historical narrative (See Chapter 3). From

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<sup>100</sup> See Chapter 3 for a discussion of the distinctions between these different danza de conquista groups.

<sup>101</sup> A field recording of Arvizu leading Xipe Totec in singing an alabanza can be found on the Internet Archive at <https://archive.org/details/uclaethnomusicologyarchive>. From the main site, search “Nielsen, Kristina” or the collection number, 2017.02, to find the full collection. The alabanza can be heard on DSC\_0671 in the folder “Celebration of the Virgin de Guadalupe.”

the perspective of Arvizu, acknowledging Yescas' developments make oral transmission and local history richer by continuing the traditional Conchero *mesa* structure that respects and honors the capitanes that came before.

### **Movement Away from Alabanzas in the Los Angeles Community**

The Los Angeles and Southern California Danza communities have been at the forefront of many musical developments in Danza, and several new ceremonies have emerged that are entirely devoid of alabanzas. These performances are frequently interpreted as “Aztec” or “pre-Hispanic,” meaning danzantes perceive them to sound unaffected by European musical idioms. Key characteristics include the utilization of Indigenous languages, especially Nahuatl; accompaniment exclusively with voice and instruments Indigenous to the Americas, particularly the absence of string instruments common in Conchero; and commonly recognized markers of Indigenous song performance, such as vocables and the imitation of Native North American vocal qualities and phrase shapes. These performances remove layers of historical abstraction for the typical danza participant, creating experiences of cultural-historical authenticity (Bigenho 2002:18).

Songs reflecting the diverse Indigenous backgrounds of danzantes have been integrated into Danza, building a distinctly pan-Indigenous repertoire. In one sense, Danza continues the historical *modus operandi* processes from colonial-era Mexico that built a shared pan-Indigenous culture through substitution, although today these dislocations are the result of international migration, diaspora and a globalized economy (See Chapter 4).<sup>102</sup> A number of musical choices therefore reflect personal heritage, while others, such as many instances of Huichol and Sonora

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<sup>102</sup> From the perspective of many within the Danza community, these dislocations are a continuation of the colonial experience.

Yaqui repertoires and symbols in Danza, are often a result of the personal preferences of danzantes and broader pan-Indigenous interpretations of Mexican Indigeneity. One example of such a performance was the integration of a Zapotec song at Xochipilli’s Mexica New Year Ceremony discussed in Chapter 2. Arteaga composed a new melody for the text that had been given to him by Tlanizpilli, and the song was performed as danzantes and participants recreated the planting of corn.

In addition to songs taught by individuals originating from, or affiliated with, Indigenous communities in Mexico, there are several songs that include Indigenous Mexican symbols or stylistic elements whose source of entry into the Danza community are less clear. Some of these songs are in Nahuatl, however in a number of cases there are Spanish songs with distinctly Northern Mexican Indigenous characteristics, particularly the blue deer symbolism common to the Huichol. These include the songs “Venadito Azul” and “Corre Corre Venadito” (Figure 6.2).

Voice

Cor re cor re ven a di to cor re cor re ven a di i to

5  
Cor re cor re ven a di to azul cor re cor re par a Wir i kut a e ah na hey hey yo eh

Figure 6.2: Transcription of “Corre Corre Venadito.” Transcribed by Kristina Nielsen.

The song “Corre Corre Venadito” is distinct from many of the other songs in the Danza repertoire because of its shifting meter. The song is in Spanish and it references Wirikuta, a sacred site of the Huichol located in San Luis Potosí, in tandem with the sacred blue deer. The origins of this song are difficult to pin down. Despite its clear connection to a Huichol spiritual

theme, the Spanish language text and Plains-style vocables common in recent compositions support the case for a more recent source of origin.

Huichol and Sonora Yaqui influences are particularly prominent in Sergio Ruiz's Danza group Gran Tenochtitlan (See Chapter 2), where deer and Huichol symbols are central to the altar. Ruiz's Danza ceremonies draw on combinations of pan-Indigenous traditions, including peyote songs—a trend that will be explored at length below; and songs and traditions originating from identifiable Indigenous cultures, such as his use of Huichol and Yaqui songs and symbols. Ruiz draws his inspiration from a number of diverse sources; for instance, while attending a Native Californian bear ceremony, he describes wondering what form a similar ceremony might take in Central Mexico, ultimately concluding that deer would be the logical animal for them to have honored (Personal Interview with Ruiz 2016). From this personal revelation, Ruiz has begun developing a deer ceremony that includes performances of songs from the Huichol and the Yaqui of Sonora and New Mexico. Additionally, his ceremony will integrate songs in Nahuatl and common Danza songs, such as “Corre corre venadito,” highlighting the ceremony's emphasis on deer. Ruiz plans for the ceremony to use the water drum, which is commonly used to accompany Native North American peyote songs, instead of the huehuetl commonly found in Danza circles. Additionally, the participating danzantes will wear *tenalhualas*, a rattle made of moth cocoons, around their ankles instead of ayoyotes, softening the percussiveness of the dancing.

Ruiz's approach to aligning his practices with the past, such as through his vision of an Aztec deer ceremony, highlight how repertoires are integrated and composed to develop historical experiences for danzantes. As noted in Chapter 2, Ruiz draws on both his own studies of books, particularly codices, that guide his development of rituals and songs that feel correct to

him. When presented to danzantes and integrated into the community, these visions of a historical Aztec music shift from potential recreations to historical practices through the power of experiential authenticity. This process renders the rituals meaningful through the communal acceptance of historicity and a connection to a communal pan-Indigenous Danza heritage. As a result, a deer ceremony becomes a part of the Aztec past through the power of experience, situating it within a Danza circle's local and ritual history, in addition to a meta-historical context that can draw on broader themes of pan-Indigenous cultural survival and resurgence.

### **Native North American Influences**

As highlighted by the bear ceremony's influence on Ruiz's budding deer ceremony, Native North American songs, musical idioms, and rituals have informed Indigenous recovery efforts among Danza circles and interrelated Aztec or Mexica cultural reclamation movements. These efforts have been fueled by the participation of danzantes in Native North American culture, such as powwows, Sun Dances, and other Native North American events and ceremonies. Springing from these Native North American influences, several recently composed songs in the Danza repertoire include the imitation of Native North American singing styles, vocables common to Inipi and peyote songs, and a movement away from the European harmonic structures commonly found in the alabanza repertoire.<sup>103</sup>

Danzantes integrating Native North American musics and rituals into their practices often construe Catholicism and European musical traits as inauthentic to Indigeneity. Furthermore, for those who view all Indigenous communities as one continuous Native community, such as those believe historical narratives such as that of Pastel related in Chapter 2, all Indigenous cultures

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<sup>103</sup> This is predominantly marked by the avoidance of chordal harmonies, although melodies still often have an underlying tonic, sub-dominant, dominant structure.

become potential repositories of an earlier Indigenous repertoire. Through these pop-diffusionist historical narratives, Indigenous repertoires are positioned as a primordial history with which danzantes can connect. Because of these diffusionist historical themes, most literature on Danza has addressed the performance of Native North American music uncritically. For instance, among the examples of musical performance provided by Jennie Marie Luna in her dissertation is an instance of a danzante and Sun Dancer in Mexico City offering tobacco to the huehuetl, as is customarily done in Native North American drum circles, before singing a Lakota song (2009:210). A similar description of a performance of Native North American songs and rituals by danzantes is provided in Raquel Guerrero's Master of Humanities thesis (2010). Here she provides an interesting example witnessed in Xochicalco, Mexico that was related to her by a danzante:

One time I was in Xochicalco [Mexico] and I ran into a group about to do a ceremony where a hole is first created in the ground, so they sang a Cherokee mourning song not knowing where it was from and not knowing what it meant. Sometimes it can be laughable, this was the "danza de la luna" which is like an inherited Sun Dance for women but at a full moon . . . So, I went to see it for myself and they sang a lot of Sun Dance songs and my friend in the Mexicayotl tradition started singing a "piercing" song and I thought to myself "wow," I was concerned that no one here is Lakota and there is no piercing going on here . . . and so I brought up my concern to my friend because why she would sing this because she knew it was a piercing song and there are songs for Moon Dance written in the last three decades. On the one hand it is a sacrifice, it's beautiful, it's honoring women; on one hand it's made up, but on the other hand when you are taking a bit here and a bit there, those bits all mean something . . . ceremonies have to come from somewhere, they have to start somewhere.<sup>104</sup> (Guerrero 2010:112-113)

Following this description, Guerrero draws on Stuart Hall and categorizes the use of Sun Dance as one of cultural reclamation (ibid.). But whose culture is being reclaimed in this instance? And

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<sup>104</sup> In this same passage, Guerrero's informant mentions the danzantes sacrificing a turkey and pouring the blood into the hole for the tree trunk. This action is a significant shift from the Sun Dance where no turkeys or animals are sacrificed (Walker 1991:178). It is therefore upon the dancers themselves to serve as the source of sacrifice.

can a process, such as the one detailed above, be understood as a cultural reclamation if the songs and rituals being reclaimed originate from other Indigenous communities? Arguably, such performances are interpreted as recoveries by performers because of the popular diffusionist Indigenous histories that underlie them (See Chapter 4). These histories position these performances as authentic Indigenous repertoire, and tap into the belief of a primordial unadulterated strata of Indigenous culture universally available for cultural recoveries.

The acceptance of such performances is not a universal position among Los Angeles *Danza capitanes*. In fact, many of the leaders with whom I discussed borrowing from Native North American music and ritual traditions found it to be highly problematic. The reasons included:

1. The integration Native North American traditions as “more Indigenous,” thereby “more authentic,” than *alabanza* repertoires further feeds into the popular notion that Mexican Indigenous traditions are less pure than those of Native North Americans, inadvertently delegitimizing Indigenous Mexican cultural heritages.
2. The integration of Native North American music dilutes the *Danza* tradition, further complicating its Indigenous core: As it becomes more of everything, some leaders see it simultaneously becoming too amorphous, losing critical cultural context.
3. The loss of performance protocols, such as sharing where a song came from, its meaning, and declaring the permissions one has received to share it, are frequently lost or ignored. This gives rise to situations in which songs may be Indigenous but the performance practices are non-Indigenous. Similar protocols exist in the *Conchero* tradition as *alabanzas* belonged—and in many cases still do belong—to specific families or *mesas*, and etiquette required securing permissions to perform a song.

Performances of Native North American songs or song styles have raised challenging questions regarding when certain boundaries of song ownership have been crossed—particularly when the songs performed are not simply based on Native North American repertoires, but rather direct replications of Native North American songs. Determinations of whether a performance is crossing boundaries is further complicated by the diversity in Danza groups; for instance, I have encountered danzantes who have Native North American ancestry, such as Pascua Yaqui or Lakota, in addition to their Indigenous Mexican ancestry. The repertoires of individual danzantes can become blurred into the larger musical identity of the Danza group, and eventually the larger Danza transnational community.

As mentioned above, the integration of repertoire and traditions from other Indigenous communities represents, in one sense, a continuation of the *modus operandi* through which Indigenous peoples in Mexico substituted one inaccessible cultural entity for another through the colonial era (See Chapter 2). In more recent history, however, twentieth-century efforts to assimilate Indigenous communities and create a mixed European and pan-Indigenous national Mexican heritage reveal other reasons for the use of diverse Native traditions. These include drawing on Indigenous traditions as signifiers of place (Hellier-Tinoco 2011:28), or as a means to unify what Steve Stern refers to as “a patchwork of ‘many Mexicos’ stitched together as much by political fiat and cultural proclamation as by unity of experience, memory, and identity” (1995:23-24).

Danza’s modern history is interwoven with these twentieth-century nationalist movements, including Amalia Hernández’s Ballet Folklórico discussed in Chapter 2 that drew on Indigenous music and dances from across Mexico. Although Yescas’ time collaborating with Hernández before departing for the United States was brief, his choreography and developments

can still be found among groups, even those that perceive him as folkloric and inauthentic (See Chapter 2). As a result, the tradition practiced by Danza groups becomes its own form of articulated patchwork quilt, de-coupling and re-coupling histories, dances and songs together. Today, many Danza histories bypass Florencio Yescas, Mexican nationalist movements, and folklórico entirely, viewing them as inauthentic. These histories, particularly those that rely heavily on secrecy and the Consigna de Anahuac and diffusionism, provide tempting escapes from the problematics of Indigenous appropriation and cultural ownership.



Figure 6.3: Plains-style tipi with Aztec symbols at the Mexica New Year Ceremony in San Jose (Photograph by Kristina Nielsen).

### **Plains Musical styles in Danza Repertoires**

Plains music, instruments, and symbols are the most readily found in contemporary Danza repertoires, and the Lakota Inipi and the Sun Dance in particular have become sources for

danzantes developing new rituals and Temazcal repertoires.<sup>105</sup> Today, many danzantes interpret Lakota rituals and symbols as congruent to those from Danza, rationalizing the integration of Lakota practices, such as the Sun Dance, in Aztec cultural revivals. These deceptive congruencies include equating the *Danza de los Voladores* with the Sun Dance, as both involve poles and the ritual cutting of trees; and the blurring of the Lakota concept of “Wakan Tanka,” or “The Great Mystery,” with “Ometeotl,” a term used to denote duality among Danza groups seeking to move away from Catholicism and European cultural practices. These deceptive outward cultural similarities lend credence to a symbolic basis for integrating Plains and Lakota music and ritual culture.<sup>106</sup>

The decision to integrate Plains symbols, repertoire, and rituals into Danza offers additional insight into how members of the community evaluate authenticities and Indigenous histories. Plains cultures are invoked through emblems, such as war bonnets, tipis and Native flutes that are associated with “authentic” Indigenous culture on both sides of the border.<sup>107</sup> For instance, an “Aztecized” tipi featured at the San Jose Mexica New Year hosted by Calpulli Tonalehqueh provides an example of this emblematic cultural blurring (Figure 6.3). Sioux symbolism is similarly invoked south of the border to assert authenticity, such as in the case of vendors in South America targeting tourists in cities such as Quito wear Plains-style headdresses

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<sup>105</sup> I use the broader “Plains” designation rather than “Sioux,” or specifically “Lakota” to include the many other tribes that shared similar musical and cultural traits. Though I discuss many examples that are specifically Lakota, the integration of many Plains-style emblems into Danza often does not make finer distinctions regarding which Plains tribes they are emulating.

<sup>106</sup> Furthermore, both “Wakan Tanka” and “Ometeotl,” are complicated by and conflated with parallel Christian interpretations of “God” or “Creator.”

<sup>107</sup> This includes the Apache groups in Mexico, such as Apache Danza Tzidada discussed in Chapter 2 that uses Plains-style headdresses and dances with tomahawks (Castellanos 2009:39).

while selling portraits and trinkets (Figure 6.4).<sup>108</sup> These uses of emblematic Plains culture can provide powerful symbols of Indigeneity, reinforcing popular interpretations of pan-Indianism or serving markers of an Indigenous authenticity, albeit one that problematically places Plains culture on a pedestal as a pure, historical and available Indigenous culture.



Figure 6.4: Vendors in Quito, Ecuador, dressed in regalia reminiscent of the Sioux (Photo courtesy of Jessie Vallejo).

In a 2009 article, Sandra Garner identifies several additional fallacies among *danzantes* that have led to their utilization of specifically Lakota culture. Garner suggests that the Lakota and Sioux are viewed as emblematic of Native North American Indians, and she notes that outsiders believe that Lakota practices are available. Additionally, she argues that there is an underlying belief that ‘practices of Indigenous groups, or ‘natural people,’ are universally

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<sup>108</sup> Thanks to Jessie Vallejo for sharing this example and photo.

shared” (2009:432), a finding that coincides with the popular diffusionist histories that create an argument for the integration of other Indigenous practices into Danza explored above. Many of these false assumptions are readily found in Danza literature and among members of the community. Guerrero’s thesis provides an excellent example of these assumptions in her explanation of why Lakota culture has been integrated into Danza:

In Danza, there is also a trend to incorporate traditions from Indigenous neighbors here in the U.S., what some danzantes term the “Lakotacization” of Danza. Lakota is another tribal name which for danzantes denotes an umbrella banner of unity among many tribes and traditions from the north (what is now the United States), much like “Aztec” does in Mexico. The unification of the traditions and peoples of the Aztec and the Lakota implies a greater unification of Indigenous peoples, a goal several danzantes have attested to—again, the principle of a greater Unión. In this regard, the principle of Union takes on the role of promoting a Pan-Indian movement. (2010:99)

The false assumption of correspondence between “Lakota” and “Aztec” as equivalent umbrella categories of identification—and thereby broad categories of cultural ownership—gives rise to the additional problems of assuming shared cultural heritage and therefore the right to incorporate materials.

The integration of the Sun Dance into Aztec and Mexica cultural revivals in both Mexico and the United States, as described earlier by Guerrero, provides additional insight into how danzantes spearheading Indigenous cultural revivals are interpreting Indigenous histories and authenticities. Leonard Crow Dog, a controversial figure in the Lakota community, taught the Sun Dance to Tlakaheel in the 1970s. Tlakaheel subsequently integrated Sun Dance into his own budding Kaltonal spiritual teachings, and he argued that the Sun Dance must have had a Mexica origin given its similarities with the Danza de los Voladores (González-Torres 2005:200). As a result, for danzantes who followed Tlakaheel or his students, the performance of Sun Dance was no longer a Northern American Native tradition but one that they had “recovered” —an ancient ritual of their own that they re-learned through the Lakota. The consequence of this perception of

recovery, facilitated by perceptions of commonalities between Lakota and Mexica/Aztec symbols, meant that there was no need to critically consider the act as one of potential appropriation. Danzantes could justify their performance through the perceived cultural similarities, strengthening histories predicated on Nahuatl cultural dissemination.

This perspective on cultural recovery bears close similarities to the Nahua-centric views of the Movimiento Confederado Restaurador del Anáhuac (MCRA) and Zemanauak Tlamchtiloyan (ZT) examined in Chapter 4, and the narrative of a Nahua cultural diffusion from Niagara to Nicaragua described by Pastel (See Chapter 2). The continuing tenacity of these historical narratives was highlighted by a young danzante in Los Angeles insisted to me that many Lakota believe Sun Dance originated with the Mexica—a claim for which I have encountered no evidence. All arguments for a Mexica Sun Dance likely stem from Tlakaelel and Crow Dog’s teachings that fused with the Mexica-centric teachings of the MCRA and ZT.

The interpretation of Sun Dance as authentically Mexica or pan-Indigenous and therefore a meaningful ritual for a Mexican Indigenous self has resulted in a substantial number Mexican American Sun Dance participants in California and the American Southwest. The California Sun Dance community overlaps with the Danza community; for instance, Jorge García, a local Sun Dance leader, served as one of the two honored elders in attendance at the Coyolxauhqui-Toyaacan Teuxihuitl New Year ceremony. Additionally, as noted in Chapter 2, Cuezalin used to participated in Sun Dance and Lakota Inipi ceremonies while he was involved in the gnostic community; however, he no longer participates in Sun Dance, and instead has focused on developing a distinctly Mexican pan-Indigenous Danza culture. Today, Cuezalin is more critical of danzantes, Chicanos, and Mexican-Americans participation in Sun Dance. When asked why

Sun Dance and Inipi culture appealed to so many from Mexican backgrounds, Cuezalin offered several insightful reasons that intersect with complex questions of identity and authenticity:

There was in California a law which prohibited Mexican children from speaking Spanish in schools, so there was a shaming of Mexicanness . . . and Chicanos wanted to be everything but Mexican. So when Danza came, they were like “oh, so I can be Mexicah and not be Mexican?” So they joined Danza as a way of being Mexican but not being Mexican—the Mexican that was shunned, that they were made to feel embarrassed about. But still, that is one of the reasons why I feel like a lot of Chicanos adopted Northern Native Tribes culture instead of digging into our own. Also because it was easier, it was already made. (Personal Interview with Cuezalin 2015)

In the Mexican diaspora, drawing on Native North American Indigenous cultures to form alternative Indigenous identities could offer respite from the oppressiveness of “Mexican,” “Hispanic,” “Latino,” or “Chicano” identities in the United States. Furthermore, the popular belief that Plains culture was culturally available to Mexicans as a source for cultural recovery—an interpretation furthered by Tlakaheel’s positioning of Sun Dance as Mexica—continues to resonate with the community.

The integration of Plains practices, including the Sun Dance and Inipi, into Danza have continued since Leonard Crow Dog’s teaching of the Sun Dance to Tlakaheel. One example recounted by Cuezalin involved Tata Cuaxtle, a Native Nahuatl speaker from Copalillo, Guerrero, and a beloved and respected elder among many in the Danza community of Los Angeles. Cuezalin got to know Tata Cuaxtle through their mutual participation in Sun Dance, and Cuezalin describes him as a pan-Indianist, meaning that he did not distinguish between the origins of Indigenous traditions. Cuezalin recounts that Tata Cuaxtle invited Joe Chasing Horse, a Lakota Sun Dance chief, to Copalillo in an effort to introduce the Temazcal to his community; however, what was actually introduced was the Lakota Inipi (Personal Interview with Cuezalin 2015). As a result of these and similar efforts, today there are Inipi ceremonies in Mexico, and

“Inipi” and “Temazcal” are interpreted to be synonymous and connected in a stratum of primordial pan-Indigenous heritage.

As the integration of Lakota traditions into Danza and affiliated Mexica and Aztec cultural revival movements approaches fifty years, Lakota cultural practices offer additional sources of histories and authenticities. For example, the teaching of Lakota culture in the community through oral transmission asserts another mode of Indigenous authenticity within the sphere of Danza and Mexica cultural revivals. Additionally, as these cultural recovery movements approach nearly half a century of integrating and performing Lakota practices, the time depth substantiates feelings of folk authenticity and tradition. Today, a generation has grown up accepting this interpretation of cultural recovery as a part of their heritage.

Additionally, the performance of Sun Dance, Inipi ceremonies, and other emblematic North American culture in Mexico reinforces interpretations these performances as authentically Mexican, using geography to bolster cultural-historical authenticity (Bigenho 2002:18).

Danzantes in Los Angeles can point to performances in Mexico and their home communities as evidence for historicity, transforming these performances of Native North American culture in Mexico into powerful authenticators in the diaspora.

### **Peyote Music**

The history of peyote music and musical developments within the peyote genre offer additional considerations regarding the difficulty of capturing and transposing Indigenous authenticity within Danza. Peyote music is itself a pan-Indigenous style that it includes, among others, Sioux, Shawnee, Arapaho, Apache, Comanche, Ute, Kiowa, Caddo and Pawnee musical elements (McAllester 1949; Catches 1991:18; Rhodes 1958:42). Although peyote is now

primarily associated with Native North America, the peyote plant has an extensive history in Mexico, and a number of Northern Mexican tribes, such as the Huichol, Cora and Tarahumara, continue to have their own peyote ceremonies that differ substantially from those of Native North American communities.<sup>109</sup> Peyote is believed to have spread north of the Rio Grande by the early eighteenth century, where it continued to disseminate further north (McAllester 1949:13). The Native American Church (NAC) is the primary vehicle of contemporary peyote culture, and continues to practice a syncretic blend of Protestant Christianity and Native North American spirituality. Indigenous continuities in NAC ceremonies include the importance of the number four and the four directions, smoke, incense, and fire (Stewart 1987:41).<sup>110</sup>

Peyote songs traditionally accompany ceremonies conducted by spiritual leaders who travel with tipis and host ceremonies that continue through the night. Much of the repertoire is recent, with David McAllester noting in his studies from the 1940s that the older Comanche songs in the repertoire likely date back to around 1910 (1949:51). In addition to this stratum of older songs in the repertoire, peyote singers continuously introduce new songs that are composed by the singers or sought through vision quests (ibid.:47). As a result, the peyote repertoire remains dynamic. Today, official NAC ceremonies are restricted to those who can certify tribal

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<sup>109</sup> Although the Mexica in Tenochtitlan had peyote through trade with peoples to the north and the name peyote is derived from the Nahuatl term *peyotl* (Schultes 1940:430), the Mexica primarily utilized other hallucinogens, such as mushrooms and *ololiuhqui* (Evans 2008:401).

<sup>110</sup> There are two primary peyote way traditions in the United States that reflect the tension inherent in the syncretism of Christian and Indigenous spiritual practices. These two primary peyote way traditions are the Half Moon and the Cross Fire ways. Differences between the two include that the Cross Fire way refers to the one presiding over the ceremony as a minister rather than a roadman and utilizes the bible; in contrast, the Half Moon way does not use the bible and instead refers to the ceremonial leader as a roadman (Catches 1991:18-20). Although the Half Moon way does not feature the bible prominently, prayers often end with the phrase “in the name of Jesus, Amen” (ibid.:21).

enrollment, and although there are a significant number of recordings of peyote songs in circulation, the ceremony itself is more carefully guarded.

A distinguishing feature of peyote songs are the introductory beats on the water drum in which the pitch of the drum rises and the tempo is established in an eight to sixteen beat instrumental introduction (McAllester 1949:54). In the peyote ceremony, the water drum and a rattle are passed around the circle, and the recipient sings approximately four peyote songs before passing the rattle clockwise to the next person in the circle (ibid.:11). A small gourd rattle with a light timbre accompanies the songs and is played with small wrist movements. The vocal part is predominantly sung in eighth or quarter note rhythms, and dotted rhythms are rare (ibid.:56). The songs typically follow a pattern in which a lead singer introduces the song and sings an introductory phrase known as the *incipit*, after which others join in. The songs are generally short, with most lasting no longer than two to three minutes.

Beginning in the 1930s, peyote singers began to integrate harmonies into the peyote repertoire. Peyote singer Joe Abdo Senior of the Yankton Sioux attributed this shift to the Sioux reservation and the influence of Protestant hymns:

They were Crow Creek Sioux, and belonged to Presbyterian or Episcopal over there, and they sang over there. In fact, I was told that they even had a quartet, and they sing that way. But they came to church over here. They never had medicine until they came over here at Greenwood. The Sioux singing at that time, well, we didn't have our 1<sup>st</sup> tenor, or 2<sup>nd</sup> tenor, or bass, but when a Sioux song came out, everybody got in there, and boy, it sounded like an organ. Each man had a voice, some had maybe a high pitched voice, one had a medium voice, and one guy with a low deep sound, and they sing that way, not only men but women—they had different pitches. When you get a lot of people in there, it's harmonized is what it is. (Yankton Sioux 1977)

The popular peyote song recordings by Primeaux and Mike in the 1990s continue to utilize this heavily harmonized style, including the 1995 album *Walk in Beauty* that was a finalist for the National Association of Independent Record Distributors (NAIRD) Indie Award in 1996 (Indian

Country Today 2007). Some of the tracks bear an uncanny similarity to Gregorian chant in their vocal quality and the addition of reverb. Such a stylistic cross-pollination is not unlikely as the 1994 album *Chant*, featuring recordings of the Benedictine Monks of Santo Domingo de Silos, had been met with critical acclaim just one year prior to the release of *Walk in Beauty*. Furthermore, the audiences of Primeaux and Mike overlapped with those of Gregorian chants, as both were advertised as relaxing and capable of relieving stress in the new-age and world music markets.<sup>111</sup>

Many recordings of peyote music draw on musical effects common in new-age ambient music, such as waves crashing, trickling water sounds, or even thunder in the background. These effects are heavily utilized on Gerald Primeaux Sr.'s 2004 album *A Tradition Continues... Harmonized Peyote Songs*. This aesthetic appealed to a new age audience and international world music market, popularizing peyote songs and presenting them as “natural” —a return to the earth. More recent recordings by Primeaux and Mike, such as the *Peyote Ways* album from 2008, have dropped many of these additional effects that became popular in the 1990s and early 2000s, although the use of reverb continues on the more recent peyote albums.

The popularization of peyote music through the world music market coincided closely with the first performances of peyote songs in Danza communities in Los Angeles—a phenomenon that the danzantes I interviewed agree began in the 1990s. There are a number of reasons why peyote songs likely appealed to danzantes in Los Angeles during this time. First, albums by artists such as Primeaux and Mike popularized peyote songs and made recordings

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<sup>111</sup> A review of the *Walk in Beauty* album by Primeaux and Mike in a 1997 *Yoga Journal* further indicates the similarities between these two genres. Reviewer Richard Price remarks “Primeaux and Mike’s ambient, mellifluous vocals are somewhat similar to Christian monastic chanting, but possess an edge derived by the mystical expectation that the divinity will appear in a vision and give personal advice. The complex harmonies are appealing musically and make a suitable background for spiritual practices and emotional quietude” (Price 1997:126).

even more accessible. The increased availability of recordings made it easier to learn peyote songs and structures; furthermore, the new recordings and their harmonies made them musically accessible through the inclusion of popular effects. Second, through their popularization on in the world music market, peyote songs signaled an Indigenous context to listeners making it possible for performers to, in their view, reject unfavorable European and Catholic music traditions. By adopting peyote songs and styles, *danzantes* could musically mark their themselves as Indigenous through an aesthetic that had already been accepted and marketed as authentically Indigenous to dominant society.

Third, *danzantes* I interviewed commented that there is a continuing belief among many *danzantes* that Native North American Indigeneity is more authentic, preserved, and unaffected by Christianity than Indigenous traditions syncretized with Catholicism in Mexico. Interestingly, the musical and cultural effects of Protestantism as described above are viewed as less impactful, possibly because of the more recent syncretic processes. Or conversely, perhaps the “certifiably” authentic Indigenous identities of Native North American performers through sources such as a Certification Degree of Indian Blood (CDIB) Card—a concept alien to Mexican Indigeneity where culture and language remain integral to Indigenous identities—render peyote songs desirable as authentic markers of a “real” Indigenous identity.

These two contrasting state definitions of Indigenous identities have given rise to a situation in which Mexicans who are fully Indigenous by heritage, even those who know their exact community, might be viewed as “inauthentic” as they neither have recognition in the United States through a CDIB card or recognition in Mexico since they have left the country and in many cases no longer speak the language.<sup>112</sup> In contrast, entire Native North American tribes

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<sup>112</sup> I was told by several Nahuatl speakers from pueblos in San Luis Potosi that even Indigenous Mexicans who grew up in Indigenous communities are often viewed as cultural outsiders upon moving to a new

no longer speak their languages, and tribal members might be only a fraction Native and still receive recognition. In light of this dynamic, coupling peyote aesthetics that are already accepted as unequivocally Indigenous with Danza might be viewed as an effort to bolster claims to recognition of an Indigenous self and identity that are otherwise called into question by definitions on both sides of the border.

Today, a number of Danza groups have a repertoire that includes peyote or “peyotized” songs. These songs can take a number of forms with the most common being the composition of new songs that emulate peyote styles with Nahuatl texts, or the “peyotization” of songs currently in the Danza repertoire. The dissemination of this music online and at ceremonies has made it readily accessible to danzantes across the broader transnational Danza and Aztec or Mexica cultural revival communities. Mimicking the structure of Native North American peyote songs, the peyote or peyotized repertoire in Danza is accompanied by a constant rattle or drumbeat played alternately on a Plains-style frame drum, often decorated with Aztec iconography; the huehuetl played softly, emulating the constant rhythm of the water drum; or occasionally the water drum with a peyote rattle, often played more aggressively than by Native American peyote singers.<sup>113</sup> An example of a peyote-inspired song in the Danza repertoire is the song “Ometeotl Huitzilopochtli Quetzalcoatl Tezcatlipoca” that has gained acceptance as a traditional Danza song (Figure 6.5).<sup>114</sup>

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city, and Mexican Indigeneity is closely linked to geography and community participation (See Chapter 6).

<sup>113</sup> For example, in videos of the group “Teocalli Tepeyolohtlan” from Denver, Colorado, the individuals playing the rattle moves from the elbow rather than the wrist as observed by McAllester, who noted that performers he interviewed believed that violent shaking might cause a lightning strike (Denver Teocalli 2009; McAllester 1949:49).

<sup>114</sup> A recording of “Ometeotl Huitzilopochtli Quetzalcoatl Tezcatlipoca” can be found on the Internet Archive at <https://archive.org/details/uclaethnomusicologyarchive>. From the main site, search “Nielsen,

The image shows a musical score for a song in 4/4 time. It consists of four systems, each with a vocal line (V) and a drum line (D). The lyrics are in Spanish and correspond to the Nahuatl names of the deities mentioned in the caption.

**System 1:** Voice: Om - e te otl Huitz il o poch tli Quetz al co atl Tez cat li po ca; Drum: A steady 4/4 drum pattern.

**System 2:** V: Yan a yan a hey yan a hey hey hey hey yan a yan a hey yan a hey hey hey; D: A steady 4/4 drum pattern.

**System 3:** V: Ton - an tzin Ton an tzin tlal li i mo tla zo Mex i ca me; D: A steady 4/4 drum pattern.

**System 4:** V: Yan a yan a hey yan a hey hey hey hey yan a yan a hey yan a hey hey hey; D: A steady 4/4 drum pattern.

Figure 6.5: Transcription of the first verse of “Ometeotl Huitzilopochtli Quetzalcoatl Tezcatlipoca.” Transcribed by Kristina Nielsen.

The first verse of the song names spiritual entities commonly referenced in Danza calpulli and the Mexica cosmology followed by vocables reminiscent of those found in Peyote and Plains songs.<sup>115</sup>

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Kristina” or the collection number, 2017.02, to find the full collection. The song can be heard on DSC\_0030 in the folder “Cueزالin Sharing Songs.”

<sup>115</sup> I distinguish between the Mexica cosmology (as understood in a historical sense) and that of individual Danza calpulli—groups that pursue the restitution or reinterpretation Mexica cosmology—since there are vital distinctions, including the more recent uses of “Ometeotl” (See Chapter 1). This is not to say that

Cuezalin believes that this song likely originated with either the Temazcal or the Peace and Dignity Journeys in the 1990s, and others with whom I spoke confirmed its approximate date of origin in the 1990s (Personal Interviews 2015, 2016).<sup>116</sup> Cuezalin sings this song occasionally with his group Xiuhcoatl, but does not particularly care for the song because of his views of authenticity in the Danza repertoire that will be discussed at length below. Nonetheless, “Ometeotl Huitzilopochtli Quetzalcoatl Tezcatlipoca” has been widely integrated into Temazcal and Danza repertoires in Los Angeles; additionally, several renditions of this song appear on YouTube with one describing it as a “Mexica peyote song” having achieved over 100,000 views (Nauikuauhtli 2010). Many of those viewing and commenting on the video reside in Mexico, highlighting the transnational dimensions of musical developments and repertoire growth.



Figure 6.6: Singers at the Coyolxauhqui-Toyaacan Teuxihuitl New Year ceremony in Baldwin Park, March 26, 2016 (Photograph by Kristina Nielsen).

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contemporary cosmologies are a-historical, but rather to acknowledge the inevitable distinction that results from contemporary reconstruction and re-interpretation projects.

<sup>116</sup> Arvizu noted that the Peace and Dignity Journeys are a continuation of the 1977 “Caravana Teponaztli” (Personal Interview with Arvizu 2016). As of October 16, 2016, the Facebook page for the 2016 Peace and Dignity Journeys features a cover photo of Tlakaheel, highlighting another link between the movements (“Peace and Dignity Journeys 2016”)

Songs that draw on peyote aesthetics and structures are now commonplace in the Danza repertoires and ceremonies. The ceremony preceding the Coyolxauhqui-Toyaacan Teuxihuitl New Year ceremony at Baldwin Park in Los Angeles provided several examples of these influences; for instance, before the danzantes entered the designated ritual space, Jiménez and other danzantes led four songs to honor each of the four directions (Figure 6.6). A “peyotized” version of “Huey Tonantzin,” a song that has become a traditional song in the Danza repertoire, was among these four songs. Like “Ometeotl Huitzilopochtli Quetzalcoatl Tezcatlipoca,” the song draws on Nahuatl and Mexica spirituality, although in a manner that allows a range of affiliations either with the Virgin of Guadalupe or Mother Earth depending on the spiritual leanings of the interpreter.

Voice

Huey To nan tzin To nan tzin Huey To nan tzin

I pal nem o huan i no yol o ta tzin tlaz o ca mat i To nan tzin

Huey To nan tzin To nan tzin Huey To nan tzin

Figure 6.7: Transcription of the first verse of “Huey Tonantzin” as sung by Cuezalin. Transcription by Kristina Nielsen.

Unlike the version of “Huey Tonantzin” performed by Cuezalin (Figure 6.7), the version performed at the Coyolxauhqui-Toyaacan Teuxihuitl New Year Ceremony was sung with a chant-like quality (Figure 6.8); additionally, the melody had been changed, adjusting the

prominent triadic structure to include more passing tones.<sup>117</sup> Another key indicator of the relationship between these songs and the peyote repertoire was the arrhythmic rattle beat marking the conclusion of the song—a trait found in virtually every peyote song.<sup>118</sup>

Voice

Huey To nan tzin To nan tzin Huey To nan tzin

Huey To nan tzin To nan tzin Huey To nan tzin

I pal nem o huan i to yo lo pa qui Tlaz o ca ma ti To nan tzin

I pal nem o huan i to yo lo pa qui Tlaz o ca ma ti To nan tzin

Figure 6.8: Transcription of the first verse of “Huey Tonantzin” as sung at the Coyolxauhqui-Toyaacan Teuxihuitl New Year Ceremony. Transcribed by Kristina Nielsen.

<sup>117</sup> In a subsequent conversation with Jiménez, I shared my observation that the songs also seemed influenced by Native Californian songs, such as the Bird Songs, that are performed with gourd rattles. I asked Jiménez who was one of the performers about the similarity in the performance style to Native North American genres, and he noted that Jorge García, who was leading many of the songs, collaborates with many Native North American tribes. Jiménez also noted that the ceremonies led by García are very secretive and he has never attended one, but he knows that García often has Native Californian singers at his ceremonies (Personal Interview with Jiménez 2016).

<sup>118</sup> Recordings of the two versions of “Huey Tonantzin” can be found on the Internet Archive at <https://archive.org/details/uclaethnomusicologyarchive>. From the main site, search “Nielsen, Kristina” or the collection number, 2017.02, to find the full collection. The version sung at the Coyolxauhqui-Toyaacan Teuxihuitl New Year Ceremony can be heard on DSB\_5771 located in the folder “Mexica New Year in Baldwin Park.” A video of Cuezalín singing “Huey Tonantzin” and discussing two variations can be found on DSC\_0032 in the folder “Cuezalín Sharing Songs.”

Carmelo believes that the song “Huey Tonantzin” was composed by a young man in Watsonville and has been in circulation for about twenty to thirty years.<sup>119</sup> For a younger generation of danzantes, however, the origins of the song have become largely anonymous, and it is frequently attributed to unspecified elders or ancestors. Through an interesting twist, the traditional Indigenous oral transmission process has traditionalized and authenticated song, and its use of Nahuatl and other Indigenous musical idioms have further cemented it as historical and linked to the Aztec past among those seeking cultural revivals.

When I asked Jiménez about the use of peyote and other Native North American music and culture for Indigenous revitalizations, he shared his perspective on the underlying reasons:

It has been here since the beginning, because obviously some of the first ceremonies in Danza were influenced by the Native American belief. I think people use it because you have to have a starting point. If everything has been destroyed from your religion, your tradition, your culture, if everything tells you that you are not supposed to do that, obviously the Spanish Inquisition terminated all of that. We weren't allowed to play drums, they would cut our hands off, we weren't allowed to do any rituals, play music. People got scared, people left, people forgot about it. So if you don't have anything, you really have to look at the next closest things that you have is Native Americans and how they carried their tradition. So, I've been here to some of the Temazcales that they do here in the United States, and they are Northern based. I mean, Native Americans from here. (Personal Interview with Jiménez 2015)

Jiménez's perspective reflects a popular view among danzantes regarding Indigenous Mexican culture loss, and Native North American music is interpreted as a starting point for rebuilding and countering perceptions of decimated Indigenous ritual in Mexico.<sup>120</sup> Drawing on popular

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<sup>119</sup> This approximate date seems very likely based on its Nahuatl text and conversations with other danzantes that collaborate this approximate date for the song.

<sup>120</sup> Adding to the complexity of analyzing perceptions of authenticity and historicity within the community are competing narratives at play. For example, the meta-historical narratives of Indigenous Mexican cultural loss and recovery often co-exist with local experiences of continuity; for instance, as noted in Chapter 3, Jiménez grew up immersed in Zapotec culture and continues to interact with specifically Zapotec music practitioners in addition to members of the Danza community. These co-existing narratives might be the result of co-existing identities, in this case as a diasporic Mexican-

diffusionist views, the traditions of Native North Americans are perceived as closer to an Indigenous Mexican past than repertoires transmitted through Conchero, such as the alabanzas, which are associated with Catholicism and colonial musical and cultural repression.

In addition to songs that borrow stylistic elements from Native North American songs, there are also several instances in which Native North American songs have been directly co-opted into Danza. Many danzantes know how to properly acknowledge who taught them the song before singing and note how they received permission to perform the song; however, a number of danzantes are unaware of the cultural protocols surrounding performance and transmission in Indigenous communities. These performances create a conflict between different sources of Indigenous authenticities, namely those of transmission and adherence to Indigenous performance protocols, similar to the permissions historically required to perform alabanzas; and those that measure authenticities in ways that bypass established tribal performance protocols.

In an example of this tension, Carmelo noted an experience at a Danza event where one of the danzantes sang a California Indian bear song—a fact she quickly picked up on given her Tongva heritage. In this case, the danzante did not properly introduce the song and the performance was out of season, as bear songs are only sung when the bears are awake (Personal Interview with Carmelo 2015). When I asked Carmelo why she believed individuals sang these songs, she related:

I think people want to bring out something that is Indigenous. I don't think they take into account the considerations that need to be taken into account.

When asked about what these considerations are, she commented:

Who should sing a song? Who are you singing it for? A lot of people don't know when you sing a song—not in Danza tradition but in Indigenous California tradition—you

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American danzante and Zapotec from Macuil Xochitl, both of which include distinct experiences of culture loss and continuity.

should have permission from the maker of the song. So, if you had a song that was your song, and I heard it and I learned it, in our tradition, I can't just sing that song, it would be bad manners. I would need to come to you and ask for permission to sing your song. (Personal Interview with Carmelo 2015)

The desire to perform Indigenous music in these instances, such as a *danzantes* singing a bear song, overshadows the desire to learn and follow Indigenous protocols. Additionally, since *danzantes* may have learned these songs from recordings or the internet, they may be wholly unaware of the cultural intricacies required for meaningful performances that the tribe that created it would accept as authentic. As a result, these *danzantes* may be unaware that in their attempts to reach for and connect with one form of authenticity—that of what they perceive to be “real” Indigenous aesthetic—they risk upsetting others, namely Indigenous traditions of transmission and the protocols surrounding songs, which are not viewed as universally available.<sup>121</sup>

### **Transmission and Growth of a Transnational Aztec Song Style**

Today, “peyotized” or “Lakotacized,” performances have been resituated as authentically Mexica or Aztec through their entrance into a broader transnational Aztec repertoire. This growing transnational repertoire continues to invoke Native North American musical idioms and integrates songs composed in the Los Angeles and broader United States *Danza* diaspora. The resulting pan-Indigenous aesthetic is resituated as “traditional Aztec”—a claim that is further bolstered through Nahuatl and the geographic reconnection to Mexico through transnational performances. For example, video recordings of songs posted by *danzantes* in Mexico proclaim them to be traditional Mexica songs. As a result, a predominant transnational

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<sup>121</sup> These performances are likely further fueled by the false perception that Indigenous Peoples do not own things, and their cultural heritage becomes conflated with a “natural resource” available as a part of returning to a more natural way of living.

style developing within the Danza and interrelated Aztec and Mexica revival communities conflates peyote and Lakota aesthetics with a recovered “Aztec” or “Mexica” sound, reinforcing the interpretation that peyote and Lakota aesthetics are pre-Hispanic or historical survivals from the Mexica.

A prime example of this conflation is the many “Mexica Peyote Songs” on YouTube by individuals affiliated with Danza and the Mexicanidad movement. These performances originate on both sides of the border with some of the most prominent examples coming from the group “Denver Teocalli” which claims to be a Native American Church Charter (Denver Teocalli 2009b).<sup>122</sup> Their videos have thousands of views and a number of comments hailing the authenticity of the performances, as well as a number comments from individuals noting that they have learned the songs.<sup>123</sup> These videos use the water drum and the peyote rattle, which differ from the huehuetl and larger rattles commonly found in Danza circles, highlighting a significant move towards the peyote aesthetic.

On the Mexican side of the border, one of the most prolific singers of “Mexihca Tolteca peyote songs” is Tótec Xiuh. Tótec Xiuh is a danzante and member of Calpulli Tlalnanzin Yaotecameh. His renditions of peyote songs are sung more aggressively with Nahuatl texts to the accompaniment of a hand drum. Interestingly, two of these songs originate with Denver Teocalli, highlighting the role of YouTube in distributing songs across a transnational network of

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<sup>122</sup> The claim of any official charter is dubious and there is no evidence of them having any affiliation with the Native American Church; however, they may have a connection to an off-shoot, such as the Oklevueha Native American Church. This branch has been widely condemned as fraudulent (Indian Country Today Media Network 2016). Their organization, “Teocalli Tepeyolohtlan,” is registered as a nonprofit corporation in Colorado.

<sup>123</sup> Examples of such comments include “We are all natives just like we were without the borders!” and “From Alaska to La Patagonia, one only native nation!!! Aho brothers, keep tuning Tlazocamati” (Denver Teocalli 2009).

danzantes identifying with Mexica culture (Tótec Xiuh 2014).<sup>124</sup> Other notable commenters include Calpulli Iskali, a Danza Mexica group based in Kansas City, Missouri; and a commenter from Ontario, California (Tótec Xiuh 2013; Tótec Xiuh 2014). Tótec Xiuh states that the songs are for honoring the “Spirit-Xochipilli of the peyote” (Tótec Xiuh 2014). In this instance, the Mexica spiritual entity Xochipilli, associated with hallucinogens and music, is connected directly to peyote, creating another cultural link rationalizing the decision to sing peyote songs. Through these performances, Mexica-identifying individuals and communities assemble a Mexica culture, bolstering their case for an ethnic or tribal Mexica identity. By placing their interpretation of pre-Hispanic Mexica culture within the purview of a larger pan-Indian peyote culture, they historicize the repertoire and their interpretations of pan-Indigeneity.

In addition to the distribution of songs through ceremonies and YouTube, a single attempt has been made to distribute songs through CD recordings and digital downloads. The only commercially available album marketed as Aztec songs is the 2004 album *Mexihkateokwikameh-Sacred Songs of the Aztecs* by Atekpatzin’s group Tzotzollin. Atekpatzin provides the following biography in a flier advertising a retreat in 2015:

Atekpatzin spent fifteen years studying with traditional healers (including the late Elena Avila) from the Apache, Genízaro, Lakota, Mexica and Chicano communities. He began his studies as a child with his grandmother Dometilia García who was a curandera. Atekpatzin is a Spiritual Leader for the Apache Tribe of Colorado and Tlamachtiquetl for the Teocalli Tonantzin Tlalli Coatlicue (Church of Our Revered Mother). Atekpatzin has had the distinguished honor of presenting workshops on traditional healing in Spain, Puerto Rico, Mexico, Canada and across the United States. (Peaceful Meadow Retreat 2015)

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<sup>124</sup> The Denver Teocalli song “Mexica Songs 4” features the Nahuatl texts “huey cuauhtli palehuia ometeotl” interspersed with vocables commonly found in peyote songs (Denver Teocalli 2009b). The video by Tótec Xiuh has the same text with vocables common in the peyote songs interspersed; however, he has changed the melody and the rhythms substantially (Tótec Xiuh 2014).

As is emblematic of other spiritual leaders, including those from the Zemanauak Tlamachtilyan mentioned in Chapter 3, Atekipatzin establishes his authority from his alleged study with a range of diverse healers, implying that he is a keeper of substantial pan-Indigenous knowledge.<sup>125</sup> This implies an Indigenous authenticity through a saturation of Indigenous knowledges. Claims of authority such as these should be viewed skeptically, since many of the claims above could be made simply by attending a workshop, and the names of informants or teachers are not provided. Furthermore, a simple search reveals the “Apache Tribe of Colorado” is not a federally recognized tribe as speciously implied in the biography above, but rather a non-profit registered to David Byron Young, Atekipatzin’s legal name.<sup>126</sup>

On the Tzotzollin website, the tagline for the album states “this celebratory collection of traditional ceremonial songs, sung in Nahuatl and Spanish, contains soul-felt vocal harmonies accompanied by drums and rattles” (Tzotzollin 2002). Additionally, the iconography on the

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<sup>125</sup> Atekipatzin is hardly the only of such alleged healers with dubious claims of authority supposedly established through a wide array of Indigenous communities. Another such individual, Tata OmeAkaEhekatl, or Erick Gonzalez, offers retreats aimed at a predominantly white audience. His biography reads similarly: “OmeAkaEhekatl Erick Gonzalez, International Coordinator and member of the Great Confederation of the Councils of the Principal Mayan Ajq’ijab’ of Guatemala, was initiated into Native sacred rites over a thirty-year period with direct participation, teachings, and guidance from various Native spiritual elders from Mexico, North America, Colombia, Peru, and Guatemala. He has worked with Native Elders and Youth Councils throughout the Americas supporting the work of international sharing and preservation of sacred wisdom teachings since 1979, promoting increased cooperation and unity between diverse communities throughout the world. OmeAkaEhekatl Erick Gonzalez was born in Guatemala and moved to the U.S. with his parents when he was 11 years old. In 1978, he was adopted by the Mexiko Teotlkalli Kalpull Koatlkalko and the teacher Tlakaheel and given the name OmeAkaEhekatl in 1978.” (Blue Deer Center). The decentralized authority within the broader Danza facilitates such individuals; yet, the positions that they claim also result in such individuals in representing the broader Danza community and capitalizing on Danza culture, even though many in the Danza community are unfamiliar with them. In an age of increasing new-age fraud, this becomes particularly problematic and has permitted a range of uses and interpretations of Danza and Danza culture that are not beneficial to local Danza communities, such as building alliances with Indigenous communities.

<sup>126</sup> According to information available about the Non-Profit Corporation “Apache Tribe of Colorado,” the paperwork was filed on March 11, 2008 (Bizapedia).

album cover from the Codex Borbonicus, the Nahuatl title, and the statement below from the website that the songs are “Mexika” or “Aztec” further situate the songs as pre-Hispanic Mexica survivals:

The songs presented in this CD were done so that they might be available to those people that participate in and run sacred traditional ceremonies. The number of the songs are used by the Kalmeka Aztlan in the Temezkalzin. . . . As more Mexihka people return to the roots of their Indigenous ancestry they find solace in this ceremony of renewal and purification. The sounds, language and rhythms of this ceremony are familiar. They speak to the soul and spirit of Mexihka people. . . . The members of Tzotzollin participate in ceremony with regularity. All play critical roles in rituals and ceremonies of the Mexihka community. No song comes without its teaching. Each song has a purpose and place in ceremony. (Tzotzollin 2002)

At least two of the musicians in Tzotzollin are active in Danza communities including Atekpätzin, who is featured on the group’s website wearing ayoyotes and holding a concha; and Raul Tlaloc Chavez, who the Tzotzollin website describes as a musician and the capitán of the Huitzilopochtli Aztec Danza circle. The group intersects with Danza culture, drawing from common Danza repertoire and aesthetics; simultaneously, it reinforces historical interpretations regarding an authentic ritual “Mexica” repertoire.

The eighteen songs included on the album are predominantly in Nahuatl, with seven songs in Spanish and one song of unspecified Native North American origin. The songs have drum and rattle accompaniments for vocal parts, with the one exception being the opening song that begins with flutes and a conch trumpet in a manner that recalls the opening of a Danza ceremony. Several of these songs are commonly performed in the Los Angeles Danza Azteca community, including “A Huitzilopochtli yo le doy mis flores,” “Tonantzin,” and “Venadito azul,” although several of them have been heavily rearranged. Most of the songs on the album integrate Native North American musical idioms and aesthetics. For instance, in “Vengan abuelitos,” a solo male singer sings the opening phrase that mimics the incipit structure before

the other singers enter. Additionally, the descending shape of phrases mimics the traditional shape of phrases in the Northern Plains—a coincidence that is further solidified in the closing vocables of “hey ah hey oh” that further tie it to traditional Native North American musical forms. The song “Rezando estoy” additionally shares this general structure with the incipit and descending phrases.

The primary peyote influences on the album include the approach to harmonization and the rhythmic drive of the rattle and huehuetl, which stands in for the water drum and provides an underlying pulse. Tzotzollin’s rendition of “Tonantzin,” for instance, features the rattle and drum at a constant beat over which the melody is sung. Following the incipit, the harmonization is almost entirely in fifths and octaves, recalling Native musical clichés. The harmonies in the Tzotzollin version differ substantially from the harmonies in other peyote music albums, where singers such as Primeaux and Mike typically vary the texture by switching between unison and harmonies.

Even if Tzotzollin did not intend to directly invoke peyote music and ritual in their attempts at recovering a Mexica ritual, the audience seems to have interpreted the resulting aesthetic as a form of Mexica peyote music. For instance, one telling review of the album on Amazon highlights the further entrenchment of the idea that the historical Mexica had a distinct, or even “classic,” peyote repertoire:

Tzotzollin did a masterful job of harmonizing and arranging these classic Mexikah peyote medicine songs, done in both Nawatl and Spanish. It makes one feel as if you're in a meeting within the sacred gardens of Wirrikuta along the Wirrarika (Huichol people). I highly recommend this cd for anyone who is in the Mexikayotl tradition, or for those who wish to familiarize themselves with the spiritual songs of the Mexikah/Aztekah. Aho-Ometeotl!! (Amazon 2016)

First, the notion that there was a “classic Mexikah (Mexica) peyote medicine” repertoire is unsupported, but the notion appears to persist among a significant segment of the Danza

community. This belief is further supported by a second review stating “absolutely amazing Aztec songs! . . . I will personally learn to sing all these songs and will pass this music on for our people. Mexica Tiwi!” (ibid.). Not only are the songs accepted uncritically as Aztec, the reviewer has accepted them as a part of their cultural heritage, illustrating an additional source of confusion as these songs are integrated into Danza repertoires. The acceptance of the songs as authentically Aztec is further supported by a third and final review posted in April 2015 that notes the songs are “pleasant, devotional and have a feel of authenticity” (ibid.).<sup>127</sup>

These three reviews reveal how songs become accepted and integrated into a transnational Aztec repertoire through their ability to achieve a perceived cultural-historical authenticity. As noted in the final review of the album, songs must offer an experience, or “feel of authenticity,” hinting that they must sound believably pre-Hispanic, tapping into an abstract historicity. In addition to the feeling of authenticity connoted by the songs themselves, the emphasis on Atecpatzin’s many sources of Indigenous knowledge presented in his biography serve to legitimize these interpretations through a purported Indigenous authority. Furthermore, the traditional acknowledgement of sources for specific songs—a key practice in most Indigenous cultures—are supplanted by a nebulous Mexica or Aztec source, strengthening folk authenticity. The Nahuatl language is key to these interpretations of historicity and authenticity,

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<sup>127</sup> In addition to the interpretation of the repertoire as Aztec, these reviews also highlight the continuing blending of other Indigenous traditions into the emerging contemporary Mexica culture. For instance, the Huichol concept of Wirikuta is referenced in spite of its geographic and cultural distance from the Central Mexico, and “Aho,” a statement common in Native North American talking circles, is combined with “Ometeotl” from Danza. The equivalence ascribed to “Aho” and “Ometeotl” further supports the supposed cultural equivalency of Aztec and Native North American culture.

facilitating the listener's acceptance of the song as "Aztec" and historical regardless of the date of composition.<sup>128</sup>

### **Xochimecayahualli, Cuezalin, and Song Composition**

Today, several *danzantes* in the Los Angeles community compose new songs to teach to their *Danza* groups and to perform at ceremonies and *Temazcales*. Cuezalin is among the *Danza* leaders in Los Angeles creating new songs, and he is actively trying to move away from *peyotized* and *Lakotized* songs in the repertoire. The songs he composes are currently in two distinct veins: old texts, typically in Nahuatl but not exclusively, with new melodies; and new songs with both new melodies and texts. In his compositions, Cuezalin draws on the study of codices, colonial-era descriptions in texts, archaeological artifacts, and his own vision of what the past may have sounded like to shape a repertoire that serves a contemporary need while connecting with a shared vision of the past.

Cuezalin began writing songs around 1998 with a group of *danzantes* from various circles with an interest in studying Mexica and Aztec history and culture. The group, named *Xochimecayahualli*, meaning "flowery rope," included a number of individuals who have studied Nahuatl independently, such as Sergio Ruiz, Tezozomoc, Huitzilmazatzin and Tlahuilcoatl (See Chapter 2). The first project of the group was to write songs for the *Fiesta de la Santa Cruz* held by Rene Poblano and the *Huehuetotl Danza* circle in the late 1990s. *Xochimeccallihualli* created

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<sup>128</sup> The importance of Nahuatl as a symbolic language is further driven home in a criticism of a performance of "Cuatro Águilas" on YouTube asking why the song is performed in Spanish and not translated into Nahuatl to throw off the "yokes of Christianity that have only brought poverty and suffering to our peoples" (*tecpatl666*). In this context, language itself becomes a symbol that, even when not understood or spoken by participants, gains a distinct form of ritual and historical value. If a song is accepted as sounding "authentic," it is then transmitted to others—as noted in the second review above—and added to the repertoire of new circles.

a booklet and composed melodies for three song texts from the *Cantares Mexicanos*, *Florentine Codex*, and the poetry of Nezahualcoyotl. These three songs are entitled “Teo Teo Inan,” “Chicomoztoc,” and “Zan Yehuan,” the latter of which is still frequently sung by Cuezalin and Sergio Ruiz during rituals and Danza (Personal Interviews with Cuezalin and Ruiz 2015, 2016).

Cuezalin continues to collaborate with Huitzilmazatzin and others from the Xochimecayahualli to create melodies for the surviving song texts in the *Cantares Mexicanos*. The *Cantares Mexicanos* collection includes ninety-one songs in Nahuatl that are believed to have been composed slightly after the time of conquest, although some have with further study been dated to the pre-conquest period (Bierhorst 1985:106). Previously, Xochimecayahualli had worked with these texts and created a booklet of twenty songs; however, the group was still learning Classical Nahuatl at the time and they have since become aware of several errors in the text (Personal Interview with Cuezalin 2016).

These songs are a juxtaposition of old and new since the oldest documented song texts in Nahuatl are given entirely new melodies; furthermore, the antiquity of the texts create an additional feel of authenticity in their performance, even though the original melodies and performance practices may be unknown. The mystical appeal of these songs lies not understanding the texts or attempting to decipher the dense symbolism they contain—a nearly impossible task; rather, the appeal lies in the very act of pronouncing the phrases that were spoken by the Mexica. In discussing the power of these words, Cuezalin commented:

I believe that their power is in the connection they establish to the words of the ancients. And when we pronounce the words that they pronounced, that for them were special, when we sing their songs we are transported to an ancient time—to a time that unites many of us that are descended from the Aztecs, so to speak, the people that spoke in those times. Even though our ancestors may not have been Nahuatl speakers at that time, these are words that were spoken in the time that our ancestors lived. Therefore, they transport us like a time capsule . . . It is a gem, a physical thing that can be sung, that one can say. Someone might, for example, have a mask or a piece of old jade, but only one

person can have that. A song is different. A song can belong to many people, and you can protect it and care for it. That is the power of the spoken word. (Personal Interview with Cuezalin 2015)

Cuezalin's observation suggest that, in addition to a distinct cultural and historical value of these song texts, singing these texts provides a powerful source of cultural-historical authenticity that danzantes can collectively draw upon. By enunciating texts that were enunciated in the past, danzantes can forge a bridge through the sensory experience of both speaking and hearing, contributing to a parallel sense of experiential authenticity. Additionally, since many danzantes no longer know their specific Indigenous heritages—often instead only knowing the general areas from where their families descended—danzantes may draw on the texts of these Nahuatl singers as a cultural proxy for an older layer of Indigenous culture that may no longer be available to them.<sup>129</sup>

Musically, the songs composed by the Xochimecayahualli for these texts are distinct from other more recent songs in the repertoire as they do not draw on typical Native North American signifiers of Indigenous music, such as vocables and Native North American instrumentation, that are found in other songs in the Danza repertoire explored above. Nothing tangible remains of the melodies that might have been performed by the Nahuatl speakers who wrote the song texts, so musicians attempting to place melodies with the texts must start from scratch. Composing melodies for these texts is often complicated by the metric irregularity of the texts; for instance, the song “Zan Yehuan” features a text with highly irregular poetic meters (Figure 6.9). Therefore, the structure of the original poetry has been altered in the song form created by the Xochimecayahualli, integrating repetition and a reordering of the phrases in the text to permit a strophic song structure.

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<sup>129</sup> As discussed in Chapter 4, this is the case for Cuezalin whose uncle refuses to teach him the Cora-Tepahuan songs that were sung by his grandfather.

Songs, such as those composed by the Xochimecayahualli, move from one Danza community to another through their performance at ceremonies and events attended by diverse Danza groups. For instance, at the Mexica New Year Ceremony in San Jose, Cuezalin led the danzantes in singing “Zan Yehuan” while holding hands and moving in a serpentine chain around the Danza circle. From the song “Zan Yehuan,” Cuezalin transitioned into a well-known Mexican song, “La Víbora,” and more danzantes began to sing as they recognized the melody.<sup>130</sup> Both songs were repeated multiple times allowing more danzantes to join in singing and replicating the sounds of the words in spite of the fact that most of the danzantes present were unfamiliar with the text of “Zan Yehuan.” In such spaces of “inter-Aztec” transmission, the larger Danza community can experience repertoires of other Danza circles, allowing a vibrant space for inspiration and potential integration of songs into the repertoires of the attending communities. Additionally, melodies and songs become traditionalized and historicized through the profundity of experiential historicity in powerful settings, such as that of the Mexica New Year Ceremony.

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<sup>130</sup> A field recording of “Zan Yehuan” from the Mexica New Year in San Jose can be found on the Internet Archive at <https://archive.org/details/uclaethnomusicologyarchive>. From the main site, search “Nielsen, Kristina” or the collection number, 2017.02, to find the full collection. “Zan Yehuan” can be heard on DSC\_0312 in the folder “Mexica New Year in San Jose.” Another recording of “Zan Yehuan” by Cuezalin can be heard on DSC\_0025 in the folder “Cuezalin Sharing Songs.”

The image displays a musical score for the first verse of "Zan Yehuan". It consists of four systems, each with a Voice part (treble clef, 6/8 time) and a Huehuetl part (bass clef, 6/8 time). The lyrics are written in Classical Nahuatl.

System 1:  
 Voice: Zan ye huan i pal ne mo a Zan ye huan i pal ne mo a  
 Huehuetl: [Rhythmic accompaniment]

System 2:  
 Voice: Ni ne tla ma tia No na hui ya in te na hua can  
 Huehuetl: [Rhythmic accompaniment]

System 3:  
 Voice: Ac ac zo a ic o hua ya Ac ac zo a ic o hua ya  
 Huehuetl: [Rhythmic accompaniment]

System 4:  
 Voice: ac ac zo hua ya No na hui ya in te na hua can  
 Huehuetl: [Rhythmic accompaniment]

Figure 6.9: First verse of “Zan Yehuan” with the melody and accompanying rhythm composed by Cuezalin. Transcribed by Kristina Nielsen.

Presently Cuezalin is in the process of writing thirteen songs for *teteotl*—a term he interprets broadly as life-giving entities—from the perspective of a “City Indian.” The songs are still written in Classical Nahuatl as opposed to contemporary dialects, which presents an additional difficulty since many relevant words do not exist in the Classical Nahuatl vocabulary. For instance, a problem Cuezalin and Huitzilmazatzin have encountered is the absence of a word

for “pride” in Classical Nahuatl, or Nahuatl as it was spoken in Tenochtitlan when the Spanish arrived (Personal Interview with Cuezalin 2015). In these cases, they have tried to look to contemporary forms of Nahuatl for potential examples. These songs are intended to modernize the repertoire and fulfill ongoing needs Cuezalin and others perceive within their community, including the need for sources of pride in an Indigenous Mexican heritage. The urgency of this undertaking has become further underscored by increasingly vitriolic rhetoric towards Mexicans and the Mexican American community in the 2016 election. Many conversations in the *palabra* portion of Danza this past year in several groups I attended revolved around helping children and young adults who face pressures to reject parts of their culture. By further developing this repertoire, Cuezalin and others who share his goals aim to develop a broader repertoire for Danza that addresses the current needs. The use of Classical Nahuatl as a symbolic *lingua franca* in newly composed song texts continues to assert pan-Mexican Indigeneity and bridge the past, present, and future as envisioned by Danza communities and interrelated Aztec or Mexica cultural revivals.

## **Conclusion**

These various repertoires, their histories, and the opinions regarding their levels of authenticity frequently co-exist at rituals and events. These overlaps are particularly pronounced at larger events, such as the commemoration in Salinas or the San Jose Mexica New Year Celebration, in which the interpretations of several Danza circles and individual danzantes are present. Danzantes focus on what is meaningful to them within these contexts, often ignoring the repertoires they do not find pertinent to their experience; for instance, both Jiménez and Ruiz noted that many leave when they start singing songs in Nahuatl at larger rituals to go eat or

socialize, much to their chagrin; nonetheless, this emphasizes how danzantes can shape their own experience within a larger shared Danza event by selectively focusing on the experiences they find fulfilling (Personal Interviews with Jiménez and Ruiz 2015, 2016).

Further complicating any simple classifications, Danza leaders who predominantly focus on developing a (re)Indigenized Danza culture can concurrently participate in alabanzas; for instance, at Sergio Ruiz's vigil, Adolfo Arteaga came with his mandolin to support and join in on the alabanzas (See Chapter 2). Though both Ruiz and Arteaga prefer (re)Indigenized repertoires in their own circles, alabanzas still retain value as a Mexican and Conchero tradition. As a result, though they may be undesirable to some danzantes in ritual contexts that aim to invoke a pre-Hispanic past because of their perceived European-ness and inauthenticity, these interpretations often exist parallel to shared respect for traditions of oral transmission and Mexican pan-Indigenous and syncretic Indigeneity. The two perspectives—one that reduplicates the alabanzas of Conchero, and one that seeks to reach beyond transmission in Conchero to a musical interpretation of the Aztec past—can therefore co-exist in ceremonies and shared rituals and spaces.

Within Danza, authenticities become a persuasive tool (Stokes 1994:7), and performers continue to seek out and establish repertoires they deem authentic. As evident in the repertoires of Danza, however, the measuring of authenticities becomes highly subjective and connected to interpretations of histories and the Indigenous self. For the Danza groups seeking to reconnect with the pre-Hispanic past, the creation of experiential authenticity through aesthetics widely accepted as historical or “authentically Indigenous” becomes key.

As a result, arguments regarding “authentic” Aztec or Indigenous music as opposed to “inauthentic” or Europeanized music continue to resonate within the Danza community, since

authentic Indigenous culture is seen a gateway to Indigenous culture recovery and a desired re-identification, while perceptions of inauthentic performance are seen as obstacles to the formulation of an Indigenous self. The challenge lies in the fact that one danzante's authenticity—what they perceive as historically accurate, culturally relevant, and harmonious with their perception of the Indigenous self—is another danzante's inauthenticity or a culturally problematic act. The alabanzas, for instance, are alternatively interpreted as “authentically” or “in-authentically” Indigenous by danzantes, though danzantes seeking to (re)Indigenize can still perform them a point of Mexican commonality or to commemorate narratives in song. Similarly, songs and rituals with peyote and Lakota influences are evaluated as “authentically” or “in-authentically” Mexica or Aztec based on danzante's perspectives of pan-Indigenous and pre-Hispanic histories. As a result, the repertoires in Danza ultimately reinforce and contribute to intertwining meta-historical Indigenous, diasporic, national, and local histories.

## **Chapter 7**

### **Conclusion**

This dissertation has sought to re-complicate oversimplified narratives of Danza on both sides of current academic debate regarding Danza in Los Angeles, including the accusation that it is an “invented tradition” and purely a product of the Ballet Folklórico in its current form; and those of a Mexica leaning scholars that attribute Danza exclusively to the Mexica, marginalizing the many communities that have contributed to Danza in its current form. As has been explored throughout this dissertation, authority on musics, histories, and identities in the Los Angeles Danza community has diversified, and today includes authority established through the lines of transmission connected to Conchero communities; descent from an Indigenous community; the ability to speak or read an Indigenous language; the study of books; or analysis of codices. This dissertation has sought to highlight the diversity of perspectives currently in circulation instead of forwarding a single interpretation of Danza and what Danza signifies. I intend for this to be a first step in a more inclusive academic approach to Danza that more closely mirrors the diversity of perspectives within the community.

The approaches danzantes take to histories and authenticities underscore two primary ways in which danzantes determine the merits of competing claims of authenticity: The first stems from individuals with lines of transmission from Conchero families that seek to continue a tradition as they received it; and the second seeks to compose an Indigenous cultural context for Danza with less European and Catholic influence. To do so, they turn to sources outside the Conchero and Danza Azteca tradition, and they often seek to compose or introduce music in the vein of what they believe pre-Hispanic cultures might have sounded like before cultural syncretism—particularly that of the pre-Hispanic Mexica. These historically-oriented

compositions subsequently become traditionalized and folded into the core transmitted in these Danza communities, further supporting interpretations of histories, such as subversive histories of Mexica survivals detailed in Chapter 5.

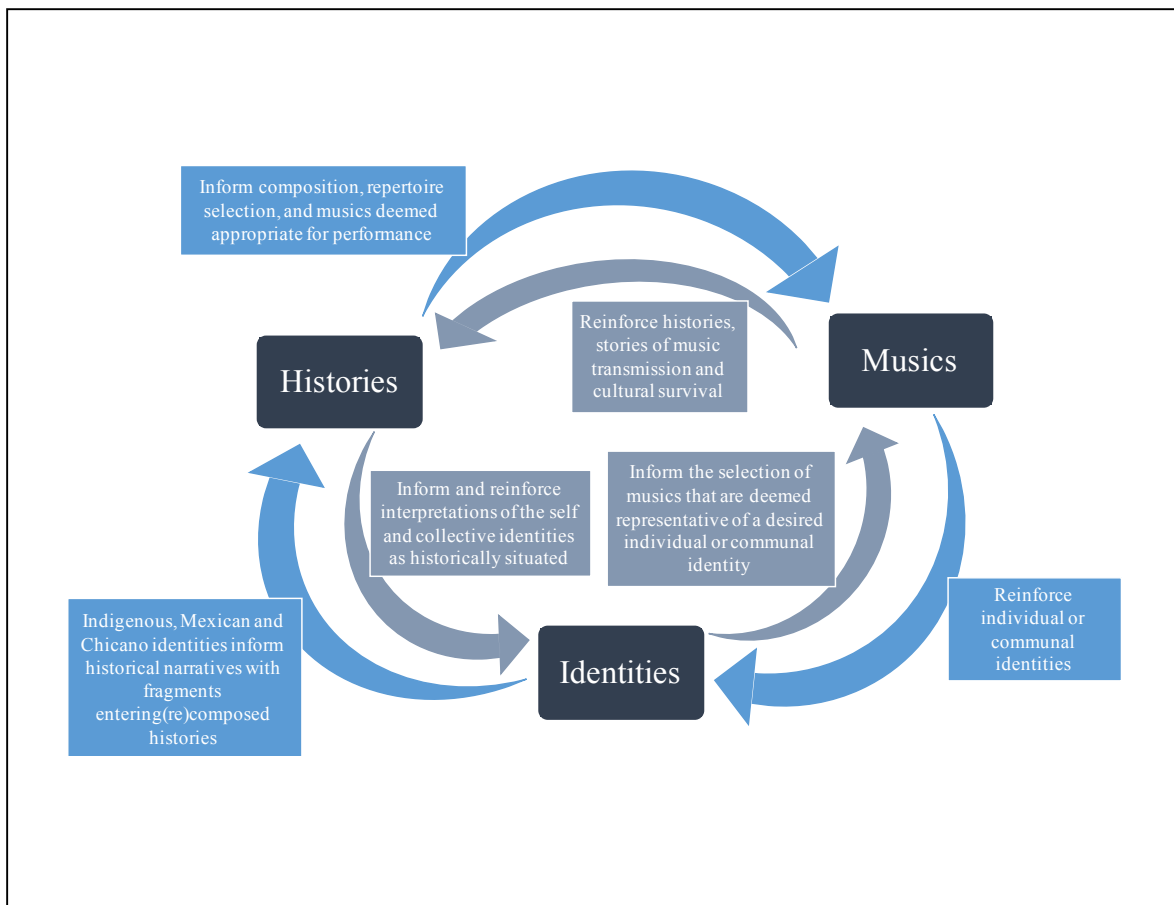


Figure 7.1: Image depicting the interrelated circularity of histories, identities and musics in Danza. These three components collectively compose the Danza experience, and each informs the others.

As a result, assessments of musical and historical authenticity hinge on interpretations of the interwoven layers of histories; understandings of Indigenous, national, and diasporic identities; and Indigenous art forms, including Indigenous musics and their perceived antiquity, modes to transmission, acquisition, and performance protocols. Through these interpretations, danzas and song repertoires become vehicles for relaying histories and shaping identities around

these histories. Concurrently, repertoires are continuously composed and interpreted in response to circulating histories, interpretations of the Indigenous self, and the identities of the communities performing them. These three elements—histories, identities, and musics—create a reciprocal relationship in which each sustain and inform the construction of the other two (Figure 7.1).

As highlighted in this dissertation, the musical and philosophical diversification of Los Angeles Danza community has not occurred without resistance and criticism, particularly centering around what is perceived as authentic or traditional, and what is perceived as disconnected from historical precedent—either the precedent set by the Concheros or the precedent inferred regarding the distant past. At the current juncture, however, most danzantes seem to agree that the schisms have allowed them to pursue a version of the tradition that they find most meaningful and personally rewarding. Sergio Ruiz best summed up the current state of the Los Angeles Danza community in his observation that,

Today Danza has many different flavors that one can chose from. If you prefer to dance religiously, there are groups. If you prefer the cultural variety, there are many groups. If you prefer politics, there are also many groups. If you prefer to dance in presentations, there are also many groups. You have to choose which one you prefer. (Personal Interview with Ruiz 2016; translated by author)

Each of these Danza variants continue to develop interlocking interpretations of Indigenous Mexican culture, histories, and identities. The constant interactions between danzantes of all perspectives in shared spaces at ceremonies, such as Mexica New Year Ceremonies and in online forums, however, results in the constant exchange of ideas. Despite these philosophical gaps in interpretations, at shared ceremonies there is a sense of solidarity, even if there is ambiguity regarding exactly what the danzas signify or whether the performance is pan-Indigenous, Mexica, nationalist, or tribal. The ambiguity and current multivocality of the danzas and song

performances that have been explored throughout this dissertation facilitate the growth of a broader community that can include individuals from disparate Danza communities and calpulli.

In efforts to further cement solidarity across the community, there is a temptation to create Indigenous meta-histories and identities that subsume intricate layers of history and modes of identification to forward one narrative. These efforts in segments of the Danza community—particularly those that are politically oriented or seeking a Mexica identity—perfectly encapsulate the remark by Adorno that “the whole is the untrue” (1974:40). Fragments may each individually be true to certain danzantes within the Danza community; however, they inadvertently echo totalizing assimilation policies of the Mexican State when presented as a homogenized cultural narrative—particularly when nationality is conflated with tribal membership. These narratives become highly problematic as music, instruments, and traditions of the Otomí, Yaqui, Lakota, Zapotec and others are explicitly or subtly reframed as Aztec or Mexica. There can be no accurate historical metanarrative because the colonial and national experience varied across Indigenous cultures now subsumed under the Mexican State and United States.

Additionally, as was explored at length in Chapter 2, to cast Danza Azteca as introduced in Los Angeles as “invention” or pure folklore is an equally problematic metanarrative. The agency of Concheros in transitioning to Danza Azteca, and particularly the lineage of Manuel Pineda—as controversial as some Concheros in Mexico might have found him—warrant more thorough consideration. As has been emphasized in this dissertation, groups such as Arvizu’s Xipe Totec retain their connection to Conchero and adhere to traditional Conchero hierarchies of authority and transmission. They transmit the rhythms as taught to them by Yescas and Pineda, interpreting Indigeneity and authenticity through this Conchero connection. Additionally, they

maintain the Conchero tradition of transmission of music and authority, including the attribution of authorship when possible. For instance, although Arvizu still believes the core of Danza is pre-Hispanic, he also strongly believes that the artistic contributions of his teacher, Yescas, should be acknowledged saying “to me it matters that they [younger danzantes] know that this came from my teacher because I have respect for everything he taught me . . . A lot of people are going to have opinions, but as long as I am alive, I will continue to honor his teachings and correct things because it is wrong, it is ignorance” (Personal Interview with Arvizu 2015). From this perspective, the recent choices of younger generations to bypass the histories and acknowledgement of leaders and contributors, such as Yescas, disrupts central aspects of the Indigenous framework of Conchero and Danza Azteca.

### **Problems of Discursive Authority in Danza Literature**

A current challenge in the literature on Danza is the use of academia to establish the authority and forward specific historical narratives or interpretations of Danza. To date, all research on Danza in the United States has been completed by members of the community. These highly reflexive studies offer useful insights; however, they also warrant caution as authors tend to forward one history (occasionally self-serving ones), or only interview and include individuals who ascribe to their philosophy and interpretation of Danza. To acknowledge that these histories and interpretations are not universally accepted counters the unity sought in the historical metanarratives explored in Chapter 5. This trend particularly noticeable in the flurry of Mexica-leaning publications that have been published in the last decade. The metanarratives they forward strategically maximize and minimize histories to forward Mexica-centric historical interpretations that have been explored throughout this dissertation. As noted

previously, recent histories in California by these Mexica leaning scholars often bypass detailed discussions of Florencio Yescas' contributions—though they often perform his choreography and dance to the rhythms developed by Pineda's Conchero community—re-attributing his artistic interpretation of the Aztec to the ancient Mexica. Danza in its totality is understood as exclusively ancient and pre-Hispanic, and frequently conflates Indigeneity and authenticity with antiquity.

In contrast to these Mexica-oriented studies, the dissertation of Mario Aguilar represents another interesting case study in the power of discursive authority. Aguilar's dissertation has been a regularly cited source on Danza in California (2009), and it has been widely cited by authors including Susanna Rostas (2009), Raquel Guerrero (2010), Jennie Marie Luna (2012), and Ernesto Colín (2014). As one of a handful of previous studies focused on the Danza community of Southern California, Aguilar's account of Danza history has remained the primary source consulted regarding developments in the Southern California Danza community because of his status as a cultural insider.

Today, a number of danzantes with whom I spoke are troubled by the historical errors that have now been widely disseminated through his dissertation, including the claim that Florencio died of AIDS and that Aguilar was the first Chicano to learn Danza (Aguilar 2009: 241, 272; Personal Interviews 2016). For instance, Lazaro Arvizu notes that there were many Chicanos and Chicanas who started at the same time, and he refutes Aguilar's claim that he was in Yescas' elite touring group *Esplendor Azteca*. Arvizu recalls that Aguilar substituted occasionally, but he was never a permanent member (Personal Interview with Arvizu 2016).<sup>131</sup>

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<sup>131</sup> As mentioned previously in Chapter 2, the members of *Esplendor Azteca* recognized by Arizu are Florencio Yescas, Lazaro Arvizu, Gerardo Salinas, Alejandro Ramírez (El Conejo) and Andrés García Pacheco (El Piolín) (Personal Interview with Arvizu 2015).

Aguilar's claims might be interpreted as an effort to claim more authority in the tradition through academia, effectively re-writing local histories and institutionalizing his authority. There is a legitimate concern by many in the community regarding the authority Aguilar has achieved on the Southern California Danza community among cultural outsiders through his Ph.D. and the frequent citation of his dissertation (Personal Interviews 2016, 2017).

In contrast to the written histories, community histories reveal the prioritizing of other voices and sources of authority. Further solidifying this order of succession and link to Pineda, Arvizu was recently ceremonially named and given the title of General by General Plasencia of Guadalajara, Mexico. General Miguel Ángel Pineda, the son of General Manuel Pineda, and Generala Esperanza Aranda, the daughter of General Felipe Aranda, were in attendance as witnesses to the ceremony in Los Angeles, and both carry the *palabra*, or the traditional leadership positions, of their fathers' circles (Personal Interviews with Carmelo and Arvizu 2017). This ceremony has strengthened the connection between Danza Azteca communities of Mexico and the United States, reinforcing traditional hierarchies and structures of authority.

In the United States, there have been several key misunderstandings, or "misguided expectations" as put by Virginia Carmelo, regarding these traditional hierarchies and structures of authority. A significant one occurred in the case of the Toltecas en Aztlan. Carmelo and others recount that the group decided to seek an *estandarte*, or officially recognized banner and group name, in Mexico. The group had a roundtable democratic structure, and three members of the group went to Mexico, including León Magayan Aztleca, Guillermo Rosette, and Mario Aguilar. The story recounted by several members of the Danza community is that Chicanos did not understand the traditional Conchero hierarchy structures, and the Concheros from whom an *estandarte* was being sought did not understand the democratic structure of the group. The result

recounted by several members of the community was that when Rosette stepped out to visit the restroom, Aguilar was named capitán of the democratically governed group. This event precipitated the disintegration of Toltecas en Aztlan. Because of this miscalculation, Aguilar had the title of capitán, but no group to lead, as the democratically led Toltecas en Aztlan did not accept him as a capitán. Supposedly he returned to Mexico the following year to seek a new estandarte for his newly founded Danza Mexi'kayotl circle, but at this point the leadership in Mexico is said to have felt betrayed (Personal Interviews 2016, 2017). Further complicating matters, within the traditional structure of hereditary groups, it would be virtually impossible to be bestowed a capitán position of two different groups. This has led to a bind in the traditional leadership structures, as Aguilar has led his group and is a widely accepted a leader in Danza who has worked hard and aided in growing the Danza community, particularly in San Diego; however, because of early misunderstandings of traditional Conchero hierarchies and structures, Danza Mexi'kayotl's estandarte under Aguilar's leadership cannot gain full recognition through the traditional hierarchical structure.

In March 2016, Aguilar was supposedly conferred the title of Capitán General of San Diego (Moreno 2016). The ceremony was said to have been conducted from several visiting danzantes from Mexico. This claim has been met with skepticism by many danzantes in the Los Angeles community with whom I spoke. Aguilar's ceremony is not considered valid by many Los Angeles danzantes, including Arvizu, and his affiliated Danza connections in Mexico (Personal Interviews 2017).<sup>132</sup> Furthermore, it was pointed out by Arvizu and another danzante that Aguilar shares his last name with a highly established Conchero family with whom his

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<sup>132</sup> One of the individuals who was supposed to visit pulled out at the last minute, and the others are said to face discipline by General Plasencia for violating the traditional hierarchies in Mexico, as none of them were capitanes and did not have the authority to confer a title (Personal Interviews 2017).

group is seeking to align itself, although the two are unrelated. Members of the community are wary of this coincidence and believe that it will create an illusion of the traditional authority of inheritance in Aguilar's circle that is not derived traditionally (Personal Interviews 2016).

Because of both these trends—including histories intent on bypassing Yescas' contributions, and individuals seeking to establish their own authority in the tradition—Xipe Totec and Arvizu have been largely bypassed and written out of academic Danza histories in Southern California. These omissions raise questions regarding the potential for academic histories to distort or supplant local histories and highlight the importance of considering the cascading effects of discursive authority (Briggs 1996).

### **Continuing Evolution of Histories and Identities in Danza**

The processes of traditionalization and the ambiguities of the origins of repertoires—ranging from the danzas that originate in Conchero to the more recently composed danzas and song repertoires—fuel the diverging historical narratives and the decision by some Danza communities to recast the repertoire as collectively ancient. This historicization coincides with a broader tendency in Nahuatl and Mexica cultural movements that include the *mexicanidad* movements from Mexico City, such as the *Movimiento Confederado Restaurador del Anáhuac* (MCRA) and *Zemanauak Tlamachtilyan* (ZT), to interpret Indigeneity through a historical lens. As has been explored throughout this dissertation, these movements often frame themselves as recovering pre-Hispanic music. When repertoires are integrated, the reasoning consistently remains that surviving Indigenous communities somehow remain “pure” —and by extension historical— and available cultural repositories. The widespread belief in a single pan-Indigenous

community prior to the arrival of the Spanish further substantiates this approach among those pursuing this form of Indigenous cultural revival.

Must Indigeneity be understood as collectively ancient, including choreography of Yescas and the compositions of new danzas and songs, such as those by Cuezalin? This dissertation research suggests that these current views of the past stem from indigenismo, and that the conflation of Indigeneity with antiquity is a modern phenomenon rooted in the mid-twentieth century. As noted by several danzantes, in the most basic sense, a composition by an Indigenous person is an Indigenous song. Despite this truth, attributions of pre-Hispanic histories and antiquity create new value and meaning within the performance for danzantes seeking an Indigeneity they believe to be “pure,” and therefore this process likely continue to anonymize and historicize contemporary artistic developments.

I conclude by suggesting that the identities manifested in Danza underscore the growing need for recognition of Indigenous heritages from Mexico and other nations south of the Rio Grande within United States identity discourses. As highlighted by the identities performed and composed within Danza, many danzantes do not identify with prescribed labels by nation states. Individuals, such as Cuezalin and Carlos Daniel Jiménez, have little in common with others labeled “Hispanic” or “Latino”—a category that would even include predominantly white Cubans in Florida with a vastly different experience in the United States-Cuban diaspora. At the same time, the move towards identifying as “Native” —paired with the use of Native culture that might be interpreted as appropriation—risks alienating members of the Native community who have historically witnessed strategic claims to Indigeneity. As with the composition of historical metanarratives, meta-identities are also problematic, and there is no clear historical precedent for of a singular pan-Indigenous identity—although Indigenous communities may collaborate on

shared causes and form alliances, they usually still identify through their community. In the case of Danza communities seeking Indigenous identities, it is difficult to determine what this identity category would be to avoid conflating a national diaspora with Indigenous communities in Mexico still experiencing repression from a culturally and ethnically mixed majority.

In a 2005 court case, a judge on the Ninth Circuit Court noted that Indian-ness is ““a complex patchwork of federal, state and tribal law,’ which is best explained by history rather than by logic” (Ninth Circuit 2005 quoting *Duro v. Reina* 1990). As has been examined in this dissertation, Mexico’s own complex matrices of racial categorization, Indigeneity, and national projects that strategically employ Indigenous materials add an additional set of fault lines to an already complicated patchwork in the United States. Histories continue to define Indigeneity, making histories imperative to those seeking Indigenous identities through Danza. Danza communities, particularly of younger generations, will continue to compose collective identities, histories, and repertoires that circumvent the definitions of nation-states.

## Appendix 1

### Virginia Carmelo's Xipe Totec and Caravana Teponaztli

Virginia Carmelo began Danza Azteca at the Plaza de La Raza around 1974. She initially began dancing Matachin under the direction of Javier Galvez, a Matachin dancer from Guadalajara, while she was a student at California State Fullerton. The class would meet regularly on Saturdays for three-hour sessions where Carmelo recalls that they learned about Matachin dances and Indigeneity.<sup>133</sup> Her interest in Indigenous dances was sparked by her Tongva heritage alongside the renewed interest in Indigenous culture that occurred in the 1960s. Carmelo recalls that the teachings of Florencio Yescas coincided with those of Native and Chicano cultural resurgence:

It was the perfect mix because there was unrest in the communities against injustices, and then, here comes Danza and its power and its beauty, and its spiritual base. It gave people something to take pride in and provide a strong foundation. What could be more powerful than saying “We are Aztec!” And when you see who the Aztec were historically, it was very very powerful because it enabled us to connect to one’s own Indigenous roots. It was very powerful. We came from a strong people. (Personal Interview with Carmelo 2015)

Carmelo was drawn to Danza Azteca after seeing Yescas dance, and she describes his personality as highly charismatic. Of his classes, Carmelo recounts that the two-hour classes at Plaza de la Raza were highly structured since he was a technical dancer. Instead of learning full dances, the class would learn steps that would later provide the building blocks for the dances.

In 1977, the group from the Plaza de la Raza went to Mexico with Yescas, where they travelled and performed across Mexico for two months on a journey named “Caravana

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<sup>133</sup> Carmelo recalls that the book *The Teachings of Don Juan* (1968) by Carlos Castaneda, a book allegedly detailing the teachings of a Yaqui shaman, was extremely popular at the time, highlighting converging interests in esoteric culture and Indigeneity in the Americas that helped fuel the early interest in Danza Azteca (Personal Interview with Carmelo 2015).

Teponaztli.” The trip was organized by Ramón Torres who managed Yescas’ booking in Los Angeles in conjunction with several cultural organizations in Mexico (Personal Interview with Arvizu 2016). Carmelo describes the trip as humbling, as the group traveled and met Conchero dancers that Yescas knew.<sup>134</sup> Carmelo was not the only Native North American on this trip, and she recalls that there were several Native Californian people as well as a Sioux who had been raised in California. One of the performances of the group took place at Teotihuacan, an archaeological site located approximately an hour outside of Mexico City. Once the center of an empire with trade networks reaching across present-day Mexico, Teotihuacan was founded around the year zero and remained in power until around the year 650, nearly seven-hundred years prior to the founding of the Aztec Empire in 1325. Although the Mexica did not build Teotihuacan, it inhabited a special place in their cosmology; the name “Teotihuacan,” given by the Nahuatl-speaking newcomers to the ruins, is thought to translate roughly to “birthplace of the Gods.” The original name of the ruins, or even the language that was spoken at the site during its reign, remains unknown. Carmelo recalls that Yescas had to seek permissions to perform Danza Azteca at the ruins of Teotihuacan, but he was well-connected and had contacts to assist him. At Teotihuacan, the danzantes from Los Angeles were greeted by danzantes from Mexico who received them by playing conch shells from the tops of the pyramids (Personal Interview with Arvizu 2015).

Performing at Teotihuacan was a powerful and intimate experience for the danzantes, for whom the diasporic form of the Danza Azteca they learned in Los Angeles became rooted concretely in a historical place and context. Carmelo describes the experience as follows:

There wasn’t a big crowd. And that is, I think, what made it more personal. We went there with specific plans, but it wasn’t going to be a performance. We did do some

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<sup>134</sup> It was on this trip that the picture of Yescas receiving a *limpio*, or traditional cleansing ceremony, was taken (Figure 2.3).

performing, some of the dancers that had more experience did perform, but that wasn't the main intention, that was just part of it. (Personal Interview with Carmelo 2015)

Although Carmelo does not identify as Aztec, Danza Azteca has provided a path for connecting with her Indigenous cultural heritage in a broader community.

The group split and the Carmelo and Arvizu now lead their own branches of Xipe Totec, although the two still collaborate. Carmelo's position is unique as she is one of only a few female leaders of Danza circles in the community: Most circles are led by men with wives who support and assist them in roles such as the *sahumadora*, or the carrier of the smoke. Additionally, her Tongva background distinguishes her from her compatriots who commonly migrated from Mexico, or, more recently, are second-generation Mexican-Americans born in the United States. Carmelo notes that her participation and leadership in the community has not been without resistance:

There are people who say "she is not Mexican, she can't know." But I say I am American, I am a Chicana, I am a Chican-Indian. But I think that kind of statement is becoming less and less supported as the tradition grows more here, when you grow from a small group of four, five or six dancers to now there are many groups and many dancers. They can no longer say we don't know anything. But there are differences. (Personal Interview with Carmelo 2015)

Like Arvizu, Carmelo views Danza Azteca as congruent to Catholicism; however, she does not necessarily interpret Danza Azteca as Catholic while dancing:

I was raised a Catholic, but for me Catholicism is a ceremony. So if I am dancing in front of a Catholic Church, I have an understanding of what goes on. If there is a Mass taking place, I know what that is about. If I am dancing outside before the Mass is over or before the Mass starts, I am concentrating on the Danza tradition. So I don't need to separate the two: The purpose of the Catholic dance ceremony is to connect you to God. The purpose of Danza is to do the same thing. It is just a different ceremony. (Personal Interview with Carmelo 2015)

Carmelo has also observed the changes in the community as more individuals repurpose and reinterpret Danza through a non-Catholic framework, such as the integration spiritual entities including Huitzilopochtli and Tezcatlipoca into the practice:

You can be esoteric, and that is fine. But it is kind of complicating things more than they need to be if you have your connection with the Spirit, with God. You don't have to dance; dancing is a good way to express it—it is a wonderful way. You don't even have to do that. You don't have to have all these different paths. With dance, the mechanism is using that energy to come into the realm of Spirit . . . The tradition includes many energies. I call them entities. They are not the most important. What is important is where they come from, the Creator. (Personal Interview with Carmelo 2015)

For Carmelo, the source of transmission is a key part of the Indigenous heritage of the tradition: Studying books written by anthropologists to piece together alternative spiritual interpretations can therefore be interpreted as disruptive to the Indigenous spirituality of the tradition.

Danza Azteca provided a point of entry for Carmelo into Indigenous expression. Apart from Danza Azteca, Carmelo has also begun to delve deeper into her Tongva heritage. Carmelo attends Tongva language classes and is working with others in her family to develop songs. Her grandchildren are growing up within this cultural framework, meaning they are learning Tongva language and culture from childhood. Carmelo credits the opportunities to learn Matachin and Danza Azteca in part with strengthening her Indigenous consciousness.

## Appendix 2

### Drumming Observations and Techniques

At any Danza event and in any circle, there are drummers that range from beginners to drummers with extensive experience drumming for Danza. On the surface, drumming can seem like an easy endeavor as the rhythms are repetitive; however, there are subtle factors that distinguish quality drummers. For instance, better drummers can get a warmer tone than those with less experience. The quality of the tone is also highly affected by the quality of the drum, and many drums have the leather drumhead nailed to the body of the drum that results in less robust sound since the head of the drum is not fully taunt.

A good drummer is distinguished by their ability to follow the movements and tempo of the dancer leading the dance, adequately mark the beats and resisting the tendency for the homogenization of accents and small rhythmic nuances embedded within the danzas. These nuances quickly fade when the drums are played too fast, forcing the danzantes to accommodate the drum rather than vice versa. In practices, drummers will get reminded by the lead danzante, often the captain, to watch the feet when this happens. For instance, at one practice I attended with Xochpilli, Arteaga gently chastised the eager young drummers reminding them that “my feet are your hands.”

The execution of the music and the dance is symbiotic in that it requires a dancer who marks their steps, allowing the drummer to follow, and a drummer who marks the accents and pauses in the leading danzante’s dancing that will help keep the whole group in sync. Today there is a culture of openness in Danza in which anyone can show up to a group with a drum and expect to play. As a result, at ceremonies and practices featuring more than the regular drumline, rhythms often get rushed and the accents typically become weak or even disappear entirely,

particularly in the redobles. Such an effect is further magnified when performances take place indoors as the reverberations further muddle the accents.

Drummers use several different techniques for playing. When getting coached by Cuezalin on how to play, he noted that the mallets could be held loosely to allow for a slight bounce. Alternatively, he noted that players can hold the mallets stiffly with the movement originating from their elbows. From observation, most of the better drummers use the former technique as it keeps the body looser and facilitates playing for several hours continuously. The huehuetl can produce two tones roughly a fifth apart. The high accented tone comes from a quicker stroke with the flicking of the wrist. The second form of accent is created when the two mallets come down together, often at the starting of the pattern and on the downbeats of measures. Cuezalin additionally finds that the best quality of sound from a double mallet strike comes when one mallet strikes slightly before the other, creating a rounder sound. Achieving this effect when playing quickly is technically challenging, and maintaining consistency without exhausting ones' arms during lengthy Danza ceremonies requires practice, stamina, and technique. Below are the common beat styles that occur in Danza rhythms.

<b>Beat Style</b>	<b>Characteristics of Playing</b>
Unaccented	Basic stroke with single mallet
Accented (up a fifth)	Rapid stroke with single mallet
Accented (Double mallet strike)	Slightly asynchronous stroke with both mallets
Rim	Lighter strokes often used to accompany sections of quick footwork

Table 1: Huehuetl beats and drum strokes commonly found in Danza.


### Appendix 3

#### “Ofrenda” as performed by Members of Lazaro Arvizu’s Xipe Totec on December 12, 2015

This Danza has a unique structure since the base continuously changes along with the cambio. The steps and rhythm below are transcribed from a version of “Ofrenda” performed by Arvizu’s Xipe Totec circle at Olvera Street on December 12, 2015, in honor of the Virgin of Guadalupe. There are many small additional variations in the steps of individual dancers. This danza has a distinct rhythm in that the pulse is alternatively felt in duple and triple meter. I have transcribed the rhythm predominantly in duple meter to better represent where the downbeats are perceived.<sup>135</sup>

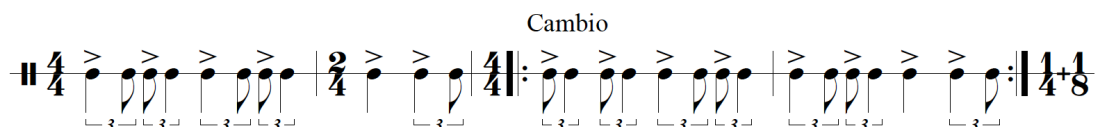
#### “Ofrenda” Transcription

Base

Huehuatl  $\# \frac{1}{4} + \frac{1}{8}$   Repeat three times

Transition to Cambio

Cambio

Huehuatl  $\# \frac{4}{4}$   Repeat four times

Variation

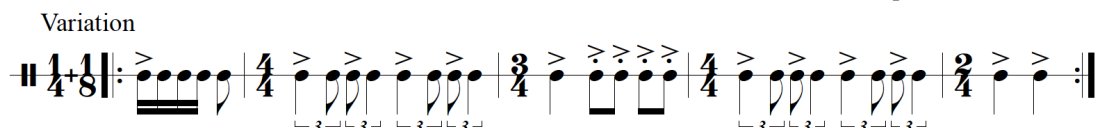
Huehuatl  $\# \frac{1}{4} + \frac{1}{8}$  

Figure 1: Transcription of “Ofrenda.” Transcribed by Kristina Nielsen and Jordan Watson.

<sup>135</sup> A field recording of Arvizu’s Xipe Totec dancing “Ofrenda” can be found on the Internet Archive at <https://archive.org/details/uclaethnomusicologyarchive>. From the main site, search “Nielsen, Kristina” or the collection number, 2017.02, to find the full collection. “Ofrenda” can be seen on DSC\_0588 in the folder “Celebration of the Virgin de Guadalupe.”

### **FIRST BASE**

Keeping the body positioned towards the inside of the circle, the dancer takes two side shuffle steps to the left, and then three steps where the right foot stomps to match the accents of the drum. With the last step, the foot pivots in preparation for repeating the same sequence to the right.

Repeat the full sequence going first to the left and then the right.

### **FIRST CAMBIO**

Walking backwards towards the left, the dancer marks the eight counts of the cambio (accented notes), pivoting at the end of the sequence. The arm is lifted at the end while pivoting to repeat the same step towards the right.

Repeat the full sequence going first to the left and then the right.

### **FIRST BASE (REPEAT)**

Repeat first base pattern in both directions.

### **FIRST CAMBIO (REPEAT)**

Repeat the first cambio pattern in both directions.

### **SECOND BASE**

Moving to the left with two sidesteps, the dancer does three kicks or small leg lifts towards the left to mark the accents of the drum. This same sequence is then repeated going to the right.

Repeat the full sequence going first to the left and then the right.

### **SECOND CAMBIO**

The dancer makes a full rotation towards the left and then marks the accents of the drum with three kicks or leg lifts towards the left. This same sequence is then repeated going to the right.

Repeat the full sequence going first to the left and then the right.

### **SECOND BASE (REPEAT)**

Repeat second base pattern in both directions.

### **SECOND CAMBIO (REPEAT)**

Repeat the second cambio pattern in both directions.

### **THIRD BASE**

Moving towards the left, the dancer takes two shuffle steps and then creates a zigzag pattern by putting their right leg in front of their left with a small step ball change alternating the leading leg three times. After the third time, the dancer turns and repeats the sequence in the other direction.

Repeat the full sequence going first to the left and then the right.

### **THIRD CAMBIO**

The dancer makes a full rotation to the left. Facing the center of the circle, the danzantes marks the three accented drum beats by lifting first the left leg, then the right, then the left, towards the center of the circle. This sequence is repeated to the right.

Repeat the full sequence going first to the left and then the right.

### **THIRD BASE (REPEAT)**

Repeat third base pattern in both directions.

### **THIRD CAMBIO (REPEAT)**

Repeat the third cambio pattern in both directions

### **FOURTH BASE**

#### *variation*

Moving towards the left, the dancer takes three shuffle steps with their inside foot marking the beat. The danzantes marks the four accented beats, often played by clicking the edge of the drum, with their right foot, touching the ground with first the front of the foot, the side, and then the back. The dancer then kneels towards the center of the circle, and draws back, opening their arms over their head. The same sequence is then repeated towards the right.

Repeat the full sequence going first to the left and then the right.

### **FOURTH CAMBIO**

The dancer spin around three times towards the left, ending with their weight on their left foot. The same pattern is then repeated to the right.

Repeat the full sequence going first to the left and then the right.

### **FOURTH BASE (REPEAT)**

Repeat fourth base pattern in both directions.

### **FOURTH CAMBIO (REPEAT)**

Repeat fourth cambio pattern in both directions

### **FIFTH BASE**

The dancer takes two shuffle steps to the left, planting both feet facing towards the left, with a slight hop and the weight on the inside right leg, the dancer pivots to face the opposite direction and then makes a full rotation. This same sequence is then repeated going to the right.

Repeat the full sequence, going first to the left and then the right.

### **FIFTH CAMBIO**

The dancer takes four steps back the center of the circle and then four steps forward, marking the accented final beat with a slight straddle-jump with the circle slightly smaller as all the dancers have taken four steps inwards. This sequence is then repeated.

Repeat the full sequence above.

**FIFTH BASE (REPEAT)**

Repeat the fifth base pattern in both directions.

**FIFTH CAMBIO (REPEAT)**

Repeat the fifth cambio pattern in both directions.

**SIXTH BASE**

The dancer takes several small rapid steps starting with the right foot. The steps are taken on the balls of the foot, and they move towards the center of the circle. The accents receive a double step with the right foot. This pattern is then repeated starting with the left foot leading and marking the accents.

Repeat the full sequence.

**SIXTH CAMBIO**

The dancer takes four steps back starting on the left foot, and then four steps forward, marking the accents with kicks by the right leg. This is then repeated with four steps back starting on the right foot with the accent marked with a kick of the left leg.

Repeat the full sequence starting first with the left leg and then the right.

**SIXTH BASE (REPEAT)**

Repeat the sixth base pattern in full.

**SIXTH CAMBIO (REPEAT)**

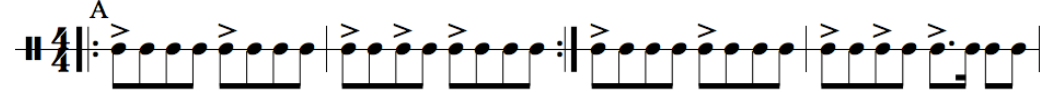
Repeat the sixth cambio pattern in full. At the end of the final cambio, the dancer kneels and bows their torso towards the center of the circle.

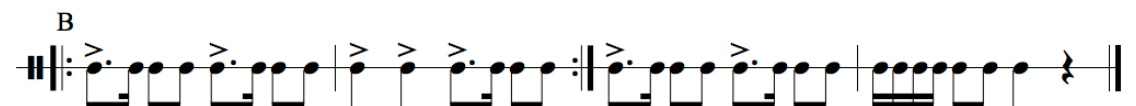
## Appendix 4

### Additional Danzas and Danza Song Repertoire Commonly found in Southern California

#### APACHE

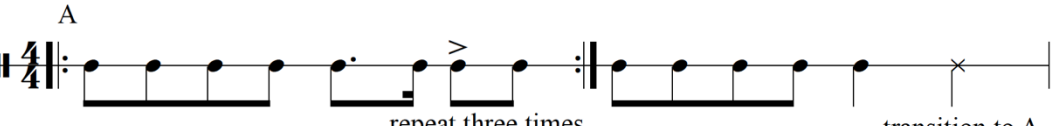
*Conchero, Earliest documentation in Chalma in 1931 (Castillo 2012)*

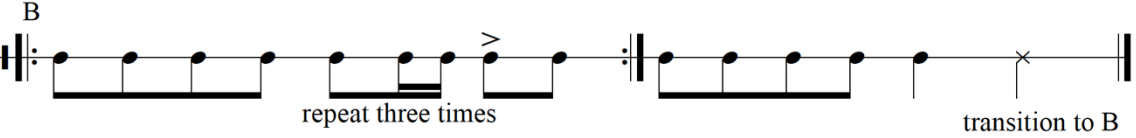
Huehuetl  $\text{H} \frac{4}{4} \text{H}$  <sup>A</sup>  Repeat three times transition to B

<sup>B</sup>  Repeat three times transition to A

#### CAZADOR

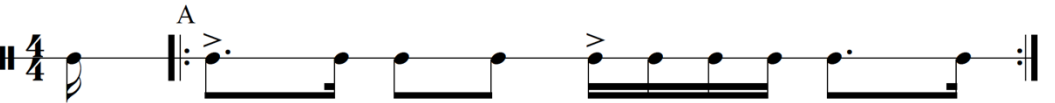
*Conchero origin, Interviews indicate it likely originates from before the 1950s*

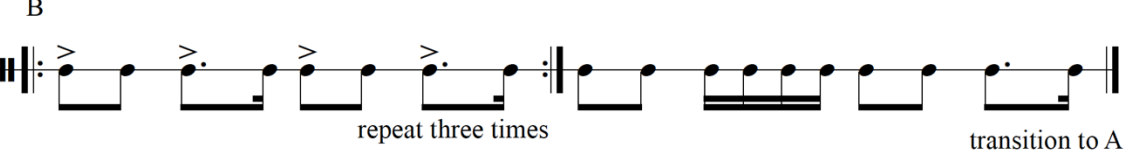
Huehuetl  $\text{H} \frac{4}{4} \text{H}$  <sup>A</sup>  repeat three times transition to A

<sup>B</sup>  repeat three times transition to B

#### DANZA AYOYOTES

*Conchero origin*

Huehuetl  $\text{H} \frac{4}{4} \text{H}$  <sup>A</sup>  repeat four times

<sup>B</sup>  repeat three times transition to A

# TONANTZIN

*Thought to have originated in Los Angeles in the 1990s*

Commonly accompanied with a Plains-style hand drum, or lightly played on the huehuetl with the hands. The beat mimics that of the water drum used in Peyote music.

The musical score is presented in two systems. The first system includes a Voice part and a Drum part. The Voice part is written in a 4/4 time signature and features the lyrics: "To nan tzin To nan tzin To nan tzin". The Drum part consists of a steady, rhythmic pattern of eighth notes. The second system includes a Violin (V) part and a Drum part. The Violin part is also in 4/4 time and features the lyrics: "i pal nem o huan i Co yol yol xauh qui tla zo ca mat i To nan tzin". The Drum part continues with the same rhythmic pattern as in the first system.

OMETEOTL HUITZILOPOCHTLI QUETZALCOATL TEZCATLIPOCA  
*Attributed to the Peace and Dignity Journeys from late 1990s*

Voice



Om - e te otl Huitz il o poch tli Quetz al co atl Tez cat li po ca

Drum

5

V



Yan a yan a hey yan a hey hey hey hey yan a yan a hey yan a hey hey hey

D

9

V



Ton - an tzin Ton an tzin tlal li i mo tla zo Mex i ca me

D

13

V



Yan a yan a hey yan a hey hey hey hey yan a yan a hey yan a hey hey hey

D

## Appendix 5

### Glossary of Danzantes and Cultural Leaders

**Aguilar, Mario:** Learned Danza Azteca in the United States in the 1970s and currently the leader of Danza Mexi'cayotl in San Diego. Mario Aguilar completed his dissertation "Rituals of Kindness: The influence of the Danza Azteca Tradition of Central Mexico on Chicano-Mexcohuani Identity and Sacred Space" at Claremont Graduate University and San Diego State University in 2009.

**Aranda, Felipe:** Was a Conchero dancer and designated carrier of the *palabra* of a long-standing Conchero community in Mexico City. Aranda also led dance ceremonies at the Zemanauak Tlamachtilyan (Rostas 2009:201). Today, his daughter, Esperanza Aranda, carries his *palabra*.

**Arteaga, Adolfo:** Was introduced to Danza Azteca in the mid-1980s and began dancing with Lazaro Arvizu's Xipe Totec. Arteaga founded the group Xochipilli in 1987, and he continues to lead the group in East Los Angeles.

**Arvizu, Lazaro:** Was one of the twelve original dancers who came to the United States with from Mexico City with Florencio Yescas. Arvizu was a permanent member of Yescas' touring group Esplendor Azteca. Starting around 1978, he founded the group Xipe Totec with his wife, which he continues to lead in East Los Angeles.

**Carmelo, Virginia:** Learned Danza Azteca in the United States in the 1970s. She is of Tongva descent, the Indigenous peoples of the Los Angeles Basin. Today, she continues to lead a branch of Xipe Totec in Los Angeles.

**Cueزالin:** Was introduced to Danza Azteca in the mid-1990s, and he began dancing with Sergio Ruiz. Today, he leads the group Xiuhcoatl in Santa Ana.

**Estuvier, Miguel:** Led the Conchero circle Itzcoatl in Guadalajara, Mexico. Sergio Ruiz first learned Conchero with Estuvier.

**General Plasencia:** Is a General of Danza Azteca in Guadalajara, Mexico. Today, General Plasencia has begun working closely with Lazaro Arvizu in Los Angeles and conferred the title of General on Arvizu in a ceremony on November 16, 2016.

**Huitzilmazatzin:** A member of Xochimecayahualli and a trusted source for interpretations of Nahuatl among some members of the Southern California Danza community. Huitzilmazatzin and Cueزالin have worked together to develop new songs for the local Danza community.

**Jiménez, Carlos Daniel:** Was introduced to Danza Azteca in the United States around the mid-2000s. Today, he is both a dancer and a musician who plays Aztec instruments at Danza events and practices with local Danza communities, including Sergio Ruiz's group Gran Tenochtitlan in East Los Angeles.

**Mireles, Arturo “Pastel”:** Was a dancer with Xipe Totec until he left to found his own group Danza Mexica Cuauhtemoc that integrated political protest with Danza. His interpretations became widely popularized and disseminated across the United States. He has since become a pariah in the community following allegations of sexual abuse (L.A. Defense of Safe and Sacred Spaces 2015a).

**Ocelocoatl:** A spiritual leader in Mexico City, Ocelocoatl grew up with his grandparents in rural Tlaxcala and learned to speak Nahuatl. He later worked with the Zemanauak Tlamachtilyan in Mexico City (Colín 2014:145). Today, he is a trusted source for spiritual interpretations in Danza Azteca in Mexico City and calpulli in the United States, including Calpulli Tonalehqueh, located in San Jose, that hosts the largest Mexica New Year Ceremony in the United States.

**Pineda, Manuel:** Was a capitán in Mexico City. Pineda is considered the first to have played the rhythms of the conchas on the huehuetl and teponaztli drums, transitioning the music from Conchero to Danza Azteca. Florencio Yescas was a member of Pineda’s group San Miguel Arcángel before leaving for the United States.

**Ruiz, Sergio:** First learned Conchero steps with Miguel Estuvier’s group Itzcoatl in Guadalajara, Mexico. Upon arriving to Los Angeles, he danced with Xipe Totec before founding his own group. Today, he leads the group Gran Tenochtitlan in East Los Angeles.

**Salinas, Gerardo:** Was among the twelve original dancers who came up from Mexico City in the 1970s with Florencio Yescas. Salinas was a member of Florencio Yescas’ elite touring group Esplendor Azteca. Today he leads a group the group Xipe Totec Esplendor Azteca in the Bay Area near San Francisco, California.

**Tlakaelel:** An alleged Mexica Toltec wisdom keeper. Tlakaelel authored the book *Nahui Mitl*, and offered interpretations of spirituality. The spirituality he taught drew heavily on Native North American spiritual practices, such as the Sun Dance, which he included in his religious teachings known as Kaltonal, or the “Spiritual Institution for the Cosmic Man” (González-Torres 2005:200; Kalpulli Chaplin 2005).

**Yescas, Florencio:** First brought Danza Azteca to California. Yescas taught Danza Azteca in San Diego and Los Angeles from the 1970s until he passed away in 1983. Yescas was a traditional Conchero and Danza Azteca dancer who first learned Conchero with Manuel Pineda. He was also trained in modern dance. Yescas had a lasting artistic impact on Danza Azteca as performed in both the United States and Mexico.

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