

DANCING MESTIZAJE: THE CHOREODRAMAS OF  
THE GUADALUPE DANCE COMPANY

A THESIS

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## DEDICATION

I would like to dedicate this research to the Guadalupe Dance Company in San Antonio, Texas and to Chicana/o dancers everywhere. May we continue to find our dancing expressions. I would also like to dedicate this research to the spirit of Gloria Evangelina Anzaldúa, la mera, mera nepantlera, whose work continues to be an inspiration and important part of my life.

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ABSTRACT

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COMPANY

AUGUST 2015

This thesis explores two choreographic works, or choreodramas, by the Guadalupe Dance Company in San Antonio, Texas: *Río Bravo* (1994) and *Santuarios* (2001), elucidating how they create new traditions in Chicana/o and in US contemporary dance. Using theories in dance analysis, Gloria E. Anzaldúa's theories on the self, and interviews with six dancers in the Guadalupe Dance Company as a framework, this study investigates issues of identity embedded in the stories of Chicana/o heritage that these choreodramas evoke. Finally, this study examines how the emphasis that these choreodramas place on multiplicity contributes to the embodiment of *mestizaje*. In this thesis, I argue that the choreodramas of the Guadalupe Dance Company embody *mestizaje* through choreography that encompasses both the individual and collective identities of contemporary Chicana/os in San Antonio, on the concert dance stage.

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## CHAPTER I

### INTRODUCTION: A SAN ANTONIO STORY

*It is 7:00 pm on a Saturday night in the year 2005. I am backstage at the Guadalupe Theater in San Antonio, Texas and all around me are my fellow Guadalupe Dance Company members, professional dancers who specialize in traditional Mexican folklórico, Aztec dances, flamenco, Spanish classical dance, and dances from the South Texas – Mexico border. Some of them are fixing their make-up, gluing on eyelashes, adjusting their feathered belts, and making last minute alterations to stubborn buttons and zippers on costumes that can be seen spread out all around the wings of the stage. Other dancers, like me, are scattered on the floor, legs spread far apart in a seated second position, our bodies leaning over and arms stretched towards the center. Still, others are standing with elongated necks, doing leg swings and warm up pliés before the show. We can all hear the chatter of the people in the audience getting louder and we know it is almost show time. I take a deep breath and exhale while going over the choreography for “El Principio,” the first suite of dances we will soon be performing for Río Bravo.*

The beginning of my passion and dedication to dance is inextricably linked to narratives centered on history and community. From kitchen floor dance lessons given to me by my mother, to choreography on the concert dance stage, I have long been impressed by the ability of the body in motion to tell stories. Long term formal dance studio training was not always possible so most of my dance lessons outside of home

came through after school programs and community centers. However, at home I received another type of dance training. It was one that involved creating dances with my sister and cousins that were often made up stories based in our neighborhood that we would then perform for family and friends. As a Chicana choreographer, the storytelling element of dance choreography has continued to influence many of my choreographic projects. My own choreography, writing, and research draws on the connection to history, identity, and community and offers a particular yet multifaceted understanding of the role of dance within many Chicana/o communities in South Texas.

Shortly after I moved to San Antonio, Texas in 1997 to pursue a degree in higher education, I went on an audition for a local theater production by the Guadalupe Cultural Arts Center. The production was based on the life of farmworker and activist, Cesar Chavez, and they were seeking contemporary dancers for this multidisciplinary theatrical endeavor. I went to the audition with a desire to be a part of a show that connected me to my history on the stage. I was one of the 8 dancers chosen and invited to attend rehearsals with the Guadalupe Dance Company that summer and I became an official member in 1999, a commitment that lasted for over 12 years. As a member of the GDC, I began to receive training in Mexican folklórico, flamenco, and Aztec dance forms. Through becoming immersed in the company, I was introduced to Chicana/o *teatro*, visual art and literature, which I became involved in on various levels.



In the dance company, I was encouraged to explore my own creativity as a Chicana from South Texas. I was nurtured in an environment where dance was not only an expression but a meaningful representation of the beauty, power, and resilience of our shared culture. That is, our dance making endeavors were often connected to our cultural histories and reflected our lived experiences. As a company member, I felt a connection to memories, family, language and culture in a way that I had never experienced before. This connection is particularly exemplified in the choreodrama, *Historias y Recuerdos*, which I briefly discuss in chapter four.

Joining the Guadalupe Dance Company made me feel like I came home. This first started with the association I felt to the music and dance of Mexican folklórico. I had an immediate connection to the emotion of the music, the dances, and the familiarity of a culture that was a part of my personal history. I grew up in a small border town located in southwest Texas called Del Rio, which literally translated means, “from the river.” At home, I was raised by a single mother who spoke to us in English because she thought it best for giving us a chance at a better life. However, my sisters and I spent a lot of time with my maternal grandparents, both who only spoke Spanish. I still have strong memories of my grandfather getting frustrated with me because it took so long to communicate. “*Um...me puedes...um...llevar...um...a la...um...um...library?*” It was at this house where I began to take notice that I spoke like a *pocha*. I learned a regional dialect that mixed the English and Spanish languages. My mom, aunts, uncles, and family friends were fluent speakers of this *pocha/o*

language, which flowed poetically out of their mouths. This Tex-Mex, Spanglish, *mochó*, pocho language, this borderland language, has a particular history wrapped up in every code-switch.

*I come from the Texas-Mexico border, from a working class background, one of four daughters raised by a single mother. I come from parents who were both migrant farm workers in their youth. They traveled across the United States year after year, picking cotton, fruit, vegetables and sugar cane. I come from stories of life, love, and survival. I come from Tejano/Conjunto music, which could be heard religiously at my house every Saturday and Sunday morning. The sounds of the accordion and bajo sexto, accompanied by the poetic stories of the corrido filled the entire house, dripped out of the windows, and were taken down the street with the wind. I come from a mother who took great care to show me how to move to the music and listen to my body.*

As a member of the Guadalupe Dance Company, not only did I learn folklórico, but I was in a space where my creativity and individual expression were nurtured and encouraged. My most profound experiences with the Guadalupe Dance Company came from the times when we explored what it meant to be Chicana dancers in San Antonio, Texas. Through these investigations, our bodies engaged in dance practices that switched back and forth between folklórico *golpes*, ballet leg extensions, or jazz grapevines. This practice of dance code-switching drove much of the work we did with outside choreographers as well. For example, original dance company choreographies

draw from flamenco, hip-hop, ballet, modern, and various social dances. Dance company members also participate in many dance workshops from instructors and choreographers who come to San Antonio. It was through these workshops that I had the opportunity to take classes with Rennie Harris Puremovement (hip-hop dance), Rosangela Silvestre (Brazilian/Modern dance), and La Tania (flamenco), just to name a few.

At the Guadalupe Dance Company, dancers are fostered in a creative environment that nurtures all aspects of who they are, which includes the multiple languages they speak. And while traditional folklórico plays a big part in what the dance company does, it is not the only kind of work this dance company produces. This is evidenced in the many original productions the Guadalupe Dance Company has presented, such as *Río Bravo* and *Santuarios*, which I will discuss at length in this thesis. More importantly for my research here, these original creative works, or choreodramas, focus on their experiences as San Antonio Chicana/os.

This study contributes to nascent discourse on Chicana/o dance by drawing attention to the ways the Guadalupe Dance Company's (GDC) choreodramas evoke the stories of Chicana/o heritage in San Antonio. In doing so, the choreodramas presented here emphasize the importance of remembering history. This history then becomes the stimulus for these dancers and the dance company to inform their contemporary work. In this thesis, I argue that the GDC's choreodramas embody *mestizaje*<sup>1</sup> and create a

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<sup>1</sup> Mestizaje is discussed at length in the following section.

choreography that encompasses both the individual and collective identities of contemporary Chicana/os, on the concert dance stage.

### **Defining Choreodramas**

A choreodrama in a very broad sense is “a dance drama for large groups<sup>2</sup>.” However, the origin of the term has been traced back to the 1800s with Italian dancer and choreographer, Salvatore Viganó who was well-known for his *choreodrammi*, which synthesized dance and pantomime (Kirstein 1984, 134). Perhaps the most renowned choreodramas were those from the 1920s and 1930s Soviet Union, which became popular because they promoted the political philosophy of socialism while distinguishing themselves from the bourgeois class associated with classical ballet. Solomon Volkov explains that choreodramas’ attention to “plot development, psychological motivation, and dramatic expressiveness” were its distinguishing factors (2010, 501). Lynn Garafola further elaborates, describing choreodramas as “narrative driven works, often based on classical literature, with clear social content, ethnographic color, and the active involvement of theater directors” (Krasovskaya 2005, xxvii). Volkov and Garafola make clear that during this period in the Soviet Union, choreodramas had a specific goal: to use dance as a storytelling method that engages with their audiences politically.

The hybrid style of choreography for social action, in addition to the focus on theatricality and its specific storytelling component make the term “choreodrama” not

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<sup>2</sup> Merriam Webster Online, sv “choreodrama,” accessed November 10, ,2014, <http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/choreodrama>.

only applicable, but also valuable for defining the contemporary work of the GDC.

Thus, I have adopted the word, choreodrama, and also expanded upon it to explore how the GDC celebrates and reclaims a Chicana/o identity through a performance of *cuentos* rooted in *chicanidad*.<sup>3</sup>

The tradition of *cuentos* comes from a long custom of folk storytelling in Chicana/o culture. With limited access to secondary and post-secondary education and middle class forms of writing such as novels, short stories and poetry, Chicana/o communities previously relied on oral traditions to communicate their history and important events to the next generation. Oral expressions such as song, narratives, and *corridos* (ballads) are examples of how this tradition cultivated a philosophy of life based on concrete, physical experiences. *Cuentos*, or stories, are still a big part of everyday life in South Texas. Despite having access to more formal education, Chicana/o communities continue to use *cuentos* to share memories, teach lessons about life, love, politics, and about how to survive and transform their social existence. In this thesis, I assert that the GDC choreodramas' focus on the narrative form of dance follows in the tradition of Chicana/o *cuentos*.

With live bodies moving through space, GDC choreodramas offer a particular kind of storytelling distinguished through dance choreography with the criticality of personal and oral history narrative. *Cuentos* in this case are more than stories; they are consciousness raising tools that use the body to impart knowledge about the world and how to navigate across it. The importance of the body and its movements are elements

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<sup>3</sup> I define *chicanidad* in a subsequent section.

often left out of the storytelling and narrative paradigms. Ignoring the body can be traced to a Cartesian dualistic way of thinking that separates the body from the mind; however, I am approaching this research with an epistemology based in an understanding of the body as intelligent and a source for producing knowledge.

Scholar, Dierdre Skar, notes that “ways of moving are ways of thinking,” pointing to a framework that recognizes the knowledge produced through the moving body. In other words, the GDC choreodramas move away from perceptions of dance as mute bodily experiences and instead illuminate the way the body knows.

Cynthia Novack writes, “Structured movement systems like theater dance, social dance, sport, and ritual help to articulate and create images of who people are and what their lives are like, encoding and eliciting ideas and values; they are also part of experience, of performances and actions, by which people know themselves” (1997, 405). The participation in complex movement systems is not unique to the choreodramas of the GDC, rather Novack elucidates that cultures all over the world are always participating in, interpreting and reinterpreting the significance of movement in relation to identity and the culture through which it is produced. Critical to this particular notion of choreodramas is an understanding of how they reflect an expression of these dancers’ personal and cultural identities, as well as the broader San Antonio Chicana/o community experiences. There is a direct connection to their choreodramas and the complexity of Chicana/o identity in relation to history, politics,

and everyday experiences. The GDC choreodramas reveal that movement and the body are social realities that interact with culture and identity.

Sherry Shapiro maintains that the body is a site for “critical reflection and understanding of one’s life world” (1999, 81). This is also the case for the dancers in the GDC who engage in choreodramas that are so closely linked to their culture, ethnicity, and sense of who they are. Their work with the GDC then can also be seen as a theory in the flesh – a particular body telling a story of the life it has lived. Cherrie Moraga (1981) writes,

A theory in the flesh means one where the physical realities of our lives – our skin color, the land or concrete we grew up on, our sexual longings – all fuse to create a politic born out of necessity. Here we attempt to bridge the contradictions in our experience... We do this bridging by naming our selves [sic] and by telling our stories in our own words.

Thus, for the dancers interviewed for this thesis, identity must be understood as changing, socially produced, and deeply connected to the body, apparent in the choreodramas the GDC performs and creates.

The relationship that I am claiming between dance, identity, and the body is based in theory that situates the body as a specific racialized state of being. Shapiro writes that the “body in all its materiality is socially marked and identified as black, woman, handicapped, old, lower class, fat” (1999, 55). In other words, the body is infused with social meanings which are written and read onto it. Similarly, Anna Beatrice Scott notes, “If dance is particular to the body that performs it – and that body is a person particular to a certain family, locale, region, nation – then dancing takes on

meaning as an identity marker and demarcates territory, both real and imagined” (2001,108). One of the implications of this identity marker brought forth through the movement of the body is the understanding that bodies are sites of knowledge, history and even power. For dancers in the GDC, choreodramas provide a connection to who they are – their ancestral roots, family history, and geographical location. They also resist assimilation and participate in a discourse on current socio-political issues in their communities. The choreodramas of the GDC are constructed through performances of mestizaje based in a particular bodily and aesthetic experience that provides a space to explore the identity of the dancers and their communities that are linked with the society in which it is created.

I call attention to the use of narrative in the choreodramas of the GDC because of its ability to examine the social realities of Chicana/os in San Antonio. In this thesis, I use the term narrative as in critical race theory, where it is characterized as a way to counter the dominant society’s construction of people of color as “other”. Derrick Bell explains that critical race theory scholarship is distinguished by its “frequent use of the first person, storytelling, narrative, allegory...and the unapologetic use of creativity” (2005, 78). For example, critical race theorist Charles Lawrence III expresses the significance of personal narratives as a site of resistance and collective identity:

Stories express depth and complexity, and allow for ambiguity and multiple interpretations. They inspire feelings of commonality, connectedness, and empathy among tellers, listeners, and the subjects of our stories. Our stories convey experience and feeling...But mostly we tell stories to ‘fight off illness and death’ – to oppose and talk back to white supremacy’s stories; to recover, or foreground, stories of violence,



degradation, and exclusion that others cannot or will not tell; to tell the world and ourselves that we are wholly and fully human, that we are you, that our stories are yours (2012, 251).

With a commitment to antiracism and building a more egalitarian world, I build on the empowering effects of this epistemology as a way to investigate how the GDC choreodramas challenge dominant perceptions of Chicana/o communities through a re-telling of a history that has been distorted and skewed. In this way, the narrative becomes a guide for resisting the negative effects of the dominant culture.

The choreodramas of the GDC become resistive in the way they prevent the forgetting of a history. Lisa A. Flores writes, “Narratives contain in them a dimension of oppositionality, in that through stories, communities create discourses about themselves” (2000, 691). This sentiment is echoed in the work of Trinh T. Minh-ha who explains that stories present the story of the teller and the story of the telling over time. She writes, “Each story is at once a fragment and a whole; a whole within a whole. And the same story has always been changing” (1989, 123). In other words, stories and narratives are not just about a moment in time, but also a contribution to a growing lineage that has already begun and will continue to grow after.

The GDC choreodramas are expressions of Chicana/o culture that honor and celebrate the legacy of oral tradition in San Antonio. They can be thought of as a space to re-imagine falsehoods that have positioned Chicana/os as inferior to the dominant culture in the way that they draw from the dancers’ own cultural and personal stories, bringing voice to a silenced Chicana/o history. These choreodramas also contest a

continued pattern of discrimination and inferiority, evident in the way they tell stories about ancestors, such as in *Río Bravo* (Chapter 2), and family members like mothers, grandmothers, sisters, and aunts, like in *Santuarios* (Chapter 3). While showing a concern to preserve the histories of their people, choreodramas also reflect current issues relevant to Chicana/o communities. For example, *Santuarios* incorporates the subject of migration and immigration especially applicable to communities on both sides of the US-Mexico border. By bringing sociopolitical matters to the forefront of their work, the GDC choreodramas provide access to dance as a meaningful artistic and bodily experience and political expression.

Traditional Mexican folklórico dances alone cannot fully capture how these choreodramas reclaim a silenced Chicana/o past. Choreodramas recover voices and narratives through the characters they create, themes they present, and the way they treat the issues presented. The use of personal and oral (his/her)stories and narratives are more than just an imagined linear report – they engage with a history that has been denied to its people in multiple ways, such as through the 300 plus years of Spanish colonization, the Manifest Destiny of the US expansionist period, and the US educational system that followed. Through this retelling and reclaiming, a new history emerges that speaks to the truth and power held in the choreodramas themselves.

The choreodramas of the GDC are marked through a dance practice that utilizes *zapateado* as the tool for building choreography. Zapateado, the footwork technique foundational to folklórico dance, is what distinguishes the GDC's choreodramas from

other forms of contemporary US dance. The rhythmical action of the feet hitting the floor, creating dance practices based on sounds and sequences in accordance with its musical accompaniment, is one that has been practiced throughout North America for centuries and connects to the native cultures of this geographical area. In Mexican folklórico dances, it is called zapateado and is represented in its various regional forms. However, a version of zapateado, feet stomping on the floor, can also be found in the many (if not all) indigenous ceremonial dance practices on this continent. From *danza Azteca* danced in Mexico and the US, to the dances of the Lakota, Pueblo, Plains, Sioux, Cherokee, Comanche, Apache and the many other indigenous nations, the exchange between the feet and the Earth is one shared throughout this broader geographical location.

Beyond it being a dance step, this exchange creates distinct and audible sounds that resonate below and above the ground. For many indigenous groups, this dance form signifies an exchange with the Earth – you give to the Earth and the Earth gives back to you. Variations of this dance form exist across the continent making them regionally and tribally specific, so they may look, sound, and have different purposes according to where they are located.

I contend that the GDC choreodramas are characterized by rhythmical foot stomping, extending this dance history into their contemporary work. In their choreodramas, the use of zapateado is expanded upon through the multiple ways that their bodies communicate, such as the various dance vocabularies used. This means

drawing on performance practices rooted in mestizaje, which cross the boundaries of traditional folklórico dances and bring the dancer's voices into dialogue on identity.

### **Mestizaje**

Rafael Pérez-Torres explains that throughout Mexico and many Latin American countries, the term mestizaje is most often thought of as a racial term to signify the mixture of Native American, European, African and Asian ancestry (2006, xi). For many Chicana/os specifically, the notion of mestizaje corresponds with the concept of *Aztlán*<sup>4</sup>, a term used to describe the ancestral homeland of the Aztecs that was reclaimed by many Chicana/os during the Chicano movement. During this time, mestizaje became a means for Chicana/os to unite under a common cultural and racial ancestry that was connected to the legacy of the colonization of North America. Thus, mestizaje in this way can be thought of as revolving around the process of racial mixing and in conjunction with a nationalistic ideology.

More recent scholarship on the concept focuses on the way that lived experiences of mestizaje are embodied and performed. For example, Diana Taylor incorporates a performative interpretation to the notion of mestizaje where she notes that mestizaje not only has a history, but “it *tells* a history, and it *embodies* a history” (2005, 94). Taylor argues that mestizaje is related to the body since “the primary site of mestizaje is the body, linked as it is to the mestizo/a, the child born of European and indigenous parents” (2005, 94). Taylor also maintains that mestizaje carries with it a

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<sup>4</sup> Alicia Arrizon makes clear that Aztlán is also a conceptual political space and “a continuation of the indigenous past, affirming that the conquest of space does not necessarily lead to the extinction of a people's cultural identity memory, and vernacular traditions” (2000,25).

cultural memory that revolves around issues of performance, which she links with the *casta* paintings that were used by Spaniards and Indigenous groups as visible markers for social hierarchies.

Richard D. Piñeda explains that “Chicana/os maintain expressive space for identity through the acceptance of *mestizaje*” (2009, 188). He adds to this by describing how *mestizaje* has become central to contemporary cultural productions in Chicana/o communities in the way that it provides a critical framework for performance. He writes, “*mestizaje* is about performing identity and style influenced by many aspects of culture” (2009, 186). For example, when thinking about the choreodramas of the GDC, *mestizaje* practices utilize the dancers’ own herstories/histories to construct a contemporary dance style that brings together flamenco, folklórico, Aztec, modern, and ballet dance genres, along with elements of drama/theater, as well as both English and Spanish languages.

In this thesis, I acknowledge the idea of *mestizaje* as having emerged from an essentialized idea about race, but I will also use it as a conceptual tool to theorize on the choreodramas of the GDC. I refer to the notion of *mestizaje* as one not only about race, but I consider it to be about multiplicity. In other words, I look at *mestizaje* as signifying multiplicity in terms of how the choreodramas draw from multiple dance vocabularies to incorporate the dancers’ multiple lived experiences and express a cultural identity that is both multiple and relational. So in this thesis, *mestizaje* is about dancing bodies telling stories in the GDC choreodramas. I maintain that it is through an

embodied dancing mestizaje that these choreodramas resist cultural assimilation from the dominant society and celebrate their cultural heritages.

The GDC's dance vocabulary is dynamic and is based on a dance practice that has multiple facets. That is, these particular dancers in the company have a multiplicity of dance styles that they draw from and use in their choreodramas: folklórico, flamenco, ballet, modern, just to name a few. Thus, the GDC's dance vocabulary is always expanding to include many styles of dance and performance practices. Most recently this has been exemplified in their collaboration with the acrobatic stilt walking performance troupe, *Nemcatacoa Teatro*, from Bogotá, Colombia. After collaborating with Nemcatacoa, the company has now begun to include stilt walking into many of their own performances. The GDC's dance vocabulary is about performing mestizaje in the way that it is made up of different elements and processes that manifest within their dancing body.

The artistic visions of Jeannette Chavez and Belinda Menchaca, dance company members and directors, are vital to the embodiment of mestizaje in the GDC choreodramas. The experiences they bring translate into mestizaje practices that have kept this company evolving. For example, Chavez recalls in her earliest memories of working with the GDC, how a dancer trained in folklórico, ballet and modern dance was brought in to work with them. Chavez states, "For me, I wasn't necessarily tied to, well it's *puro* folklórico and traditional or it's gotta be *puro* flamenco. I was like, 'let's do it all!' I love that we do it all!" In fact, the emphasis on combining various

movement vocabularies can also be seen in the classes that Chavez teaches at the Guadalupe Dance Academy as well as in the way she conducts company rehearsals.

### **Mexicanidad and Chicanidad**

*Mexicanidad* signifies the special cultural connection many folklórico dancers feel to Mexico rooted in family history, tradition, and a sense of responsibility when they dance folklórico. The ability that Mexican folklórico dance has to instill mexicanidad among the dancers interviewed for this thesis is noteworthy in that it informs and reflects a sense of pride in their Mexican cultural heritage. For example, Marlene Pita expresses mexicanidad in relation to a sense of being proud of her Mexican heritage and having an appreciation for the way the GDC publicly presents folklórico dance traditions:

*El baile* for me, the traditions, are us just trying to recreate what was happening once before. I know a lot of times the Guadalupe, we steer away from like the flashiness, which is awesome and I like that we do that. I like us trying to bring back as traditionally as we can these dances, and just representing the respect and admiration we have for Mexico. The things we want to learn from there and share it. Because I think a lot of times, for me personally, having friends and we're Mexican American, we forget about that whole other side.

On the other hand, Carolina Guerra articulates a particular connection to an indigenous Mexican culture through folklórico dance practices indicating a break in any binary notion of identity for these dancers as either Mexican or American.

My grandma is indigenous. She is from Oaxaca. So I guess one of the things I want to share in my bio in the programs...I want it to be real specific and real short about why I do what I do. And in my bio I say, "Dancing is feeding my soul. And I love my traditions and my culture and it's through dance that I share this with my audience." To me it's

[dance] so powerful and my grandma is such a big influence in my life and I think she's one of the reasons why I dance folklórico.

The comments made by the dancers above exemplify how the staging of folk dances from Mexico can “stand as public symbols of Mexican culture” (Nájera-Ramirez 1989, 15). What is more, the dancers' comments suggest that cultural expressions such as folklórico dances performed by Chicana/os in Texas do not erase mexicanidad; rather they draw upon it to create new meanings.

There exists a long history of Chicana/os creating new traditions founded in inherited Mexican theatrical expressions. Folklórico saw significant popularity, particularly among Chicana/o communities in the Southwestern portion of the United States, during the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. Peter C. Haney has noted that throughout South Texas during the 1920s -1940s, popular tent shows or *carpas* used folklórico dances to open their shows (1999, 439). Folklórico dances in carpa shows presented a hybrid of folklórico and vaudeville shows exemplifying a Chicana/o cultural fusion during this particular time period (Haney 1999, 437). Mexican folklórico dances gained huge popularity once again during the Chicano Movement, as it instilled cultural pride and dispelled negative stereotypes about Chicana/o communities. Dr. Olga Nájera-Ramirez has described this as the “folklórico phenomenon,” which I will discuss further in chapter 2.

While traditional ballet folklórico tells a distinctly Mexican story, the GDC's choreodramas tell a Chicana/o story reflecting *chicanidad*, or the Chicana/o experience. In this thesis I elucidate how these works create new traditions in Chicana/o dance



forms while simultaneously creating new directions in contemporary dance. Indexing a US history and culture as opposed to that of Mexico, I maintain that a closer examination of these choreodramas also adds much needed discourse to the to the fields of dance studies and Chicana/o studies in the way that they express a unique US dance expression.

For the purposes of this thesis, I have chosen to use the term Chicana/o for two reasons. One is due to the *original* mission statement of the Guadalupe Cultural Arts Center, where the company is based out of, that uses this term. The second is because of the ability that Chicana/o has to encompass a particular experience of mestizaje in the US Southwest. That is, Chicana/o or *chicanidad* speaks to the recognition of the Indigenous, Mexican, European, and Chicana/o cultural heritage of this particular group of dancers, which also influences the choreodramas they create. However, I acknowledge that Chicana/o may not always be applicable when speaking about a particular individual interviewed for this research. Instead, some of the participants identify with other terms like Mexican, Mexican American and Latina/o. I use those terms accordingly.

Anchored in *chicanidad*, choreodramas often speak to issues of (im)migration, racism, and citizenship, and they confront the history of colonization experienced by many Texas Mexicans. With a resurgence of anti-immigrant sentiment across the country, and the strong response by Washington lawmakers to take a clear stand on illegal immigration, particularly from Mexico, as a criminal activity, these

choreodramas disrupt the hegemony of the dominant culture and become an active resistance to its ideological constructs. In this thesis, I situate the GDC's choreodramas as an active participant in its relationship among individuals and communities in San Antonio, and I examine how this link expresses personal and cultural identities through a performance of mestizaje. I maintain that the choreodramas of the Guadalupe Dance Company exemplify a complex contemporary Chicana/o identity that looks back toward history to inform the present.

### **Chicana/o Art in San Antonio**

San Antonio's historical legacy is deeply intertwined with politics, immigration, and colonization. Mexicans and Chicana/os have always been part of the geography of US cities, especially in San Antonio which is situated just a mere hundred miles away from the US-Mexico border. The US Census Bureau reports that over half of San Antonio's population is categorized as "Hispanic/Latino." With a history that dates back into the Spanish expeditions of the early 1600's, Chicana/os have been part of San Antonio even before Texas was a part of Mexico. It is a city composed of mestizaje, with a great amount of its historical influences being of Mexican, Indigenous, German, and southern Anglo American cultural descent (Texas State Historical Association, 2015). Within the city each of these cultures lives on and can be seen among its architecture, food, music, and local traditions including dance.

The city's history is also wrapped in religion and combat, which has shaped San Antonio's culture and become a big influence on art making by Chicana/o local

artists. For instance, San Antonio is home to historic Catholic missions and to the San Fernando Cathedral dating back to the 1700's. In the downtown area of the city, tourists flock to visit the many different churches of varying denominations such as Presbyterian, Lutheran, and Methodist that all stand within a close radius of each other. San Antonio was also the site of such battles as the Siege of Bexar and the Alamo. It was seized two times during the Mexican invasions of 1842. It served as a Confederate depot in 1877. And after the 1910 Mexican Revolution, many Mexican citizens fled to San Antonio. It is home to the first United States Volunteer Cavalry organized during the Spanish-American War, and in both world wars San Antonio was an important military center for the US Army and Air Force (Texas State Historical Association 2015). It has been the home to at least 4 military bases: Kelly Air Force Base, Lackland Air Force Base, Randolph Air Force Base and Fort Sam Houston, and continues to be known as "Military City USA."

At the first annual Luminaria Arts Festival<sup>5</sup> in 2009, Chicana filmmaker and media artist Laura Varela co-created the installation "'Enligh-Tents: Reconquering the Alamo Through Art", a site-specific installation located on the grounds of the Alamo, which commented on the effects of European cultures on the Native cultures of San Antonio. In this public art piece, images of Native peoples were projected onto the Alamo's façade along with placing more than 50 teepee structures around the building.

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<sup>5</sup> Luminaria Arts Festival is an annual contemporary arts festival which began in 2009 as a way to promote the arts and artists of San Antonio. It features art work from all disciplines in a two-night event located in downtown San Antonio's Hemisphere Park.

The Alamo, a former Spanish mission, is under the custodianship of “The Daughters of the Republic of Texas” and also known to some as “The Shrine for Texas Freedom.” This piece caused a great deal of controversy and as a result, public art has now been banned on the Alamo grounds.

### **The Guadalupe Dance Company and the Guadalupe Cultural Arts Center**

The GDC is part of a larger non-profit, multidisciplinary organization named the Guadalupe Cultural Arts Center (GCAC) founded on the west side of San Antonio in 1980. The GCAC was established by a group of San Antonio *artistas* or artists-activists who came together to preserve and promote the art and culture of Chicana/o, Latino, and Indigenous peoples. According to the GCAC’s website, these artists were “determined to play a critical role in shaping the artistic and cultural experiences of San Antonio’s residents and visitors alike” (Guadalupe Cultural Arts Center 2014). These artists banded together and called themselves the Performance Artist’s Nucleus, or PAN. Through their determination and diligent efforts, PAN became an effective force throughout the city, working toward promoting an understanding that cultural traditions were disappearing and raising the public’s awareness that vital decisions were being made for the San Antonio Chicana/o community without their input.

The GCAC has been a fundamental multidisciplinary arts organization since its establishment. They profess to have either introduced, showcased or fostered the talents of “almost every major Chicano/Latino visual artist, filmmaker, playwright, actor, writer, folkloric dancer/choreographer, or Chicano musician in the United States

today” (Guadalupe Cultural Arts Center 2014). The GCAC hosts a variety of community education classes such as the Guadalupe Academy, the *Escuela* Project, and the Teen Arts *Puentes* Project. They also put on annual festivals such as the Tejano Conjunto Festival (now in its 34th year), *CineFestival*, the longest running Latino film festival in the US, and *Hecho a Mano*, a showcase of handcrafted items by local, national, and international artists. In addition, since 2002 they have become the home to the *Museo* Guadalupe, an exhibition space that highlights Latina/o visual art from local, national and international artists.

Despite various leadership changes at the GCAC, the GDC continues to be a strong hold at the cultural arts center. The GDC has made a name for itself as one of the nation’s leading professional folklórico and flamenco companies. Established in 1991 under the direction of Roen Salinas, the GDC got its start as one of only three dance companies funded by the city of San Antonio. It was made up of over forty *folkloristas* or folklórico dancers who came from several other San Antonio folklórico dance companies. The GDC’s longevity is a testament to the company’s longtime directors, Belinda Menchaca and Jeannette Chavez, but it also demonstrates the connection this company has to their community, audiences, and supporters. Through a representation of their history, the GDC creates and presents performances that celebrate and express their cultural identity, while connecting to the larger community of San Antonio.

Belinda Menchaca started to work with the GDC in 1991. She was the company's ballet and flamenco instructor and a member of the company's advisory committee. An established dancer, teacher, and performer in San Antonio, Menchaca was known to many San Antonio natives as a flamenco dancer. She became the director of the dance company in 1992, and has been with the GCAC for 22 years now. Throughout her 22 years at the GCAC, Menchaca has had many roles beginning with dance program director, and then education director, marketing director, and now her most current position as the performing arts director. In our interview, Menchaca spoke of these many hats she has worn at the GCAC and expressed a deep sense of responsibility for the organization.

Under her direction, dancers in the dance company became trained in flamenco as well as ballet and folklórico dance techniques. She felt this to be important because dancers would have an ability to express themselves in various styles of dance while providing them an opportunity to work with different instructors and choreographers. In addition to fostering the growth of multiple dance movement vocabularies for company members, Menchaca also became invested in work that involved the company in multidisciplinary collaborations. This sentiment was evidenced during our interview when Menchaca stated: "My work here goes beyond the dance. It's bringing the community together, it's bringing experts together to create work." Indeed, bringing together community and collaborators is evidenced in the GDC's

choreodramas. One of the greatest examples is the 2001 production of *Santuarios*, which I will discuss in chapter three.

San Antonio is the 7<sup>th</sup> largest municipality in the United States and the largest city in Bexar County. In more recent years, this city's tourism factor has grown exponentially with visitors traveling to the city to visit its amusement park, historic Riverwalk, to attend conferences, business seminars and sports events. Significant to note is how Mexican folklórico dance is part of the tourism advertisements for the city, which creates an image of San Antonio that is nestled in arts and Mexican American culture. Many of the GDC's gigs come about as a result of the tourism industry in San Antonio. For these performances, the GDC is hired to present more traditional folklórico dances like dances from the state of Jalisco with the big colorful skirts that are typical of many folklórico dance images. In many instances, this means dancing for a crowd as they enter the doors to a conference they are attending or dancing as the background while food is being served and consumed.

Indeed, these performances play a big part in keeping the company financially afloat, providing resources to be able to then work on productions that involve more risk taking and thinking outside of the box. With national funding for the dance arts having withered away so much over the past twenty years, the GDC directors have realized the importance of performing at all sorts of venues. In this way, the dancing offers GDC members a way to navigate back and forth between performances of

mexicanidad and chicanidad, at times straddling both. The dancing is also how the GDC values both worlds and the world of dance in general.

With the sociopolitical factors that make up the history of this city, it is no wonder that the work of the GCAC and the GDC more specifically, remain charged with themes that reflect San Antonio's historical legacy especially as it relates to the Chicana/o people. Moreover, with the size of San Antonio continuing to grow and with the addition of the newly built Tobin Center for the Performing Arts<sup>6</sup>, the role of the arts in San Antonio is a subject that holds much value and necessitates further analysis in order to understand its impact on both a local and national level. This thesis seeks to contribute to this scholarship as well.

### **Methodology**

The research presented here is based on my interviews with members of the Guadalupe Dance Company, as well as analysis of some of the company's most noted original choreographic works: *Río Bravo* and *Santuarios*. In addition, I attended and participated in rehearsals periodically over the course of a year when the company was working on the 20th anniversary show of *Río Bravo*. These rehearsals with the company served as a research tool for this thesis as well as invigorating muscle memory<sup>7</sup> while (re)situating me in this company's dance structure.

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<sup>6</sup> The Tobin Center for the Performing Arts opened in September of 2014. It contains a state of the art, multipurpose performance hall, a 250 seat studio theater, and an outdoor performance plaza that connects to San Antonio's Riverwalk.

<sup>7</sup> In dance practice, muscle memory is a term used to describe how muscles remember and retain movement vocabulary and choreography.



I conducted one-on-one interviews that lasted about one hour. My interview structure allowed the participants to guide the conversation based on their personal experiences and reflections on their involvement with the dance company. Through open-ended interviews, the dancers were given the opportunity to talk about their experiences with dance in general and ballet folklórico more specifically, the dance company, and the Guadalupe Cultural Arts Center. I interviewed six current and long-time members of the Guadalupe Dance Company: Jeannette Chavez (dance company director/company member), Luis Garcia (company member), Carolina Guerra (company member), Sabrina Latigo (company member), Belinda Menchaca (former company director/company member) and Marlene Pita (company member). All but one interviewee were born and raised in San Antonio and have been members of the dance company between 10-20 years. Participants in this study were dancers that I personally knew or who were recommended to me by the dance company director, and who responded to the recruitment email that I sent out. The only criteria used to recruit participants was that they be adults and former or current dance company members who could provide information that placed the company in its historical, cultural, and professional contexts.

In this thesis, I posit that much of the value that the GDC's choreodramas bring to their San Antonio community and to the field of Dance Studies, Chicana/o Studies, and many other interdisciplinary fields of research, lies in a contemporary re-telling of history for the Chicana/o people of this area. Thus, I use the stories behind the

choreodramas of the GDC, the stories of the individual dancers interviewed, as well as my own personal stories to acknowledge and validate the existing Chicana/o presence in American dance. I have found the methodological tools of women of color feminist theorists such as the theorizing of lived experiences, in addition to critical race theory and autoethnography crucial for theorizing on the choreodramas of this company. This is especially true of the work of post-colonial feminist theorist, Gloria E. Anzaldúa.

In addition, I draw on methods of dance analysis to explore and theorize on these choreodramas. In this analysis of dance choreography, I examine how the dancers use their body in space – How do they move? What are their choreographic roadmaps and pathways? What is the effort they use to move through the space? What does this choreography say about the relationships being established on stage and with the audience? An analysis of dance reveals how choreography is a thinking tool in that choreographers think very deeply about dancing bodies and the power that dance images hold. Susan Leigh Foster explains, “Bodies do not only pass meaning along, or pass it along in their uniquely responsive way. They develop choreographies of signs through which they discourse: they run (or lurch or bound, or feint, or meander...) from premise to conclusion; they turn (or pivot, or twist...) through the process of reasoning; they confer with (or rub up against, or bump into...) one another in narrating their own physical fate” (1996 xi). In this quote, Foster illuminates how bodies in motion in choreography become sites of meaning making, extending the life of a dance by connecting to the images it creates.

Further, I look at how the dancers' bodies are moving in relation to the context they are in, revealing cultural knowledge being expressed in the movement. Sklar explains that “-knowledge involved in dancing is not just somatic, but mental and emotional as well, encompassing cultural history, beliefs, values and feelings (1991, 6). Thus, this analysis is also a framework for understanding how the choreography tells the stories of Chicana/os in San Antonio. I explore the dancers' motivation and purpose for dancing in order to reveal more about the culture in which these choreodramas are located. Therefore, I use dance analysis and the interviews as a methodology for understanding the connection between the dancers' cultural experiences and cultural identity in relation to what is being presented on stage.

The development of identity is complicated and multifaceted and I do not mean to homogenize the individual experiences of the dancers and the dance itself. Instead, my work here seeks to acknowledge how different aspects of identity become more or less visible in various times and situations (Moya 2001, 464). In this thesis, I focus on a discussion of Chicana/o identity as it relates to the social dominance and structural power in the American Southwest and particularly in Texas because throughout the interviews about the GDC's repertoire and their personal experiences as GDC members, the dancers continuously stressed identity in terms of race, ethnicity, and culture. For example, a reoccurring theme revolved around their identity as being connected to their Mexican ancestry. However, they also made clear that because they live in the contemporary United States, they are not solely Mexican. I suggest that the

relationship these dancers have to choreodramas is grounded in their historical perspective and reality of living between multiple worlds, Mexican, American, and Chicana/o, all at the same time.

The experience of my participation in *Río Bravo* and *Santuarios* is what led me to focus on these two choreodramas. In this thesis, I draw from my own personal emotional and sensory understandings to explore how these two choreodramas present an evolving folklórico dance dynamic. I also connect my personal experiences with a movement analysis that came from observing and studying videotaped recordings of these shows. This allowed me to integrate how this choreography felt in my body to the larger context of cultural values and ideas involved in these choreodramas. By including myself in this thesis as the researcher, writer, and a participant, I utilize my own experiences as an attempt to understand how these choreodramas engage with issues related to San Antonio's political and spiritual heritages, while also actively speaking from the perspective as a member of Chicana/o community in San Antonio.

### **Chapter Overview**

In chapter two, I present an analysis of the choreodrama, *Río Bravo*. Originally choreographed for the GDC by Maestro Rafael Zamarripa in 1992, I explore how *Río Bravo* represents a story of the borderlands extending the geography of South Texas temporally into the past. I begin with a brief history of ballet folklórico in Mexico and the US as a way to contextualize the tradition from which choreodramas draw from. Next, I move into a background of the creation of the show to understand what the

piece is about and the central role that Zamarripa had in the beginning stages of the company. My analysis of *Río Bravo*, also takes special notice of the multiple movement vocabularies used to reflect this borderlands choreography, a fundamental element of the methods of mestizaje used to develop choreodramas. In addition, chapter two draws from Gloria E. Anzaldúa's historic text, *Borderlands/La Frontera* (1987), which informs how *Río Bravo* builds on a borderlands theory that negotiates the border through dance.

Chapter three delves into the choreodrama, *Santuarios* (2001). This original collaborative work between the GDC, Serafín Aponte, and Lourdes Pérez combines music and dance to dramatize a Chicana/o narrative of crossing borders, emotions, time and memory. Based on the metaphor of the monarch butterfly, *Santuarios* addresses the possibilities of an interrogation of borders, both physical and psychological. I also delve into the transformation of folklórico zapateado into a contemporary dance language that conveys notions of travel, movement, and pathways. Using Anzaldúa's post-*Borderlands* work and theory of geographies of selves as a theoretical framework, I explore how the choreography and the creation process of *Santuarios* stages a multiplicity of identity.

In the conclusion of this thesis, I reflect on the 20<sup>th</sup> anniversary of *Río Bravo* and the history of the GDC in the larger San Antonio community. I also consider how the GDC's connection to zapateado draws on the folklórico dance to create a new

tradition, choreodramas, representative of the San Antonio region. I look at this significance in relation to the larger implications for folklórico dance.

## CHAPTER II

### *RÍO BRAVO: DANCING THE BORDERLANDS*

*The stage is dark and filled with the sounds of flutes and bells and the lights are twinkling like stars. It is cold as I lie there on the stage floor waiting for the lights to illuminate the large pictograph images, one of a shaman and the other of a deer, which can be seen hanging from the rafters on earth toned fabric. I am one of the ten dancers on stage dressed in flesh toned unitards, feathered belts and chunky reddish-brown beaded necklaces and bracelets. We remain still, our bodies positioned in the shape of a letter "T". I instinctively begin to contract my abdomen when I hear the sound of the drum begin to fill the stage with its heartbeat pattern. Our knees float up and down to its paces several times before we turn to our sides and begin reaching towards our partner lying at our side. We reach away with one arm which then travels into second position. Lengthening out, our arms stretch up to curve over our heads before slowly moving down toward our center body line, while our abdomen forcefully contracts once again. Gracefully, our arms return to our partners as we reach to help each other come to a standing position. Next, our arms interlock around our waists and shift our upper bodies toward the ground. What begins as short percussive stomps of our feet striking the floor quickly coalesces into a strong and steady harmony that blends with the pounding drum. We all begin to come into one long line that then travels around the stage like a snake slithering in the grass. Smoothly and boldly marking the floor*

*with the stomping of our feet, we are rhythmically in synch and together we move to our next formation in “El Principio.”*

It is this moment of zapateado – the instant the feet strike the floor – where *Río Bravo* the choreodrama comes to life. Through the physical movement of rhythmical foot stomping along with the forward position of the torso, the dancers begin *Río Bravo* by marking a sacred connection *con la tierra*, the Earth. This connection is reinforced with the two dimensional gestural movements created in the arms to portray the planting and harvesting of seeds and plants. The zapateado stands as a union of the company and San Antonio’s connection to an ancient indigeneity that dates back over 4,000 years ago with the native communities of the lower Pecos region of Texas. It is in this stomping, this zapateado, that the dancers declare their connection not only to this geographical region, but to the zapateado dance form.

Choreographed for the GDC by Maestro Rafael Zamarippa Castañeda, *Río Bravo* premiered at the Jo Long Theater in San Antonio to a sold-out audience and was the GDC’s first commissioned production<sup>8</sup>. *Río Bravo* chronicles the evolution of Chicana/os in Texas from pre-Columbian times into the present through five *cuadros* or suites of dances: “El Principio,” “Matlachines,” “El Viejo Mercado,” “Nostalgia,” and “San Antonio Hoy.” Native San Antonio actor and dancer, Jesse Borrego, plays a central role in *Río Bravo*, guiding the audience and the show through time and through

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<sup>8</sup> *Río Bravo* was also the first major collaboration between the GCAC and the Instituto Cultural de México, the permanent cultural representation of the Mexican government in San Antonio.



each cuadro. The opening of the show, “El Principio” is set to a vivid percussive score<sup>9</sup> and presents an early view of an ancient Texan hunter-gatherer society from the lower Pecos region. “Matlachines” presents a ritual dance based on a syncretic spirituality that combines indigenous and Catholic elements. In “El Viejo Mercado,” a painting of the San Antonio marketplace comes to life as the character of el viejo calls out *lotería* cards that provoke couples to engage in folklórico inspired dancing. “Nostalgia” is set in an early 19<sup>th</sup> century salon where Borrego is featured as a *bastonero* or dance caller, and couples dressed in elegant gowns and tuxedos smoothly glide through popular European court dances, like waltzes and mazurkas. In the final cuadro, “San Antonio Hoy,” time moves forward once again to feature Texas Conjunto inspired dances accompanied by a live Conjunto band playing the everyday music of working class Texas Mexicans.

Throughout *Río Bravo*, the zapateado shifts and alters into many different forms. For example, in “Matlachines” zapateado is performed in *huaraches* with strong stomps that strike the floor in single and double stomps accompanied by the rhythms of the *sonaja* and *tambor*, but in “El Viejo Mercado” zapateado appears as the familiar rhythmical sounds of ballet folklórico with its *golpes*, *puntas*, and *tacones* all done in traditional *zapatos*. In “Nostalgia” the foot work patterns come from an over exaggerated waltz or schottische with an emphasis not on striking the floor but on caressing it gently before bringing the foot up into the air. In “San Antonio Hoy”

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<sup>9</sup> The musical score for “El Principio” was created by internationally acclaimed Latina composer, Alice Gomez.

zapeateado appears in two ways. The first comes from the tradition of dances from *El Norte*, or the North, with quick, loud, and lively patterns that bounce off the floor while the dancers yell words of encouragement to each other. Later in this suite, zapateado is featured in a much softer way with not too much effort, as done in Country and Tejano line dances.

The choreography for *Río Bravo* as a whole is about the physical borderlands of the Texas-Mexico border. Each cuadro moves from one time period into the next, tracing the border culture from pre-Columbian indigenous people through the European immigrant influences to modern day music and dance traditions. However, as the dancers' comments indicate, the implication of this choreodrama goes beyond the geographical site of the border. The borderlands represented in the show *Río Bravo* also speaks to them as Chicana/os from Texas. What I mean is that each of the dancers interviewed for this paper all talked about how they view this show as a symbol of the history of their culture. In *Río Bravo*, the connection for these dancers is different from traditional folklórico dances because it is a connection built on an affirmation of their Texas Chicana/o heritage and ancestral ties to these lands that go back generations. The embodiment of mestizaje seen in the choreography of *Río Bravo* creates new dance traditions that speak to who these dancers are and where they come from.

In this chapter, I take an initial look at how *Río Bravo* becomes a blueprint for informing how the GDC produces, creates, and performs their future dance works. This choreodrama provides a sense of what it means for this company to navigate the

borderlands between traditional ballet folklórico and more contemporary dance forms. I then provide a brief history of ballet folklórico traditions in Mexico and the US in order to articulate how this dance form has been a critical medium through which identity is claimed and embodied. I provide a short background on how Zamarripa created the piece, conveying the importance of his role in this company's development. I also look at several moments in interviews when members of the GDC articulate and give expression to the deep physical and psychological connections they have to the folklórico dance tradition and to the elements of folklórico present in the show, *Río Bravo*.

The particular experiences of the dancers coupled with the choreography in *Río Bravo* drives my interest in Anzaldúa's borderlands theory in this chapter. Described as a synthesis of cultures, Anzaldúa's descriptions of a border culture and a borderland identity provide the theoretical framework for expressing how the choreography in *Río Bravo* portrays a San Antonio Chicana/o identity. Read together, the history of ballet folklórico, the efforts of the GDC and Zamarripa, along with Anzaldúa's work, present new ways of thinking about how dance articulates cultural knowledge and historical legacies in this Chicana/o community. I argue that the choreodrama, *Río Bravo*, expresses an embodiment of a mestizaje identity that tells a cuento of the borderlands that extends the geography of this area temporally into the past.

## **A Brief History of Ballet Folklórico**

“Folkloric dance is a vital form of communication, art is communication...be it dance, painting, culture, an expression of our sentiments...”

-Rafael Zamarripa, *Danza Folklórica Escénica*, 2011

Maestro Zamarripa has been one of the most highly accomplished and respected dance teachers and choreographers in Mexico of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. He is also well known for his talents as a painter, sculptor and designer throughout the country. As a young dancer, Zamarripa was invited to join the acclaimed *Ballet Folklórico de Mexico*, under the direction of Amalia Hernández, an experience he drew from when creating his own folklórico dance groups. He was the founder of the *Ballet Folklórico de Guadalajara* in 1968, as well as the *Ballet Folklórico de la Universidad de Colima* in 1980, which was Mexico’s first university to offer a bachelor’s degree in Mexican folklórico. Maestro Zamarripa also founded *Técnica Raza*, a progressive dance technique that is the product of 45 years of his work in traditional Mexican dance. *Técnica Raza* trains dancers to read the codex of traditional Mexican folklórico; that is it trains the dancers in recognizing the sounds or rhythms of the dances. His work as a folklórico dance teacher and choreographer continues into the present day.

The term folklórico encompasses both the representation and theatrical presentation of Mexican regional and indigenous folk dances. Ballet folklórico dances are theatrical representations of Mexican culture, rather than “authentic” dance forms. In other words, ballet folklórico dances are subject to the artistic interpretation of the choreographers and are decidedly stylized for the stage. They display the diversity of

Mexican culture, which can be seen in the variety of music, costumes, and dances that make up the various suites, also known as *cuadros*. Most folklórico performances consist of a representation of these cuadros from a particular state, region, and historical time period. Similar to classical ballet, ballet folklórico dances are typically courtship narratives. Unlike the narrative storytelling in the GDC's choreodramas, which is based on oral history and real life experiences of Chicana/os in South Texas, ballet folklórico narratives most often tell a love story between a female and male dancer.

During Mexico's post-revolutionary period, President Alvaro Obregón was determined to construct a new Mexican nation. It was during this time period, also known as the nationalist movement, when the Mexican government began to sponsor national efforts to reach the many rural indigenous people who lived in isolation from Mexico City and mestizo culture (Tovey 1999, 2). The goal was to unite the Mexican people under one national identity and to do this the government largely employed the use of folk arts, such as music and dance. Under the direction of *Secretaria de Educacion Publica*<sup>10</sup> (S.E.P), Jose Vasconcelos, who determined that education was the key for entering into the modern world, small traveling *misiones culturales* or cultural missions, began to travel to rural areas. Their goal was to introduce Western style education while simultaneously documenting their local music and dance traditions to be studied later in Mexico City (Stark, Tortajada 1994, 74). David Tovey writes that these teams of "educational specialists" hoped to

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<sup>10</sup> Secretary of Public Education

show rural communities the value of the federal government while simultaneously establishing nationalistic education and an educated society “working for the common good” (1999, 3). Eventually, documented folk songs and dances were taught to students in public schools, providing shared symbols of the diversity of Mexican culture. More importantly for the Mexican government, these folk dances brought the various indigenous cultures under a dominant Mexican hegemonic order (Nájera-Ramírez 1989, 19). That is, the research and presentation of these dances contributed directly to a romantic Mexican nationalism.

Later in the 1950s, famed Mexican dancer, the late Amalia Hernández, began developing, shaping, and popularizing the term “ballet folklórico” in both Mexico and the United States through the promotion of the beauty of Mexico through her interpretation of Mexico’s regional dances. Since its inception in 1952, her company, *Ballet Folklórico de México de Amalia Hernández*<sup>11</sup> (BFM), has been noted as one of Mexico’s most influential promoters of Mexican culture. This company was the first touring company endorsed as a cultural representative of the Mexican government, promoting ballet folklórico and Mexican culture internationally. In 1954, Hernández’s company began presenting a series of ballet folklórico dance performances on Mexican national TV, heightening the popularity of her company’s distinct presentation of these dances within the country. In 1958, they toured North America under the invitation of the Mexican Department of

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<sup>11</sup> The company’s first name was *Ballet Moderno de México* which was later changed to *Ballet Folklórico de México* in 1958 after the group was asked to represent Mexico at Pan-American games in Chicago. For additional reading on Amalia Hernández, see Hutchinson, 2005 and Tortajada Quiroz, 1995.

Tourism, and in 1959 the company began weekly performances for tourists at Mexico's *Instituto Nacional de Bellas Artes y Literatura*<sup>12</sup>. As the popularity of *BFM* grew, so did the formation of other performing folklórico groups in Mexico and the United States.

Amalia Hernández's presentation of traditional folklórico has been described as modernist choreography. For example, the repertoire of the BFM includes many indigenous themed choreographies such as the company's signature piece, "Danza de Venado," (Deer Dance) based on a traditional dance of the Yaqui Indians of Sonora. Sydney Hutchinson explains however, that many of these dances are "based not on living traditions but on pre-Columbian artwork" (2009, 211). This statement makes clear that Hernández's choreography was one based on her interpretation of these regional folk dances rather than precise representations of them. In other words, the dances presented by the BFM are not the same as those danced by the people in these regions. Maestro Zamarripa speaks to Hernández's presentation of Mexican folk dances saying, "Hernández never considered ballet folklórico an attempt to copy folk dances. She intended for ballet folklórico to be a spectacle created by imposing a choreographer's imagination on historical material" (Wimer 1995). That is, Hernández's choreography was informed by historical and anthropological research of various Mexican communities in an effort to represent Mexican culture, but its intention was to create a dance spectacle that would grab the attention of the general public.

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<sup>12</sup> Mexico's National Institute of Fine Arts and Literature

## **The Making of *Río Bravo***

Nájera-Ramirez notes that “only rarely has the Chicano experience been presented in folklórico dance” (2012, 172). This is what Maestro Zamarripa and the GDC have set out to do in the choreodrama, *Río Bravo*. Keeping with the original vision that the GDC would produce dance works that told the stories of Texas Mexicans, *Río Bravo* represents the social experience of the southern region of Texas. The dancers interviewed for this thesis all expressed how they understood *Río Bravo* to be a creation of the evolution of the people and the cultures of this area told through dance. And they all expressed how intimately connected they are to the show because it stands as a symbol of the history of this land and a history of their culture. For example, Carolina Guerra expresses the following:

To me it's the perfect show to show what our folklore in this area is...it was just perfect for that because it's showing them how the evolution of these people mix through time.

Guerra's statement makes clear that this choreodrama is indeed about a Chicana/o experience in South Texas. The choreography in this show is a mixture of the choreographer's imagination and dances that have developed from the people of this region. This is because Zamarripa made many trips to the area to research the people and customs of San Antonio before creating the choreography. Speaking of Zamarripa, Menchaca recalls how he became inspired by the culture of the city:

He [Zamarripa] came to San Antonio and I guess started talking with the dancers, but he started doing research. So that's why Principio is based on the Ancient Texans exhibition at the Witte<sup>13</sup>...he started going

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<sup>13</sup> The Witte is a San Antonio museum of South Texas history and natural science.



to like the museums and the Riverwalk and then we went to like the Market Square, you know, just saw what was San Antonio. So, I think, when he would go to the Market Square and he would see people of all ages and all sizes and all colors dancing Tejano, he was like, ‘We have to end this production with Tejano because this is like *folklore vivo* – this is folk dance happening and evolving in the city today. And we have to take it to the stage.

Menchaca sheds light on part of the research process that Zamarripa used to create the show. The inspiration for this choreodrama was based in experiences which drew from a particular geographical region of Texas. By visiting various historical landmarks and paying attention to the traditions of the people in this area, she also elucidates the connection that *Río Bravo* has to San Antonio.

Zamarripa considers dance to be first and foremost a form of communication. As a dance artist and choreographer, Zamarripa is not concerned with just preserving dances from the past; “instead he creatively choreographs dances to represent a cultural environment or regional social experience” (Nájera-Ramirez 2012, 173). His approach to creating the choreography for *Río Bravo* undoubtedly drew from traditional ballet folklórico, evident in its theatrical representation and spectacle form. However, Zamarripa’s ability to capture the heritage of the people and the South Texas region is what makes *Río Bravo* distinct and moves this show beyond ideas of “authentic” folklórico and into a borderlands choreography.

Zamarripa’s influence has been significant for the GDC. First, his highly respected position as a dance master teacher/choreographer and overall artist in both Mexico and the United States established the small Texas dance company as one worth

paying attention to. For instance, each time the GDC has produced this show (1994, 2000, 2005, 2012, 2014) it has been quite successful, with sold out shows and people driving in from all over Texas to the Guadalupe Theater just to see the show. Then, his unique approach to telling stories using ballet folklórico techniques such as the use of cuadros, in addition to his research methods that involve gathering historical and ethnographic data as a source for choreography, has become a blueprint for how the GDC has approached several shows since the first staging of *Río Bravo*. The directors of the GDC, Menchaca and Chavez, have built on the knowledge they gained from Zamarripa's methodology, resulting in the creation of new approaches to choreography that further explore issues relevant to who this dance company is and how they choose to represent themselves through dance in San Antonio. This has become most evident in the way they have continued to weave traditional folklórico dance with various movement vocabularies, a tactic they now introduce to students in the Guadalupe Dance Academy, the future of the GDC. For example, Sabrina Latigo recalls that as a student in the academy, Chavez always had them do "an extra dance" in addition to the traditional ballet folklórico. "One year we did a 40s piece that was a Zoot Suit kind of thing...at the Guadalupe Theater but in the 40s. It was cool because obviously, you know, we didn't know anything about that, but we researched it and we found these are the steps that were used or people usually did when they were dancing." I offer this as one example of the way that the GDC has continued to bring Chicana/o cuentos from the past into a contemporary context.

## **The Chicana/o Experience**

“We crossed no ocean...No Statue of Liberty greeted our arrival in this country... We did not, in fact, come to the United States at all. The United States came to us” (Steiner and Valdez 1972, xxxiii).

While the history of folklórico in Mexico has been largely tied to the Mexican government and nationalism, in the United States folklórico has been a medium through which Chicana/o communities have resisted cultural assimilation. Nájera-Ramirez explains that a “folklórico phenomenon” occurred during the Chicano movement of the 1960s and 70s, when the rise of the popularity of folklórico became especially evident within Chicana/o communities. She clarifies that folklórico on the US side of the border gained such popularity during the Chicana/o movement because it was a way to promote pride and dispel negative stereotypes against Mexicans and Mexican culture (2009, 282). Along with the various civil rights movements of the time, the movement gave rise to a sense of affirmation in a shared cultural identity, especially within working class Chicana/o communities, countering oppressive systems of power, which they had been subjected to for generations.

Olga Nájera-Ramirez’s focus on the social and political significance of folklórico in the United States contextualizes the hegemonic struggles involved in Chicana/o communities. She maintains that this dance tradition has offered an avenue for Chicana/os to oppose Euro American cultural, political, and economic domination. The dancers interviewed for this thesis echo this sentiment. Based on their comments, their reasons for participating in folklórico dance traditions are wrapped up in the

importance of holding on to mexicanidad and can be seen in the way they relate folklórico dance to preserving Mexican traditions, culture and language. Similarly, Nájera-Ramirez's discussion on the representation of Mexican culture and what is being imparted about Mexicans through ballet folklórico dance performances are important for examining how the GDC's choreodramas assert a shared cultural identity and community for Chicana/os in San Antonio, Texas.

It is my contention that this sense of cultural assertion and pride that ballet folklórico communicated in the 60s and 70s continues to be significant to folkloristas today. For example, throughout the interviews for this thesis, each of the dancers expressed how "strong" and "powerful" they felt when they performed traditional folklórico dances with the GDC. They also declared a close personal connection to the dances that related to their family history and cultural heritage, an important reason why they have continued to participate in the preservation and promotion of these dances for so long. The following excerpts from my interviews offer further insight.

Dancer, Carolina Guerra expressed how folklórico has taught her about the various states in Mexico.

I think it all has to be with the fact that I'm from Mexico and having folklórico is what keeps me kind of like closer...So, you know with folklórico I learned from Guerrero, I learned from Tamaulipas, I learned from all the states...I never got to travel there but through folklórico I get to know how people talk, you know their accents, maybe, the words that they use because they'll teach us those words to say on stage. Or they dress like this because you know it's hot or...the influence from certain part of Europe is here so they dress like this. So, you know, I think that connection that I see is what makes me want to be as close as

original and authentic as possible. I guess because I want to get as close as I want and I think that's probably why I think of it that way.

While dancer, Luis Guerra spoke about how folklórico connects him to a part of his Mexican heritage that he feels disconnected to living in the United States:

I think for me it's having to do with I guess understanding where I come from, I think. My roots ---I was born in San Antonio, TX and I had access to my parents, my grandparents, Spanish was my first language, but I still even today I still feel disconnected to that heritage...I feel like I've lost that touch and maybe I'm using or I want Guadalupe to help me maintain that connection.

Sabrina Latigo expresses how important it is for her to perform folklórico dances because it gives her a way to publicly display mexicanidad.

Ballet folklórico means a lot to me because I don't want to hide who I am or my background or my ethnicity, like I want to express it. And even though, you know, I always joke around that I'm the whitest one in the studio, I mean that is still a part of who I am. And so even though my friends they don't really understand they never really paid attention in Spanish class, I always did because I wanted it to become a part of me and just be able to express to people you know, I am Mexican, and even though I live in the United States, it's something that I think is so beautiful to share with people who don't know

In many aspects, the above passages from the interviews make clear that for them folklórico dance traditions are celebrations of mexicanidad as a positive source of cultural pride. For these dancers, folklórico dance has functioned in the same way that the Mexican government hoped it would for rural communities; that is, it has become a unifying source for the larger community. Moreover, the histories of folklórico dance traditions in Mexico and the US both underscore the power of dance as a means to expressing cultural and personal identities. The rise in folklórico dance groups and

presentations during the Chicano movement signaled a conscious effort of the people to make a political statement about who they were and the importance of retaining one's cultural roots. While the dancers interviewed here may not consider their participation in folklórico dance traditions a political statement, the purpose and intent of preserving and presenting these dances they have expressed makes clear that participating in folklórico dance traditions remains a consciousness raising activity.

However, it was not always this way for the dancers interviewed. Current dance company director and member, Jeannette Chavez, who has been with company since 1991, recalls loving all styles of dance as a young girl. She studied clogging, jazz, tap, and flamenco through San Antonio's Parks and Recreation programs. However, she remembers being discouraged to take folklórico dance classes. When I asked about this in our interview, Chavez responded:

And the funny thing is my mom never wanted me to do folklórico because everybody does that. You know? That's kind of beneath us. So she would let me do Flamenco....And growing up, if anybody had asked me what I wanted to do, it was definitely to dance and definitely to like tour the world. I wanted to be on Broadway. I never thought, 'I want to do folklórico dance for the rest of my life.' For me folklórico dance was just the big colorful skirts and everybody did it. You could see it at Market Square; you could see it anywhere.

Chavez's comments reveal a common attitude toward dances from Mexico in Texas. Her description of folklórico dance as being "beneath" other dance forms highlights a popular struggle with a Mexican American/Chicana/o cultural identity. For many US citizens of Mexican descent, there has existed a shame with associating oneself with Mexican cultural practices. I argue that this is largely due to the long history of

stereotypes that permeate our society of Mexicans as being dirty, lazy, less educated, cowardly and poor<sup>14</sup>. Folklórico's association with *mexicanness* has caused many dancers in Texas to look down upon it as a noteworthy dance form. Instead, folklórico has often been treated according to its place in the racial and social hierarchies that place Mexicans at the bottom. To a certain degree, Chavez's remarks speak to an internalized oppression that existed for many of the dancers before they began studying and performing folklórico dance. Her comments also exemplify how this dance form transformed a negative sense of self into a positive one.

In another example, Luis Garcia's experience with folklórico dance came when he was in college. Despite his involvement in the "Chicano Culture Committee" at the University of Texas – Austin (U.T.), where he often taught Salsa workshops as part of their weekly gatherings, Garcia commented that he resisted accepting an invitation to join the U.T. Ballet Folklórico group. He stated:

And there was this one young lady who would come to all the meetings and would come to all the Tejano dance/Tejano nights and she would see me dancing and she would say, "You need to come and dance with the U.T. ballet folklórico." And I don't know why a part of me – you know in college you're discovering all these things and trying to understand yourself – and I think a part of me didn't want to associate myself with the Mexican side...it is really awkward now that I say that out loud...but I think folklórico for me meant even further back in the roots and I guess I didn't want to access that. "Oh, I know what you're talking about," I told my friend, "but I don't think that's for me. I can't. I'm not gonna do that. That's like, you know, that's too Mexican. I'm not gonna do that." I don't even know what that meant. I remember saying that.

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<sup>14</sup> The racialization of Mexicans in the United States can be traced back to the early 1800's when the conflict between the US and Mexico worsened. For more on the racial treatment of Mexican Americans in US history see (Acuña 1972), (Montejano 1987), and (Haney Lopez 2003).

Chavez and Garcia speak to a long standing state of internal oppression entrenched in a history of everyday derogatory beliefs and attitudes about Chicana /os in Texas.

Because of folklórico's connection to mexicaness, and the history of oppression for Texas Mexicans, many young Chicana/o dancers are discouraged from taking folklórico dance classes. However, for many of the dancers interviewed for this thesis, myself included, folklórico became a symbol of empowerment after we began to learn about its history and were able to contextualize our own personal herstories/histories in relation to this dance form.

This is evident in the following excerpt from the same interview with Garcia, who spoke of his experiences with folklórico after joining the U.T. ballet folklórico dance group:

And by that I don't mean the movement or the choreography, but also in folklórico how it connects to the culture. And for me it was always feedback from the audience of course, that always gets me excited – the connection. But even more on a personal level, like my family when my parents and my aunts and uncles would see the show and they would connect because it was either a part of their history or something from back in Monterrey or from Michoacan where my dad is from...and we are able to talk about that and kind of make a deeper connection. And that's what gets me excited when I'm performing – to know that I'm making some of those connections, one with my family but then with the larger audience as well.

The connection that Garcia speaks of between folklórico and his history, culture, family, and the audience reflects the importance that this dance form has had in creating a positive sense of self and cultural identity, as well as building community for Chicana/os in the United States. This further adds to the significance of the GCAC for



many San Antonio Chicana/os, who did not grow up with an affirmative image of their culture. The role of the GCAC has been one that has energized Chicana/o communities of San Antonio to take pride in their *cultura* and *arte*.

In the United States, folkloristas inherit a collection of narratives, experiences, and for many a sense of empowerment and pride through the knowledge gained by knowing their history. Folklórico dance performances have also become a vehicle for bringing Chicana/o people together and building community through a common sense of culture. For many folkloristas today, maintaining their cultural traditions through folklórico dance practices gives dancers a tool to explore what is Indigenous and what is American to them. This is best expressed by founder, director, and choreographer of Danza Floricanto/USA, Gema Sandoval, when she states, “We Chicanos are Americans and the styles and the significance of our dances have evolved in this country so much so that they have become American” (Sadownick 1989). In other words, folklórico practiced in the United States is no longer a purely Mexican cultural symbol.

Still, it is my assertion that traditional folklórico dance does not portray a Chicana/o experience. For instance, they do not feature the *polka* or *vals* of *Conjunto* music or the *cumbias* of Tejano music. I propose that it is this desire to include the San Antonio Chicana/o experience into their dance repertoire that is what makes the GDC unique and sets them apart from traditional folklórico dance companies. Choreodramas

like *Río Bravo* hone in on a distinct Chicana/o cultural expression, and exemplify how the GDC choreographs the borderlands.

### *El Viejo Mercado*

As the curtains open, the audience is transferred to the San Antonio market place in the early part of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. The dancers form a tableau around a table, portraying the scene in the painting, “Market Plaza” by Thomas Allen, from which this suite was inspired. Pictured in the center is the character, *el viejo*<sup>15</sup>, who is also the narrator in this scene, played by Jesse Borrego. Almost as soon as the audience’s eyes settle on the stillness on stage, *el viejo* comes to life shouting aloud, “*Quien quiere jugar el juego de la vida?*”<sup>16</sup> The dancers respond enthusiastically and what follows is an imagined scene of the San Antonio open market played out around the Mexican card game of *lotería*. A live mariachi stands upstage right, not only providing the music but becoming part of the scene as they interact with the dancers and the narrator. The sights and sounds of an older San Antonio are surprisingly familiar, immediately establishing the Chicana/o culture of this city as one that dates back hundreds of years and is rooted in mexicanidad, but yet is not too far removed from what feels recognizable even today.

The theatricality displayed by the dancers as they begin to interact with the narrator, musicians, and each other brings the scene to life. The distinctness in each character can be understood in the varied costumes, personalities, and in the way they

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<sup>15</sup> The old man.

<sup>16</sup> “Who wants to play the game of life?”

each approach the choreographed dances in this suite. For example, as the mariachi begins to play the first song, one of the couples dance very close to each other signifying a flirtatious or even romantic relationship, while another couples larger distance can be read as more of a friendly or maybe even familial relationship, all while performing the same steps and body positions. It is this aspect that first signifies how this choreodrama participates in telling the stories of each of these individual characters on stage. They are not faceless, nameless, dancers who all look the same, but instead they bring a unique voice to the dance through the development of each of their characters.

At first glance, “El Viejo Mercado” seems to portray a typical folklórico suite of dances. The mariachi music, a typical sound often associated with folklórico, the dances done in male-female couples, along with the choreographed sequences and familiar resonances of zapateado all seem to indicate a traditional folklórico dance. However, what might not be so obvious is the way that this scene incorporates footwork patterns from the traditional folklórico dances of various Mexican states. For instance, in the first dance of this suite the zapateado performed as a *paso de tres*, which is most often utilized in the dances from Jalisco, is followed by a *guachapeado* step from the state of Veracruz. And while the men in this dance keep their hands behind their back like in many dances from the states of Jalisco, Colima, and Nayarit, the women do not apply any particular skirt work patterns. Some of them hold their *rebozo* quietly at their sides, while others barely lift their skirts in the front exposing

their feet, and still others make use of larger skirt work *floreos*. In other words, none of these dances can be connected to a particular Mexican state, but instead they draw from various states. The varied use of dance steps and traditional styles makes the mixed heritages of the people in San Antonio known through dance. The dances in “El Viejo Mercado” are much like being a *pocho/a*<sup>17</sup> – that is they unapologetically combine dance steps and costuming in the same way that Chicana/os combine words and cultural practices, creating new ones unique to their borderlands culture.

### **Conceptualizing the Borderlands**

*Soy Chicana Senores  
Y vengo de dos tierras  
Donde siempre crezcan los flores  
en los nopales de las sierras*<sup>18</sup>

Gloria E. Anzaldúa uses the term “mestiza consciousness” to bring awareness to an identity that is built across multiple terrains and across difference in the historic text, *Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza*. She calls for a mestiza or borderlands self to address the plurality of the self. The borderlands, according to Anzaldúa, are both physical and psychological. In the chapter, “La conciencia de la mestiza,” Anzaldúa imagines the expansion of what she refers to as a new Chicana consciousness. This consciousness turns ambivalence engendered by living within contradictory frameworks into “something else” (1999, 79). For the GDC, this

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<sup>17</sup> The word *pocho* or *pocha* is often used by Mexican natives to describe Chicana/os and/or the way that Chicana/os speak the Spanish language. To be a *pocho/a* usually signifies someone who mixes both the English and Spanish languages and cultures. Tex-Mex or Spanglish is an example of a language spoken by *pocho/as*.

<sup>18</sup> Dava D. Hernandez, “Yo Soy,” (2008)

“something else” manifests in a mestizaje dance practice, which always includes an element of zapateado. Their presentation of *Río Bravo* celebrates a Chicana/o identity through a performance based on multiple forms of dance styles and zapateado.

The notion of the borderlands as equated with a geographical location is surely a clear connection here. However, the borderlands concept is also one that refers to boundaries that can be psychological, emotional and social. In the preface to her book, *Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza*, Anzaldúa states,

The actual physical borderland that I’m dealing with in this book is the Texas-U.S. Southwest/Mexican border. The psychological borderlands, the sexual borderlands and the spiritual borderlands are not particular to the Southwest. In fact, the Borderlands are physically present wherever two or more cultures edge each other, where people of different races occupy the same territory, where under, lower, middle and upper classes touch, where the space between two individuals shrinks with intimacy (1999, preface).

Anzaldúa has situated the borderlands to be geographical, but she adds to this view an ideological and epistemological aspect as well. Consequently, references to the borderlands as one of territory is only one way in which Anzaldúa’s borderlands theory is established.

The name, *Río Bravo*, comes from the Mexican name for the Rio Grande, the 1,896 mile long river that forms the border between Texas and Mexico. Due to the history of pain associated with colonization, racism and oppression of its inhabitants, Anzaldúa has described this border as “una herida abierta,” an open wound (1999, 25). For many who live along it or within close proximity of it, the border stands as a

symbol of prohibition. It is a fence that separates people, especially evident at the present time when rates of deportation are high and families are being torn apart.

The geographical aspect of Anzaldúa's borderlands theory is one that deals with the colonization of a specific area of Mexico and the colonization of Chicana/o people as a result. For instance, the geographical borderlands include a specific territory previously under Mexican control; however, it is also an area not exclusive to the US. The physical borderlands for Anzaldúa consist of the US/Mexico border – a culture that is neither fully one or the other; instead, it is a shared culture that contains parts of both. What is more, this culture has been deemed as inferior particularly from an Anglo perspective. Anzaldúa writes, “Gringos in the U.S. Southwest consider the inhabitants of the borderlands transgressors, aliens – whether they possess documents or not, whether they're Chicanos, Indians or Blacks” (1999, 25). Anzaldúa makes clear that the occupation of these particular geographical borderlands have historically subjugated Chicana/os. Living in the borderlands requires a mestiza consciousness, argues Anzaldúa – an identity that exists as a straddling of two or more cultures and selves. The choro-dramas of the GDC straddle the borderlands of a Mexican, Chicana/o and American culture. By this I mean, they reflect not a search for a lost identity, but they provide a framework for the many aspects of their identities.

In the US Southwest, Mexicans and Chicana/os have historically been seen as the inferior race. Ian F. Haney Lopez writes that these negative stereotypes emerged as Anglos came in close contact with Mexicans during their westward expansion. He

notes, “Anglos attributed these characteristics to Mexicans as a supposed matter of nature: Mexican vices were rooted in Mexicanness itself. In the Anglo view that developed during the 1800’s and to some extent carries forward to today, Mexicans constituted a mongrel race stamped by ancestry with dark skin and an inferior and unalterable character” (2003, 65). In other words, stereotypes positioned against Mexicans as dirty, dark, lazy, cowardly and criminal have existed for centuries in the US and especially in Texas. These derogatory connotations have been accompanied with a great many attempts by Anglos to force Mexicans off of their lands and for those who remained, to abandon their culture and ties to any aspect of mexicanidad. In short, the Anglos viewed Mexican culture as in direct opposition to their own, and so it was deemed as less than and subservient.

For Anzaldúa, the borderlands are also indicative of a place of contradiction.

This is understood in the following passage:

“Nosotros los Chicanos straddle the borderlands. On one side of us, we are constantly exposed to the Spanish of Mexicans, on the other side we hear the Anglos’ incessant clamoring so that we forget our language...Deep in our hearts we believe that being Mexican is a state of soul – not one of mind, not one of citizenship” (1999, 84).

The contradiction expressed by Anzaldúa is evident among many of the interviews conducted for this thesis. It is one of not fully belonging to one culture or the other, but learning how to navigate both. In this way, Anzaldúa’s borderlands theory is also closely related to the way identity is formed as a result of this paradox.

According to Anzaldúa, this state of contradiction has resulted in an inner struggle. She writes,

Chicanos and other people of color suffer economically for not acculturating. This voluntary (yet forced) alienation makes for psychological conflict, a kind of dual identity – we don't identify with the Anglo-American cultural values and we don't totally identify with the Mexican cultural values. We are a synergy of two cultures with various degrees of Mexicanness or Angloness (1999, 85).

The southern US border is one that has historically spewed colonial discourses at Chicana/os, creating a hierarchal structure among citizens who live in this area. People of Mexican descent have been made to feel second-rate, with little regard to the contributions that they have and continue to make in terms of the economy and culture in both the US and Mexico. Thus, the struggle for Chicana/os occurs because they experience life on both sides of the border.

The interviews make clear that performing in this choreodrama makes the dancers feel that they are able to straddle the many cultures that exist in the history of these borderlands while crossing the boundaries of traditional ballet folklórico dance. Company member, Marlene Pita, reiterates this feeling. Pita joined the company at only 16 years old and performed in *Río Bravo* in 2005. At the time of our interview, she was preparing for the company rehearsal for the 20<sup>th</sup> anniversary show of *Río Bravo* 2015:

Well I know we go back to our folklórico, but technically you look at it and you're like, 'it's not a folklórico show.' So I – me trying to educate myself a little bit more throughout the show now that we're doing it again and trying to pass something on...I think when I was younger I kind of just lost my head that this was the whole Pecos Indians. You're



young and sometimes you're not thinking about those things, you know? So now older, I'm like, wow, this is really inspirational.

Chavez's response to her experiences having performed in all of the *Río Bravo* productions the GDC has had represents a similar opinion.

-Even though I did love folklórico and I was learning – it wasn't a traditional folklórico show. And for me it spoke to, again, who I was and kind of even realizing or understanding or learning my history at that point because even as a kid I couldn't tell you that I was Mexican American and what that meant. I was brown. My parents say we're Mexican – I'm Mexican, you know? So it was again just like this huge mind blowing experience and on a whole different level because I had done folklórico shows...it was a completely different experience than I'd ever had before.

Their comments reflect how each time they dance in *Río Bravo* they are also enacting a performance of chicanidad. Like Pita and Chavez, I share a similar experience with *Río Bravo*, feeling proud and inspired to dance in a show that reflects my regional culture. *Río Bravo* embodies an identity that embraces both Mexico and our current location as Tejanas and Chicanas. *Río Bravo* is not a Mexican narrative, nor is it just a US story, but it is both. Like our identity that is enriched by both cultures, the dances in *Río Bravo* represent a way to express a new history – a history that allows for a sense of pride in both. *Río Bravo* speaks to a feeling of pride in this borderlands culture, a heritage made up of inherited and adapted customs made anew.

The choreography in *Río Bravo* is fitting when one considers how the geographical place of the border is itself a cultural mestizaje. In order to tell the story of the Chicana/o people in Texas, it must include the many cultures that have influenced it, such as the Czech, Polish and German populations that have settled here.

An example of this can be found in the dance suites, “Nostalgia” and “San Antonio Hoy,” which display the influence of Europe on Texas dance traditions. For example, the dances that make up “Nostalgia” are throwbacks to 19<sup>th</sup> century European inspired social dances of the higher classes such as the waltz, mazurka, and schottische. In this suite, the narrator invites the dancers to enter into the *epoca de oro*, or the golden age of nostalgia, represented as a dream-like state complete with a huge grandfather clock centered in the middle of the stage, keeping track of the time before this comes to an end. When the curtains open, the audience is transported to a fancy party with champagne, caviar, and waiters. The female dancers are dressed in elegant floor length ballroom gowns with big puffy petticoats, while the men wear black and white tuxedos. As the first dance begins, the couples enter onto the dancefloor with raised chests that lift up and back. They gently hold hands and dance in lines and circles in triple meter with the upper body remaining very still and the feet quiet.

On the other hand, the final suite, “San Antonio Hoy,” characterizes the tradition of Tejano Conjunto music, accompanied by the social dances created among Texas Mexicans. Anthropologist, Manuel Peña, notes the long tradition of Tejano Conjunto folk ensembles along both sides of the Texas-Mexico border, and especially prominent among the working classes since the 1860s. He writes, “In its stylistic simplicity, its continuing adherence to the *cancción ranchera* and working-class themes and, most importantly, in its actualization in weekend dances, the conjunto remains the bedrock music for millions of people whose everyday culture is Mexican at its core”

(Smithsonian Education 2015). Peña's statement is useful in thinking about how the dances in "San Antonio Hoy" are heavily influenced by a Texas Mexican cultural fusion, different from "Nostalgia" in the way they reflect a distinct connection to a cultural expression that is influenced by both sides of the US-Mexico border.

In this chapter, I have explored how *Río Bravo*'s multiple dance vocabularies connect with the borderland identity of many Chicana/os in San Antonio. As such, *Río Bravo*, the choreodrama, signifies a borderlands choreography that celebrates the history of people over time through the dance traditions of the South Texas region. However, as Anzaldúa reminds us in *Borderlands/La Frontera*, the notion of the border is one that expands beyond a geographical marker and into psychological borders. *Río Bravo* is significant to the psychological borderlands of the dancers interviewed for this thesis as it speaks to reclaiming traditions and histories that have been lost to them through the history of colonization and racism in this area.

In the next chapter, the focus on borderlands is not as fixed. While I continue to explore the connection between the GDC choreodramas and identity through the use of mestizaje, the chapter is less about time and more about how all of the different places and people we encounter create an identity that is interconnected. In this way, the following chapter is less about the connection with identity to a physical place and more about an embodied geography in process.

*The theater is dark once again and all that can be heard is the sound of the bajo sexto and accordion tuning up. I am standing by right off of stage right and when the stage lights come up, the curtains open and I see the musicians from the group, Conjunto La Naturaleza de Santiago Garza. They start to play the beginning riffs of an old and familiar tune and the audience comes to life, smiling, yelling and clapping their hands. My partner Chris and I give each other the ready, set, go, look. We are dressed in a costume that resembles a cross between the folklórico dance costumes for Tamaulipas, Nuevo Leon, and Chihuahua – all Northern Mexican states that border the US and Texas. While the choreographic circular and linear patterns are still recognizably “folklórico,” our use of zapateado, the songs being played, and the close proximity to my partner, makes me feel like I could be at a wedding or quinceñera. The audience continues to cheer and clap throughout the entire set, especially at the end when we all come downstage to form one long line that reaches from far left to right. The musicians stop playing and all that is left is our zapateado, the stomping of our feet on the concert stage floor. With hands on our hips and elbows protruding forward, the high energy on stage propels my body into a small hop to my right foot that forcefully hits the floor in a classic polka zapateado. As we come to an end, our gritos become louder, encouraging each other to keep going. Eso! Hechale! Asi se baila!*

### CHAPTER III

#### *SANTUARIOS: CREATING CHOREOGRAPHIES OF SELVES*

*The lights go up and I am in the wings waiting for my cue. I stand there holding a stool and large book and watch as Denise walks on stage holding a suitcase in one hand and a doll in the other. She stops and raises her doll into the air then presses it lovingly against her heart. Next, I see Marlene and Belinda enter with their suitcases. Marlene walks proudly and direct, shoulders back, chest out, focus forward. Belinda walks rapidly and looks around almost in confusion. More and more of the dancers begin to appear all holding suitcases. No one really acknowledges each other. They move around the stage like strangers at a train station. Everyone is dressed in vintage 1930s style clothing, with fitted jackets, long skirts, and small hats adorned with lace. Finally, I see the last dancer enter and I wait a few breaths before walking in. I too am dressed in the same style of clothing, but I am the only one not carrying a suitcase. As I walk in, the train station scene continues unaffected. I move downstage center, sit on my stool and flip through a few pages of my book before looking straight into the audience to tell my story about traveling home. The dancers freeze when I begin to talk. Scattered around the stage, they stand motionless.*

This opening scene for *Santuarios* (2001) by the Guadalupe Dance Company lays the foundation for what follows in this choreodrama. Through the overlapping of two simultaneous worlds on stage, represented through the narrator and the travelers,

this scene becomes the figurative theatrical set for *Santuarios*, creating a space for the dramatization of Chicana narratives of journey, migration, and the pathways created along the way. *Santuarios* situates the stage as a middle space where worlds, stories and experiences converge without the boundaries of time, history, or borders. It is in this middle space where dance creates public consciousness around the themes of transformation and the human desire to move freely. Through these themes, dancers bring with them in their bodies their identities, personal stories and connections that draw upon many layers of being and human emotion.

*Santuarios* was choreographed as a collaboration between the GDC and Mexican modern dance choreographer, Serafin Aponte Nájera, Austin based Puerto Rican singer/songwriter, Lourdes Perez and “The Queen of the Accordion,” San Antonio native, Eva Ybarra. It premiered in 2001 at the Watson Fine Arts Center in San Antonio, Texas and was performed by a cast of 7 female dancers from the GDC to live musical accompaniment. Dancers performed in 11 danced vignettes or scenes that combined a mixture of modern dance with elements of Mexican folklórico that can be seen in the frequent use of zapateado (sometimes barefoot and other times with shoes) and skirt work with the essence of traditional *faldeo*<sup>19</sup>. The vignettes: “Viajes,” “Errante Flor,” “Monarca I,” “Madre,” “Cuatra Generación,” “Monarca II,” “De San Antonio a Del Rio,” “Monarca III,” “Cruzando,” “Rocas,” and “Monarca IV,” were held together by the reoccurring themes of crossing boundaries and borders, artistically, physically and spiritually.

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<sup>19</sup> In Mexican folklórico dance, *faldeo* refers to manipulation of the skirt by the female dancer.

Using the metaphor of the monarch butterfly, *Santuarios* also explores issues of migration, immigration, rights to survival, and finding a sanctuary. The monarch butterfly metaphor in *Santuarios* connects the monarch or *monarca*, with the native human population of the Southwest of which Chicana/os are part. It links the Chicana/o history and culture of migration, particularly along the Rio Grande, to the fluid crossing of the US-Mexico border. In doing so, *Santuarios* relates the *monarca*'s rights to survival to the survival of immigrants who cross the border from Mexico. In doing so, this desire to survive pushes back against the dominant society that often ignores or does not understand their plight. The *monarca*'s struggle in a world of diminishing resources is extended to the immigrant struggle, delving further into the relationship between the *monarca*'s predicament and the discourse around issues of citizenship. Would we challenge the *monarca*'s right to fly freely through its migratory routes, which crosses three country's borders in order to find the right ecosystem needed for survival? Can we as a society expand this right of liberty to the native human population of the Southwest that for centuries has been affected by manmade geographic borders that have made them "intruders"?

In this chapter, I argue that *Santuarios* constructs collaborative choreographies of selves through a staging of a middle space, a pivotal space, where dancing bodies retell lived cultural experiences emphasizing the importance of an identity of interconnectedness that is necessarily multiple. These choreographies of selves articulate the changing social context of living within the border state of Texas, but at

the same time, they also get extended beyond any specific area or people in the way that they emphasize the notion of identity as a being influenced by the many people we meet and experiences that occur as a result. Choreographies of selves can be seen through collaboration and multiplicity, as well as the interweaving of different stories into a nonlinear continuum in *Santuarios*. The various processes used to generate the movement for the dancing and the multiplicity of bodies presented live on the stage add to the notion of choreographies of selves as interconnected to the many people we encounter in life.

Like geography, *Santuarios* is also about motion and development. This is indicated in the literal sense when the dancers appear with suitcases that they then pick up, carry, push, and pull all over the stage in the opening scene. In the same way as traveling stories filled with memories and history, the dancers' choreographic patterns in this scene cover the entire stage, setting the tone for a show that emphasizes the importance of the journey and not the final destination. For example, in the opening scene, three different "landscapes" are created in order to tell one larger story. The first is seen in the dancers' bodies, whose pedestrian movement phrases create a scene of travelers in a train or bus station. Then there is the world of the narrator who brings us into a specific and personal story about driving through Texas. There is also the musical landscape being created by the musicians whose lyrics and sounds engage the auditory sense and bring us further into this pivotal space on stage. All of these



storyboard landscapes connect histories and individual experiences that translate into a bigger narrative about the interconnectedness of identity.

In the following section, I examine the theoretical framework of Anzaldúa's notion of "geography of selves" in order to consider how this theory situates identity as not only multiple, but interconnected to others. I then expand upon this theory to consider how "choreographies of the selves" occur in *Santuarios*. I elaborate on the process of creating choreographies of selves paying special attention to how choreography and embodied knowing in *Santuarios* reflects an emphasis on lived experiences. I then delve into how the choreography in *Santuarios* puts into motion, on stage, the identity processes that are ongoing in the lives of these Chicana dancers in San Antonio. I contend that these processes of identity are particularly concentrated in this liminal space of performance, offering an opportunity to bring all of the experiences and stories of the dancers, choreographer, and musicians together at one time. Within this discussion, I also explore the representation of Chicana bodies on stage as individual and collective agents of change.

### **Geographies of Selves**

In this chapter, I draw from Anzaldúa's post- *Borderlands* concept of identity as one that is always in process. Anzaldúa describes "geography of selves" in a 1995 interview with Maria Henriquez Betancor in the following way:

I think identity is an arrangement or series of clusters, a kind of stacking or layering of selves, horizontal and vertical layers, the geography of selves made up of the different communities you inhabit...where these spaces overlap is nepantla... (Anzaldúa 2000, 238-239).

I am compelled by the way that Anzaldúa acknowledges that identity includes multiple geographical sites of knowing. At the same time, she speaks to the notion of identity as related to and informed by the body in the way that it occurs through the physical space such as the communities that one's body inhabits.

This falls in line with Dance Studies scholars such as Ann Cooper Albright, who recognize the potential of the body as being the center of knowledge production, as well as a complex site of sociocultural production. Albright writes, "Much contemporary dance takes up and plays with these questions of movement and meaning, giving us some brilliant examples of how physical bodies are both shaped by and resilient to cultural representations of identity" (1997,xiv). In other words, despite the art form of dance being defined by the body, it also presents us with an exploration of how that body is positioned and responds to the world it inhabits (Albright 1997, 4). In this instance, I look at how the GDC and this particular choreodrama foregrounds the corporeality of identity by examining the rehearsal process as well as the final choreographic production. I maintain that Anzaldúa's geographies of selves offers a particularly embodied insight important to understanding the complex intercessions between the dancer's somatic experiences and the representations of their bodies in the way that it helps to trace the interconnectedness of bodies and identities.

Choreographies of selves occur when dance is created from a personal place of experience. These choreographies draw from the many layers of identity and human emotion and manifest in the way the body moves and the patterns and pathways it

takes. In *Santuarios*, choreographies of selves were created through a process of collaboration between the dancers, choreographer, and musicians. Through a combination of free writing exercises, group discussions, dance improvisation and choreographed sequences, *Santuarios* features Chicana/o dance practices that illuminate the self through personal narratives. Dancing in *Santuarios* is structured on the personal; that is, it draws from the dancer's multiple layers of being. Because I am a dancer and scholar concerned about the documentation of dance in Chicana/o communities, I read the choreographies of selves created in *Santuarios* as an articulation of the connection between the body in motion and identity in this community. What is revealed is a choreodrama that uses these danced personal narratives to reflect larger issues, such as the interrogation of societal borders, but also allows for an understanding of the self as interconnected to all life.

Anzaldúa's "geographies of selves" provides an understanding of the intricate connection between the body and the multiple layers that one's identity holds. Her description of multiple layers of selves as "geographies of selves" provides a sense of three-dimensionality to identity that becomes especially important when considering how identity manifests within the moving and dancing bodies in *Santuarios*. The stacking, layering, and overlapping of one's identity forms something physical that is in motion in space. As such, geography then becomes a metaphor for identity in the way it speaks to its complex and shifting nature. It also speaks to the various

formations that occur to these structures based on the relationship between the self and the worlds it inhabits.

For example, in the opening scene, dancers' individual experiences and stories occur as they walk alone and almost in their own world; but those stories also come together signified in moments of choreographed unison and shared movement phrases. In one particular instance, dancers appear far upstage. This time they are aware of each other's presence as the first dancer begins the following sequence of movements that then gets picked up by each dancer. She walks in backwards, slowly, one arm waves toward the wings of the stage. Her body then turns to face the audience as the other hand firmly presses against the empty space. With a flexed hand, she pushes her arm away from the rest of her body, head leaning toward the outstretched hand. She slowly steps to the side. Each step takes her closer and closer to the floor. Sitting down, she stretches out one leg while the sole of the other foot digs into the floor and then pushes to scoot her back. Alternating legs, pushing herself further and further down the horizontal line, each turn takes her from a seated position to a squat, facing the audience once again. Her hands meet under her chin and with one hand on top of the other, she stops to rest for a few seconds, gazing straight ahead. This pattern repeats with each dancer that enters. The contagion reflects a shared sense of unity within each one's individual journey.

In this scene, the dancers expose an identity that is based on collaboration and a collective of voices, memories, and places. In other words, identity is not just about the

individual person, but about the people and places we encounter in life. This is accentuated with the live narration of the story that navigates through the past into the present, creating another collaborative texture to the space being created. Add to this, musicians whose voices and instrumentation combine with the dancing in a very intimate way, and the stage is transformed into a liminal space that unites experiences and stories. This middle space traverses various moments in each of their lives and histories. Personal stories communicate with others, generating a notion of building community through collaboration, which is significant to creating choreographies of selves and to the overall experience of *Santuarios*.

As in *Río Bravo*, I explore how the choreography in this choreodrama encompasses identity on the concert dance stage through an embodiment of mestizaje. However, unlike *Río Bravo*, where identity is linked to the specific Texas-Mexico border, *Santuarios* extends the notion to an embodied geography within. In other words, in *Santuarios*, the nature of identity is reflected as always changing, in motion, and never fixed. What is more, the relationship between the dancing body and identity is distinguished in this choreodrama as one rooted in the multiplicity of the self, refusing any essentialist notions of identity as contained within race and ethnicity.

This multiplicity is most strikingly portrayed through the use of very defined and intersecting choreographed pathways on the stage. On the one hand, these pathways present a literal translation of the long journey that the monarcha must endure in order to ensure its survival. On the other hand, these reoccurring choreographed

moments of bodies speedily coming together, crossing, meeting, and then proceeding, mark the stage with intersections that emphasize the collective body of the dancers as opposed to just one individual. These spatial formations, characterized by dancers traveling within close proximity of each other, chart an embodied journey of the self that travels alongside and with the other performers on stage. These pathways also parallel Anzaldúa's theory of geographies of selves where identity is constructed across multiple dimensions of interactions and experiences. The concert dance stage, the site of the middle space, is where these various intersections of the complex, changing selves occur.

Anzaldúa writes, "Identity is like a work of art: you take from all the influences and worlds you're inhabiting and...los compones, haces una composicion with different stages<sup>20</sup>" (Anzaldúa 2000, 241). In other words, identity is a relational process that is not reliant on just the individual, but becomes altered by the people around you. Identity is informed by being both inside and outside of many worlds, groups, and locations. In Anzaldúa's theory of geography of selves, identity changes through a crossing of various borders. In her interview with Betancor, Anzaldúa illustrates this shifting or crossing from one to the other as a train station, also known as her theory of the way stations. She explains that as a child you begin at a little train station that is related to the particular community in which you live. Then, as you grow up, you make stops at various train stations along the way and you are able to look back at who you were at the previous stops from a different standpoint because you are no longer the

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<sup>20</sup> ...you arrange them and make them into a composition...

person you were before. She explains, “Every time you settle in a particular place – either a state of mind or a physical location – you become comfortable and you look back to your past from the perspective of this location” (Anzaldúa 2000, 239). During these stops, you are able to reflect on your life in a different way, forming the various layers and stacking of your identity. In this way, identity is not a singular activity located only in the present time, but it includes how you relate to others as well as your past and your history.

Equally important is the time that exists in-between these stops. Anzaldúa writes, “When the train is between stations you struggle and all is chaos: you don’t know what you are, you’re a different person, you’re becoming a new person, a new identity” (Anzaldúa 2000, 239). According to Anzaldúa, it is during this time that one enters the liminal stage of *nepantla*, “a place of change...a liminal in-between space” (Anzaldúa 2000, 168). *Nepantla* is a *Nahuatl*<sup>21</sup> word that indicates a middle space or a middle ground where two things meet. Anzaldúa writes that *nepantla* is “an unstable, unpredictable, precarious, always-in-transition space lacking clear boundaries” (Anzaldúa 2009, 243). AnaLouise Keating explains that in her post-*Borderlands* work, Anzaldúa’s notion of *nepantla* expands upon her theory of borderlands in the way that it includes dimensions of “psychic/spiritual/material points of potential transformation” (2006, 4). For example, in “Speaking across the Divide,” Anzaldúa explains her theory of *nepantla* in relation to her writing process. She writes, “When I sit and images come to me, I am in my body but I’m also in another place, the space between worlds

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<sup>21</sup> A pre-Columbian indigenous language of Mexico.

(nepantla). Images connect the various worlds I inhabit or that inhabit me” (Anzaldúa 2009, 291). Nepantla then becomes a space of transition and agency. For it is during one’s time in nepantla that the potential exists for radical reflection, personal growth, and change.

Nepantla can be a process, as in a state of transformation, but it can also be a creative power. For example, one’s experience through the space of nepantla becomes a bodily act in the way that it involves accessing embodied knowledges based on feelings, emotions, images, and culturally mediated understandings. Nepantla can become a place of agency and activism where internal memories along with the emotions and feelings attached to them, are explored in relation to the outside world where you have the power to transform your social reality. Anzaldúa’s theories on the space of nepantla in relation to the geographies of selves further explores how this middle space involves “creating your own meaning or *conocimientos*” (Anzaldúa 2000, 267). Nepantla then includes a space of reshaping who you are based on how you choose to compose yourself within the multiple worlds that one inhabits in relation to other people.

The different stages of the creative process in *Santuarios* provided an opportunity for the cast of all women dancers to explore their own sociopolitical consciousness in connection to who they are, where they come from, and their present location in society. For example, the stories brought forth by each participant in *Santuarios* carry very specific and transitional moments that speak to a variety of



issues related to the body and identity and the historical knowledge embedded within this specific Southwest region. It is through the joining together of the multiple narratives on stage that we begin to see the many perspectives that occur within the community presented in *Santuarios*. These perspectives are at once individual and collective in the way that they represent the multiplicity of experiences that make up the people of San Antonio. And it is where these multiple stories overlap and crisscross with each other that nepantla can be seen and experienced. The choreography then acts like a roadmap, with the dancers and musicians as guides, taking the audience through this liminal space where stories affect the shape and movement of the landscape on stage.

### **Collaborative Choreographies of Selves**

In *Santuarios*, creating collaborative choreographies of selves involved many bodies drawing from their various personal, historical, lived cultural experiences. For example, the process used to create *Santauros* involved the dancers sharing stories about their families, physical borders, emotional borders, and finding a place to call home. In this work, music and dance came together and provided the landscape against which the choreodrama was conveyed. In the process of creating the show, collaboration went beyond just sharing stories and experiences; it was important that each individual became active in their own storytelling. For the dancers, this involved improvising movement and for the musicians it entailed creating songs and musical scores to interpret their own personal stories in relation to the dancers' stories.

Adrienne Sansom explains that “the telling of one’s own story draws on multiple layers of being and unearths the deeply embedded emotions that lie within, thereby exposing something about who we are and what we care about” (2008, 209). In *Santuarios*, the personal experiences that each individual drew from in the process of creating the show came together to symbolize multiple layers of perspectives. As all of these stories came to life and embodied through dance and music, they also become layered, crisscrossed and informed by each other, exemplifying a composition of mestizaje.

These multiple layers of emotion can also be heard in the lyrics for one of the main songs created for the show called, “De San Antonio a Del Rio.” This song was based on the dancers’ stories of traveling composed during a free-writing exercise and then embodied through movement improvisation during the rehearsal process. Perez arranged passages from each of the dancer’s stories written that day and worked with Ybarra on the instrumentation. For example, each line from the first stanza of the song was taken from 5 different stories. It reads like this:

*Con la poema de mi madre*, (With my poem of my mother)  
*Con mi santo me voy* (With my saint, I go)  
*Entonando mi trompeta una linda cancion* (Playing a beautiful song on my trumpet)  
*Tengo fotos y recuerdos* (I have my pictures and my memories)  
*Y en mi Corazon yo me llevo a San Anton* (And in my heart I take San Antonio).

This song becomes a motif for the entire show, reoccurring in various instances.

During our interview, Menchaca, former dance company director and now performing arts director at the GCAC, expressed the following sentiment about her most memorable experience with the company.

I think, what comes to mind first, is the dance company sitting on the stage of the Guadalupe Theater, with our choreographer from Mexico for *Santuarios*, Serafín...and sitting there with Lourdes Perez the composer, and creating this organic piece you know as collaborators. And them wanting to hear our stories and that whole process – that whole organic process to me was just so enriching and so unique and so motivating...as opposed to go to the studio, the teacher plays the music, you learn the steps and you perform it which is you know kind of what you would do in a normal dance studio. And having that opportunity to work with a composer and choreographer and the dance company as true collaborators, you know, I think is just a wonderful experience that not a lot of people get to share.

Menchaca highlights how the collaborative process for *Santuarios* is deeply connected to personal experiences, creative intentions, and multiple perspectives. The stories told through the female bodies of the dancers became the backbone for the choreography, further strengthening the relationship between the body, identity, and dance in this show. For example, in the second scene of *Santuarios* titled “Errante Flor,” GDC member Denise Rios dances a solo created through improvisation in which she pays homage to her mother.

Menchaca also emphasized the importance of working collaboratively and creatively to raise social awareness. She explained that being part of the GCAC has afforded the GDC many opportunities “to do other dance styles...and to work with choreographers [and] composers.” She went on to say, “It has allowed us to do things that are outside of our comfort zone, and to be able to interpret things that have some

social context...and I think that is what I try to do. I try to always have some sort of a storyline in the work that we do so that there is something that we're giving back to the audience that is open for interpretation as opposed to just the traditional.”

Menchaca's comments are important for a number of reasons. First, they offer a view of the importance of working collaboratively. Second, her words highlight the value of storytelling to the choreodramas of the GDC, particularly as a way to illuminate social issues. In this particular instance, she also distinguishes productions, such as *Santuarios*, from “traditional” performances like purely traditional folklórico shows, which she feels do not offer much room to engage with contemporary issues. This is because in traditional folklórico performances, dancers learn choreographed patterns that have been done the same way for generations. Traditional folklórico dances then are more of a display of mexicanidad than a creative process that came from the dancers' artistic expression and creativity. In contrast, choreodramas like *Santuarios* offer new interpretations of culture based in an expression of contemporary chicanidad. Finally, her concern with “giving back” to the audience sheds light on the importance of using a storyline to connect to audience members. This is significant because the majority of the audience members who attend the GDC shows are people who have been supporting them for years. In fact, audience members are largely a mix of family, friends, GCAC volunteers, and long-time supporters. In this way, her comments also speak to the GDC's desire to educate and activate issues important to this close knit community.

The experience of collaboration that Menchaca talks about in our interview, exemplified in the rehearsal process and in the song, “De San Antonio a Del Rio,” symbolize a collaborative process that invites a multiplicity of voices and contains various levels of the dancers, musicians and choreographer’s backgrounds. This results in choreography that is personally meaningful in the way that it relates to who the dancers were in this particular place and time period. In *Santuarios*, this particular mode of telling stories deepens the connections between memory, experience and consciousness not only for the dancers who get the opportunity to explore them on stage, but for the audience who get to see them and make them their own.

*Santuarios* took on a special meaning for the dancers, musicians, and choreographer, when one month before the show opened, fears of terrorism resulting from the September 11<sup>th</sup> attacks on US soil, generated a lockdown of immigration laws. In this post 9/11 moment, a new political backlash against immigrants, especially Mexican immigrants was initiated. The political climate of the time and the subject matter of a show based on the borderless flight of the monarch butterfly provided an opportunity for dialogue to emerge with the performers around anti-immigration ordinances and issues relevant to the contemporary US Southwest and the Chicana/o communities situated within it. This is significant because it articulates a creative and candid sociopolitical consciousness through shared danced narratives on the concert dance stage.

### ***Monarca I: Making Space for Choreographies of Selves***

Deep blue light envelopes the stage and images of leafless tree branches slowly begin to show up on the back scrim. The percussive sound of a *clave* rhythm can be heard being pounded out on the back of a guitar as two dancers rush in from the back of stage right. With their arms intertwined around each other's waists, they speed head first running along a diagonal pathway through center stage to end downstage left. Draped on top of their solid black dresses is a light pastel colored material which ripples out to the sides as they zip through space. Their quickness is echoed in the feather light material worn around their arms and waists, which flows out like wings when the air catches it. As they run across the stage to their next destination, a new pair of dancers comes in, and then another, following the same pathway and repeating the same movements. The first duo continues to zoom around, outlining new passageways throughout the stage while the rest follow a few beats behind. At one point, one of the dancer's head falls into the open palms of the other, who carefully but quickly guides her to their next spot on stage.

In the next few moments, the use of space extends to three dimensional traces and wide and strong gestural movements in the dancers' personal space. A solo dancer enters with *chaine* turns toward center stage. Her skirt bellows out in a rippling motion, once again creating a sense of flying and taking up space in the transverse plane. Before she arrives two more trios enter in the same way, situating themselves just to the left and right of her. With large reaches made in the upper body, the dancers leave

curved traces that stretch from side to side. Personal space is also utilized with the contractions they make in their abdominals that then ripples up their body, pulling their elbows behind them, forcing their heads to hang toward the floor. Then, quickly and sharply, one arm reaches horizontally with a flexed hand up toward the sky and the eyes follow while the other hand flexes down toward the earth. At the same time, the dancers stomp the floor underneath them with bare feet accentuating the rhythm of the song before changing levels and falling into a plank position only to quickly rise again. Their arms reach wide to the sides, tracing the formation of a circle that meets above their head. Again their feet hit the floor in a complicated zapateado rhythm and their arms accentuate its close.

Such moments as these in “Monarca I” exemplify a sense of the space during the migration of the monarch butterfly. The choreography pulls together the free flowing use of large spatial pathways of the butterfly onto the stage and couples it with the dancers’ wide and resilient full body explosions as a way to make space for choreographies of selves. This is best exemplified in one particular phrase that repeats several times in “Monarca I” and then reappears throughout the entirety of this choreodrama. I have named this motif, *pasos de ir y vuelta* or steps of leaving and returning. Sometimes *pasos de ir y vuelta* occur in flashes and other times in more developed dance phrases, but they become the interlocking thread that weaves all the stories together.

In this motif, the dancers' arms travel above their heads, and as if attached with a string, their arm and head drop from side to side while they push the floor away with their feet. Next, they jump quickly into the air striking it with an arabesque sauté with one leg piercing into their back space. At the same time, they lengthen into the air above them with an outstretched arm and flexed hand. When they land, they reach their elbows out to one side so that they can cup their hands together, which they then take up and around their head to the other side. Then, they spin their bodies into a quick pirouette turn that ends with a forceful extension of the leg into a grand battement while their upper body leans away in a counterbalancing motion.

Like Anzaldúa's notion of nepantla as the site where "different perspectives come into conflict", the pasos de ir y vuelta reflect a juxtaposition and the struggle to find equilibrium (Anzaldúa 2002, 548). They contrast groundedness and flight, push and pull and extension and contraction. For example, the grounded movement is seen in the zapateado that keeps the dancers and the choreography connected to the earth. The moments of flight push the dancers into the air with jumps and hops, only to pull them back down to Earth. The pasos de ir y vuelta are also signaled with the push and pull of the arms and upper body. This is seen with the tight cupping of fingers while pulling one elbow back and switching side to side from right to left. Another signifier happens with a push off of the floor, usually into a sauté or a jump that smoothly transitions into an extension of the leg or sometimes into a contraction of the



abdominals that drives the head down. This is followed with big movements of the arms that come down and around while the chest follows.

For instance, the dancers are often seen propelling themselves into the air by pushing off of both feet and taking their upper body backwards into an arch while the arms circulate back to front, before landing with a torso contraction that drives their focus toward the ground. These movements are followed with zapateado – sometimes in bare feet and sometimes in folklórico dance shoes. The zapateado is accompanied with movements in the upper body, such as the opposition of arms that reach up and pull down, or with flailing torsos that powerfully extend side to side.

Making space for choreographies of selves is necessarily a nonlinear endeavor. This is because in *Santuarios*, looking at identity from two or more perspectives, as in Anzaldúa's geography of selves, creates a choreography drawn from different moments in time. Choreographies of selves lie on a continuum that uses past knowledge to inform the present reality. Nonlinearity also allows for the interweaving of stories, dance, text, and music drawn from different bodies. This composition poses an alternate model for the audience to experience the show as well. Through this nonlinear structure, audience members are offered multiple points of entry into the world being created on stage by the interconnectedness of feeling, emotion, and experience.

Another feature for creating choreographies of selves is a free flowing use of space. Like the monarcas who fly without borders, the choreography in this particular scene, "Monarca I," moves the dancers effortlessly in crisscross pathways that whiz

around the entire stage. They pave the way for the next couple to follow with ease and grace, but do so with speed and a sense of responsibility seen in the way they intertwine their arms around the other's waists, helping each other to keep up and sometimes even guiding each other to their next destination. They each repeat this pattern once again, only this time they come in backwards, their solar plexus radiating toward the sky, the backside of their head initiating their falling motion and quick run. They move fearlessly exhibiting a unique characteristic of the monarch whose internal magnetic compass directs it to an area it has never been, thousands of miles away.

The use of space proclaims the need to move freely like a butterfly with no borders, signifying a deep connection to making this space their own and claiming agency. These women engaged with their own personal memories, stories of migration, and a connection to humanity in the rehearsal process where their bodies became viable sites of thinking, remembering, and expressing lived experiences. In "Monarca I" we see this consciousness come alive in moments when they move together, support each other, and sometimes even carry each other.

### ***Rocas***

In the scene entitled, "Rocas," the choreography tells a story of risk and journey through the unknown. Like the undocumented person who moves across an unknown terrain fearful to be seen, a dancer emerges from the back of the stage, hunched over and walking slowly as the lights dim. With a rebozo wrapped around her head to which she clings tightly, the woman's hands reach down toward the floor as if feeling for

something in the dark. She walks backwards off stage and then re-enters surrounded by the company of dancers. Their bodies contorted into little balls that look like roly polys, they enter crawling on hands and knees around her feet. They glide across the floor as if carrying the woman who continues to look and feel her way around. Stopping in the center, the woman now contorts her upper body to match theirs. The woman reaches one arm and then the next towards the dark sky as if slowly emerging from a cocoon. Reaching forward, her belly supported by the kneeling dancer in front of her, her body stretches forward like a rubber band being pulled to its limits before quickly retracting. This repeats once again, this time she leans backwards with her arms still extending up towards the sky. When she returns to standing, the dancers on the floor mimic her arm reaches and pull her down to the pile below. They all now crawl as one, traveling around the side of the stage until the woman appears again in the middle of the pack. She throws her rebozo like a fishing net into the water, her body following, only to be dragged back into the cluster that now lies on the floor, reaching and pulling her in. The woman continues to struggle and throw her rebozo out until she finally makes it to standing. She reaches up, stretching the rebozo above her head with both hands in the air. The dancers move back into their crawling formation and the woman slowly takes a few steps backwards with arms outstretched now to a “T” position. She eventually lies backwards onto the backs of the cluster. They begin to drag the woman who now looks like the image of the crucified Jesus on the cross.

“Rocas” is one of the scenes in *Santuarios* that makes the subject of immigration clear to its audience. With constant arms that outstretch into the space in front, above and below her, the woman who is featured in this piece displays the yearning to make it through the unknown. Later in the dance, she is seen running from one edge of the stage to the next. At each corner she is met with a wall of arms and bodies that push her back, until finally they rush toward her and lift her up into the air. They carry her to the center of the stage and place her down on both of her feet before running off stage. Working together, the dancers make it clear that the search for a sanctuary continues, but along the way there are moments when we need to be carried, when we need support, and when we move together.

*Santuarios* passes on personal stories of migration and the larger political issues of immigration inherited from the generations before. These are stories that reflect upon the experiences of Chicana/os from South Texas, but they reveal current issues of citizenship and immigration relevant to many US and Mexican citizens. Similar to these dancers’ stories, the monarcha’s migration is also generational and there are various stories associated with this beautiful and intriguing creature. Scientists have found that their long precarious flight of migration is completed by the fourth generation and their time of arrival to their sanctuaries in the Mexican mountains of Michoacán coincides with *Día de los Muertos*, or Day of the Dead, a celebration that dates back to pre-Columbian Mexico and its indigenous people. Some indigenous legends correlated the monarcha with the souls of children who have died and come

back. In other stories, the monarca was believed to take the souls of warriors who have died in battle or sacrifice and women who died giving birth to their final resting place.

The image of this delicate and powerful creature that is the monarch is significant in the way the female dancers in this choreodrama represent it. The monarch's continued existence, despite all it is up against, denotes endurance and fortitude. The direct intention of each extension of the leg or the power behind every arm reach that slices into the air, demonstrates that this not a helpless creature. The dancers' unison phrases along with the intention and verve involved in their execution, grows out of a mutual and asymmetrical dependency of human interaction. The relationships they create on stage through the mapping of their choreographic pathways, as well as the way they move in flocks across the stage, exhibits the interconnectedness that exists between a family, a community, and to the larger human race. The choreography in *Rocas* and in *Santuarios*, exhibits relationships that exist not out of weakness or some sort of predefined roles; rather they are examples of relationships between human beings that may vary in length or be asymmetrical in relation, but nevertheless are not dispensable.

In this show, these women are not limited to male/female partner dances as is the case in many traditional folklórico dance choreographies and in *Río Bravo*; instead the dancing Chicana bodies in *Santuarios* represent women who move as individuals, who move supported by each other and who move together as a community. There are instances where they are seen as mothers and daughters and at other times, the women

are seen working collectively. These multiple locations are important to an understanding of the various aspects of identity inherent in the creation of choreographies of selves.

*Santuarios* depicts images of flight, migration and a search for sanctuary. However, if we look at what these women represent on stage, this choreodrama also starts to suggest that sanctuary can be found in the community of women dancing together. This notion of community can be extended even further beyond the stage and into the experiences of the dance company members. In doing so, we see that sanctuary is located in the strong community experiences built through this dance company. In other words, sanctuary is located within the GDC, the GCAC and among the supporters of the center.

## CHAPTER IV

### CONCLUSION: FOLKLÓRICO DANCE BEYOND BORDERS

In 2014, the GDC revived *Rio Bravo* once again for the San Antonio community (and its surrounding areas) in honor of the show's 20<sup>th</sup> anniversary. In our interview, Chavez underscored the importance of this choreodrama, particularly for Maestro Zamarripa when she said, “-of all the places that Zamarripa has worked, we’re the only company that has kept his choreography alive in production.” I was able to attend one of the shows during the anniversary run and for the first time sit in the audience and watch. I was overwhelmed by the energy present in the theater as audience members waited anxiously in a sold out house. Over the years, *Rio Bravo* has become one of the most well-known shows that the GCAC produces and in 2014, *Rio Bravo* was the most successful event for the Guadalupe Theater.

When the GDC was established, the main focus was to use tradition as an inspiration for generating new dances. As the GDC continues to add new members to the company and new pieces to their repertoire, they remain steadfast in their mission to “preserve, present, and promote cultural heritage through traditional and contemporary styles of dance and music.” Towards that end, the GDC embraces their history and culture while nurturing the company members’ creativity and artistry. Throughout the years the GDC has continued to create original work because of all the experiences they have had with master choreographers, composers, and playwrights.

The skills that the dancers have gained have led to more recent shows, such as *Historias y Recuerdos*, a choreodrama that uses video excerpts of interviews collected from local residents who grew up around the Guadalupe Theater as inspiration for dance theater choreography. As part of this ongoing project, each year that this show is presented a video booth is set up in the lobby of the theater where audience members can share their own personal stories of the Guadalupe Theater that will be used to add to future productions of this show.

### **Folklore Vivo!**

*Historias y Recuerdos* premiered in 2006 and has been resurrected in various forms several times since then. All of the choreography for this show is created by dance company members and features some Guadalupe Dance Academy (GDA) students as well. In each of its revivals, at least one new suite is exchanged for an older one, keeping the show relevant to the current company members and to the new interviews they receive from community members. *Historias y Recuerdos* strings together vignettes based on San Antonio stories that facilitates a connection between history and memory, while teaching about how to survive and transform their social existence. Some of the themes in previous renditions of the show spanned those of immigration, war, love, and religion. For example, in the opening scene for *Historias y Recuerdos* in 2006, “La Frontera” told the story of undocumented Mexican immigrants and their journey of crossing the border. In this theater dance piece, company members moved in pairs as they made their way through the audience. In each pair, one dancer



portrayed an undocumented immigrant while the other, who was dressed in black, became their shadow, shining a flashlight along the floor to illuminate their path.

Menchaca notes that productions like *Historias y Recuerdos* empower the community “because we are telling their stories.” The empowerment that Menchaca speaks of extends to the dance company members, who feel a sense of accomplishment in the way that their dances, both traditional and contemporary, give something back to the community that supports them. In my interviews with company members, I found that empowerment is a reciprocal relationship between the dancers and the community. For example, Sabrina Latigo comments, “-to be on stage and have people be inspired by what we’re doing and the message I think that is coming across from it, it feels like I’m doing something good.”

The company members are also empowered by a sense of reconnecting to their ancestry and heritage. Carolina Guerra expresses,

I really like to see myself, you know, back in that little town dancing in the streets...to me it’s just so powerful because like I’ve been telling you, I’ve been away from my *raices*, you know? And it’s kind of sad but it’s hard to be away, so folklórico keeps me in touch with my roots and where I’m from and my traditions and my culture.

Similarly, Luis Garcia talks about how choreodramas have been impactful to his life,

I’ve used some of the stuff I’ve learned to discuss culture and history with my dad and with my family. My father is from Michoacan...so one of the songs that I choreographed for *Historias*, I used music from the Purepeche Indians and the Purepeche is from the Michoacan area. So I did that on purpose of course. When I asked my dad about that he had no idea, but it was an interesting conversation. And it’s this whole idea of me wanting to learn more about myself.

The comments made above exemplify how the choreodramas that the GDC creates are intricately connected to an acceptance of an identity rooted in mestizaje: a mixture of cultures, dance, and personal experiences. These dancers are expressing an understanding that traditional, indigenous, and contemporary interpretations are necessary in order to fully express the Chicana/o cultural experience through dance.

My focus on the choreodramas of the GDC in this thesis does not mean to suggest that the desire to learn and perform traditional Mexican folklórico dances has gone away for these dancers. Instead, what I have set out to do here is to provide an understanding of how choreodramas have enhanced the formation of new traditions and expressions about who they are as Chicanas and Chicanos in the United States. This has created a “folklore vivo” or a folklórico that is alive today.

The traditional folklórico elements of the company are central to its survival. What I mean by this is that it is what company members are first drawn to and their reason for auditioning in the first place. In other words, dancers do not audition for the company because they perform choreodramas, but because they are known primarily as a dance company that performs folklórico and flamenco dances. Furthermore, as I have explored in this thesis, the traditional folklórico connection is also how many company members learn about and connect to their Mexican history and culture. It is this strong folklórico connection that members from the company continue to pass on to the younger generation. Dance company members do this through teaching both at the GDC studio and throughout the greater San Antonio community, as well as in the

lecture demonstrations they present at the Guadalupe Theater throughout the school year. All of these things put together ensure the company's survival into the future.

At the same time, developing an extensive dance vocabulary beyond traditional folklórico is an element that cannot be overlooked when discussing the GDC. This begins in the GDA, where young students are trained in folklórico and flamenco dance techniques, along with various other dance styles. It is the preparation that these young dance students receive in the dance academy that becomes the key to the future creations of GDC choreodramas. For example, when talking to GDC member and former GDA student, Marlene Pita, she recalled attending the Guadalupe Summer Dance Camp where students would take different classes from different company members or guest instructors in jazz, ballet, hip hop, Salsa, and theater. She states, "And we got to take these classes and really start developing and learning and asking questions and kind of being exposed to different things." Sabrina Latigo also talked about the Guadalupe Summer Dance Camps as giving her the ability to be able to adapt to "all types of dance styles."

GDC director, company member, and GDA instructor, Jeannette Chavez, expressed that she always tries to incorporate "something different." She explained, "- there is always something in addition to their traditional folklórico work...For me it is pivotal to have exposure to working artists of a different caliber and in different genres because all dance I think any kind of dance training, informs who you are in your specific area." These dancers make clear that GDC members are encouraged and

fostered to be curious about numerous styles of movement as a way to engage in multiple dance languages. And while traditional folklórico plays a big role, the GDC choreodramas create new traditions in Chicana/o cultural expression through dance.

### **Mapping the Future of the Guadalupe Dance Company**

The use of folklórico zapateado has also become the tool for building new work, as in the choreodramas discussed in this thesis. However, zapateado is not just a dance step, but its distinctive sound and the energy it creates makes it a highly sensuous act. The senses of touch, sound, and sight that are employed through the physicality of stomping the Earth become especially important in the way that they speak to how these dancers come to understand who they are, where they come from, and their contribution to this world. What is more, the act of zapateado then becomes a direct connection to how these dancers know themselves through the body. When likened to the dance traditions of many other native populations of North America, the use of zapateado also becomes the interlocking thread that provides an embodied knowledge important to mestizaje, personal identification and building community through dance.

The tradition of folklórico dance comes from regional experiences. This region specificity is also true for the dance traditions of various native dance groups on this continent. In this way, folklórico is already set up to include a space for the dances of Chicana/os in Texas to exist. What I mean is, just as there are dances from Jalisco and Veracruz, and dances from the Apache and Plains, then of course there are dances of

Texas and San Antonio, dances of California and Los Angeles, dances of New Mexico and Santa Fe, for example. Thinking of folklórico and dance traditions more broadly opens up the discourse presented here on dance in Chicana/o communities of Texas. That is because changing dance traditions attest to the historical and political paths of the people (Introduction 2009, xiv). And when considering Chicana/o dance beyond this company, it only makes sense that new dance forms continue to develop. In the globalized world of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, dances circulate a lot more readily beyond the places that they were created. Thus, dance traditions are constantly changing, adapting, and functioning in various ways depending on who is dancing and where they are dancing. This is especially true at the US-Mexico border where the tradition of continuous crossing carries on despite the many push backs from government laws and anti-immigrant rhetoric.

My decision to focus on the choreodramas of the GDC came from the fact that the dance forms created in this area have not received enough scholarly attention. What is more, this thesis looks at the GDC choreodramas as living traditions and sociopolitical expressions of the people in the South Texas area. Choreodramas are storytelling dance forms that allow the GDC to tell stories that mean something in their own way. In this research, I have provided an analysis of the choreodramas of the GDC, offering a deeper understanding of the role dance has played in the formation of identity for the dancers interviewed in this thesis. The GDC's choreodramas invite the voices of history and experience to emerge and develop through performance that

extends the tradition of cuentos to cultural performance and the dancing body on the concert dance stage. I have also contended that an analysis of dance within Chicana/o communities in San Antonio is important to broadening the understanding of the differences and connections among the American dance experience. An examination of the choreodramas of the GDC also provides a way to identify how Chicana/o dance inserts a specific cultural experience into dominant American discourses on history and performing art. What is more, GDC choreodramas' emphasis on chicanidad presents a direct contribution to Chicana/o history, identity and culture.

The choreodramas that the GDC creates straddle borders and connect personal and cultural experiences of the larger community in San Antonio. It brings the cultural and political voices of this area onto the stage and embodies a Chicana/o contemporary dance movement that is largely absent from the discourse on dance in the United States. Moreover, these choreodramas reclaim a public art space that challenges the tourism image of San Antonio's Mexican American population as a reflection of Mexican folk heritage only.

The GDC choreodramas also serve as a demonstration of the complexity of the cultural identity of San Antonio's Chicana/o population. In the GDC's choreodramas, dancers are free to draw from all of their experiences, creating new work that is not necessarily folk but takes from it to create something new. In this thesis, I have argued that the ability to bring all of their experiences with them contributes to a nepantla dance space. With a focus on the personal and cultural existences of the San Antonio

Chicana/o community, choreodramas exemplify a San Antonio Chicana/o and South Texas cultural expression. In my interview with longtime GDC member, Luis Garcia, he discussed the ways in which the GDC choreodramas explore traditions in a new way. Garcia articulated, “In the same way that ballet technique is used to stylize ballet folklórico, I think we are using traditional Mexican folk to inform newer pieces – new interpretations.” Garcia’s comment brings to light the essence of the two choreodramas I have discussed in this project while illuminating the significant contributions that Chicana/o dance has on the American dance art scene.

In this thesis I have also explored two specific dance works by the Guadalupe Dance Company in San Antonio, Texas: *Rio Bravo and Santuarios*. I have used an interdisciplinary lens in order to examine how the GDC’s choreodramas present a Chicana/o identity through a combination of dance, theater, and narrative. I have argued that the GDC’s choreo-dramas develop new innovations in dance by focusing on the San Antonio, Texas Chicana/o experience and expressing a sense of reclamation of a silenced history. Moreover, I have attempted to further the conversation on how dance and dance making practices within Chicana/o communities in San Antonio can be understood as a way of breaking the silence around a culture that has endured generations of oppression.

It is important to remember the limitations of the research that I have presented here. While I have sought to add an underrepresented Chicana/o voice to dance studies and also emphasize the importance of dance studies to ethnic studies programs, such as

Chicana/o studies, I have only begun to scratch the surface on the role that dance plays in Chicana/o communities in South Texas. Still, this thesis does illustrate how Chicana/o dance artists of the 21<sup>st</sup> century are instrumental to producing striking and thought-provoking artworks, while also articulating an aesthetic of mestizaje. The choreodramas that the GDC creates are an example of how an aesthetic of mestizaje is tied to the unique experiences of US citizens of Mexican descent. Through the artistic expression of dance, the GDC's choreodramas enhance the notion of a personal and collective cultural identity that draws from oral history traditions, theater, and zapateado dance practices.

*It is about midway through the lecture demonstration and hundreds of San Antonio students sit in the audience, attentively watching and responding to the dances we are showcasing. It is audience participation time and Belinda is on stage talking to the students and asking for volunteers. Once she has the students on stage, she calls for me and Carolina to assist her. We arrange the students in two lines and proceed to demonstrate paso de tres, or step of three. I notice a young girl who reminds me of myself at that age – petite, dark skinned, and curious about dance. When she looks over to me, I smile and she does too. Once the demonstration is over, the students go back to their seats and we have a question and answer session. The young girl from before immediately raises her hand and asks, “What made you decide to dance this kind of dance?” I answer, “Because it is a part of who I am.”*



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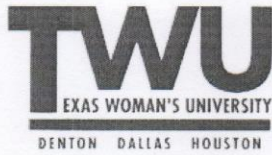
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APPENDIX A

IRB Approval Letter



**Institutional Review Board**  
Office of Research and Sponsored Programs  
P.O. Box 425619, Denton, TX 76204-5619  
940-898-3378  
email: IRB@twu.edu  
<http://www.twu.edu/irb.html>

DATE: July 14, 2014

TO: Ms. Dava Hernandez  
Department of Dance

FROM: Institutional Review Board - Denton

*Re: Approval for Dancing Identity/Building Community: A Critical Examination of the Guadalupe Dance Company and the U.S. Ballet Folklorico Experience (Protocol #: 17725)*

The above referenced study has been reviewed and approved by the Denton Institutional Review Board (IRB) on 7/11/2014 using an expedited review procedure. This approval is valid for one year and expires on 7/11/2015. The IRB will send an email notification 45 days prior to the expiration date with instructions to extend or close the study. It is your responsibility to request an extension for the study if it is not yet complete, to close the protocol file when the study is complete, and to make certain that the study is not conducted beyond the expiration date.

If applicable, agency approval letters must be submitted to the IRB upon receipt prior to any data collection at that agency. A copy of the approved consent form with the IRB approval stamp is enclosed. Please use the consent form with the most recent approval date stamp when obtaining consent from your participants. A copy of the signed consent forms must be submitted with the request to close the study file at the completion of the study.

Any modifications to this study must be submitted for review to the IRB using the Modification Request Form. Additionally, the IRB must be notified immediately of any adverse events or unanticipated problems. All forms are located on the IRB website. If you have any questions, please contact the TWU IRB.

cc. Mary Williford-Shade, Department of Dance  
Dr. Rosemary Candelario, Department of Dance  
Graduate School