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Blazing New Paths From Ancient Footprints: Enactment Of Mexican Traditional Dance And Music (folklórico) In A New York Urban Community Of Early Childhood Learners

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BLAZING NEW PATHS FROM ANCIENT FOOTPRINTS: ENACTMENT OF MEXICAN TRADITIONAL DANCE AND MUSIC (*FOLKLÓRICO*) IN A NEW YORK URBAN COMMUNITY OF EARLY CHILDHOOD LEARNERS

by

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A dissertation submitted to the Graduate Faculty in Urban Education in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy, The City University of New York

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This manuscript has been read and accepted by the Graduate Faculty in Urban Education in satisfaction of the dissertation requirement for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy.

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THE CITY UNIVERSITY OF NEW YORK
ABSTRACT

BLAZING NEW PATHS FROM ANCIENT FOOTPRINTS: ENACTMENT OF MEXICAN TRADITIONAL DANCE AND MUSIC (FOLKLÓRICO) IN A NEW YORK URBAN COMMUNITY OF EARLY CHILDHOOD LEARNERS

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Pamela A. Proscia

Advisor: Professor Kenneth Tobin

The research undertaken for this study centers on outside-of-school teaching and learning through the practice of traditional Mexican music and dance (folkloric musical culture or folklórico) as transmitted to children of early childhood age in a New York urban ethnocultural dance community. The study focuses on the ways in which the traditional Mexican music and dance community, as cultural producers, pass along knowledge and inherent values of Mexican heritage and on how the process of acculturation includes changes imparted through progressive western approaches to teaching movement.

The study incorporates a long-term sociohistorical perspective in order to contextualize the place of musical culture in the long, rich history of Mexico’s people. Using an hermeneutic phenomenological approach, this work offers a critical lens that reveals how the performance of folklórico maintains links between a symbolic imagined past and life in present times. To establish a context for the relevance of Mexican music and dance as practiced in a largely immigrant community, this essay
also includes background on the dynamics of the U.S.-Mexican relationship and
dance and music history showing their metamorphosis from the pre-Conquest
period to modern day, and on the relevance of musical culture to the forging of
Mexican nationhood and national identity are included. How do an ethnic
community-based music and dance program and its practices support the
emergence of Mexican identity?

Ways of learning that extend beyond systematized educational institutions
can make fundamental contributions to children’s identities. The realms of everyday
practices, which encompass participation in customs embodied in Mexican musical
culture, cultivate a sense of ‘Mexicanness’ (*mexicanidad*). Traditional Mexican dance
and music are not only celebratory; rather they are fundamentally part of identity
and nationhood for Mexicans. Social networks have developed through these means
in New York City’s Mexican diaspora, and their musical culture contributed to
structuring social spaces within U.S. mainstream society. The signification of
*mexicanidad* represented by music and dance, promotes a sense of belonging,
engendering agency and empowerment in this urban community.

This study implies that equitable learning communities would uphold a
pluriethnic view of knowledge and advocates for that perspective. Such an approach
would honor the histories, traditions, and practices of the multitude of people that
make up the U.S. nation and appreciate their value. This case study endeavors to
make a contribution to that end.
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

There are many to thank for all the support and guidance I received throughout the long period of doctoral studies, carrying out a field study, and ultimately writing the dissertation. Much of the writing process is a solo journey, however, there were many bright moments spent in collaboration with other researchers, professionals, and friends. Those contacts helped to buoy me up when I was feeling lost along the way.

The children and people of the New York Mexican community, who are the heart of my study, were a joyful part of my life throughout the period I intermingled with them. I am most grateful to them for their warm generous spirit, welcoming ways, and for allowing me to come into their lives.

Although there were many twists and turns, I eventually found my way to the end of the study. I would like to thank the members of my dissertation committee. First and foremost, Kenneth Tobin, my advisor, came to my aid when I was lost in the deep, dark thicket of the woods. He helped restore my spirit, offered me Zen tea, and co-created a path back to the light. He offered brilliant insights and challenged taken-for-granted conventions of my thinking, especially on the matter of culture and interpretive writing. Beyond this, he selflessly gave of his time, which enabled me to bring this project to fruition. Thank you for your friendship, guidance, and for being such a positive force in my life. My thanks extend to Philip Anderson, who has been steadfast in his support of me throughout my graduate studies, and to Jerry Kerlin, who as one outside of the CUNY community, generously gave of his time and knowledge above and beyond the call of duty to music education. In the eleventh
hour I had the great fortune of having Electa Arenal, Professor Emerita, join my committee. Her breadth and depth of knowledge of Mexican literature, culture, and *folklórico* music and dance came at a most timely hour.

Other individuals whose help was life changing throughout the extended writing period were, my dear friend, Jeanne Marie Col, who opened her office to me as a haven. It became my hideaway place, so that I could withdraw, read, study, and write. Another long-time friend, Carmen Hendershott, also came to my aid numerous times. Her background as a cultural anthropologist and research librarian greatly contributed to my understanding of the field of culture; she provided feedback on my ideas early on and throughout my research journey. Cheering me on from across the miles were my very dear and long-time friends, Kathy Dapcic and Harry Dudley, who helped in funding a portion of my work to complete the final chapters of the study. A veteran music educator, Walter Paul helped with the musical notation that appears in the text, and Martha Eddy's friendship and expertise in movement studies has been invaluable to me. Cesar Atzíc Marquez often provided answers to the many questions I have had about Mexican life and customs.

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CHAPTER 1
Music and Dance as a Bridge: The Immigrant Journey to Become an American

One unique aspect of the United States of America is that it is a country comprised of a vast mix of immigrants. This factor often steers national conversations toward issues regarding immigrant concerns. Over many years, in fact, my work with children of diverse immigrant backgrounds prompted me to question much of what I was seeing in New York City public school classrooms ultimately leading to this present study. Since 2008 I have been engaged in research on the teaching and learning of traditional Mexican music and dance within a community situated in the Borough of Queens in New York City. Approximately 35 children, who are the focus of this study, were between four and eight years of age during the time I observed them in Mexican folkloric dance classes. I have undertaken to explore the means by which customs, and ways of teaching and learning these customs, are embodied in traditional Mexican music and dance (folklórico), as well as how they are passed on through generations. This study examines adaptation, maintenance, and change of representational musical structures and forms of Mexican folkloric musical arts, and the processes of reconstruction and transmission within the Nochtlaca Mexican dance community in the New York City area.

My research explores the relationship between music and dance as culture as well as in culture (Campbell, 2000a [my emphasis]) and the role they play as an intercultural bridge to identity in a new context, a means of connecting the old and the new through time and place. “The concept of culture is one of those seemingly commonsense words that implies a taken-for-granted meaning” (González, 2005, p. 29) yet there is no agreed upon definition. Some of the pitfalls in the use of the term culture are that it has resulted in
essentializing and typecasting groups (p. 36) and reifying associated traits. Frequently the word ‘culture’ can be “loaded with expectations of group norms and often-static ideas of how people view the world and behave in it […] The term presumes coherence within groups, which may not exist” (p. 10). William Sewell, Jr. (1999) takes note that attempting “to clarify what we mean by culture seems both imperative and impossible” (p. 35). He asks how culture might be conceptualized as practice? (p. 51).

My investigation, in particular, looks at the potential benefits that participation in the musical arts—song, instrumental music, and dance—might afford immigrant children of Mexican heritage (and others) as a doorway to intercultural understanding, resolutions of identity issues, and accommodation to a new culture. I am also concerned with the relationship of musical arts to learning in other areas.

This study probes the knowledge and cultural values contained within a Mexican dance community in New York City, providing a view of how these values are transmitted to and acquired by the children participating in these dance classes as they experience their musical culture and dance. Interviewed on Latino culture, ethnomusicologist Steven Loza remarked, “Music is an essential part of Latin American culture” (Loza in an interview with Patricia Campbell, 1996, p. 61), which, of course, includes Mexican culture.

**The Research Context: Introducing the *Noctlaca Dance Community***

*Noctlaca* is a young company, which is at an early stage in their organizational development. As a group they do not adhere to a rigid or set philosophy that guides them, however, the artistic director at the time of the study stated that the dances they dance are “of the past melded with the present.” They describe the works they perform as ‘honoring’ Mexico’s past and immigrant life in the United States.’ For the purpose of this research
study, I refer to them as Nochtlaca, which means ‘everyone’ in Nahuatl, the indigenous language of the Aztecs. It is a word I feel represents the dance company’s spirit and intention to be inclusive.

My relationship to this community as researcher and the data collected during this period represents a window in time—a series of snapshots that include many facets of the company, the children’s classes, the people who comprise the community, and what went on during the period in which I carried out my field research.

At a party in the spring of 2008, I began speaking with Lucy, a woman I had just met there. While conversing, I told her I was a doctoral student and embarked on the subject of some of my experiences teaching movement and music to children and early childhood educators. I shared with her my interest in pursuing a study on Mexican children and their music. My master’s thesis had been related to this area, so I had already explored some of the relative literature and had visited the interior of Mexico in 2004. I found out Lucy and I had our Italian heritage in common. She was a freelance photographer and was married to a Mexican man. They lived in Queens, New York with their daughter, then a preschooler, who was just the age I was interested in for my study. She told me that her daughter was attending Mexican dance classes. At that time, I was still thinking of researching Mexican children’s songs and their transmission with transnational children, but I had not been able to locate any children for my study. We exchanged business cards and said we would contact each other in the future.

Little did I know at that time that our meeting would open a door leading me to this present study. In the summers, I taught an undergraduate college course for early childhood education students at City College of New York (a part of the larger system of the
City University of New York) on ‘Facilitating Children’s Musical Development,” which included a fieldwork component. While aiding the students to find suitable sites for their fieldwork, I came upon a listing for an open rehearsal of Mexican dance and decided to go. Lived history is made up of converging forces, although this is rarely the way history is recorded. The party previously mentioned and my decision to go to the open rehearsal turned out to be such a convergence, for when I arrived at the rehearsal, Lucy was there. One of the dances they were rehearsing included non-professional dancers and Lucy was involved in that particular dance. She introduced me to three men of Mexican heritage—the founders and organizers of the dance company and the children’s dance program. I told them of my interest, and they agreed to allow me to carry out this research for my dissertation study.

That same summer, with permission from the Mexican dance company’s founders, I first visited the dance studio to get a closer view of what the children were learning. I was originally seeking young children singing, and in a larger population of children I thought the odds of finding this would increase, but no such luck. Instead, what I did see in the course of the children learning Mexican dance was so fascinating, that I decided what was going on was important enough to focus on in greater depth, since it could reflect not only transmissions of particular dance and music, but also, implicitly, cultural values associated with *mexicanidad* (Mexicanness). My research, moreover, provides an account of the process and means of an alternative approach to reach and engage learners, and inform teaching, as compared with static pedagogical devices as can be found in the mainstream school system. It would allow for further exploration of commonalities and differences of styles and approaches. These explorations could potentially bring to light a broader and
deeper understanding of the early influences a child is exposed to in an outside-of-school setting within an ethnocultural community. Giving visibility to what transpires in such an environment could offer an opportunity to apprehend the child’s experiences before immersion in an institutional environment in the dominant culture. Undeniably, these areas have been and continue to be underresearched. Such investigation could also provide insight into the complexities associated with these different approaches—both the content and ways in which they are conveyed to such a child.

**Carrying Out the Research**

The principal data were gathered by means of participant observation and interviews; other data collection resources included documents and cultural artifacts. In order to determine the means of transmission, content, and the children’s learning experiences in the classes of traditional Mexican music and dance, I observed dance classes principally during a concentrated period of seven months within the Mexican dance community in New York City between late summer of 2009 and spring of 2010. Additional data collection came from interviews with the key dance company members, which began in spring 2010 and provided important information about the company and its members as a significant part of the foundation for the study. Combined informal and semi-structured interviews were conducted and audiotaped with the study participants. Beyond this, I attended children’s recitals several times a year and the company performances as well. I went again to the site of the dance program in the summer of 2011 when they were preparing for a public performance at the Brooklyn Public Library, which I also attended. Last summer, I went to a Family Workshop and Dance Party as part of their Tenth Anniversary celebration. During the months I spent in the children’s dance classes, spontaneous and natural
conversation occurred between the children and me in the setting of the dance studio and other study sites. In a similar manner, casual talk with their parents and other family members transpired providing further data.  

This research is interdisciplinary and considers theoretical perspectives pertinent to anthropology, cultural studies, folklore, identity and cultural adaptation, ethnomusicology, musicology, anthropology of dance, Latino/a Studies, sociology and sociological studies on immigration trends, as well as early childhood studies and music, movement, and arts learning. *There has been a paucity of literature in the combined areas of immigrant children’s cultural adaptation and the effects of musical culture on children’s learning, particularly in the early childhood years.* This dissertation is an effort to help fill that gap and provide evidence of how transformative engagement in the arts can be for the learning environment of children. Rob Horowitz and Jaci Webb-Dempsey (2002) ask the question, “How do the arts contribute to human development?” (p. 98). There is a dearth of studies on how music or the performing arts link to aspects of human development for ‘at-risk’ students or the educationally disadvantaged, particularly in early childhood learning. A deficiency remains in qualitative research that considers musical learning from an ethnocultural perspective. 

**Applying the Musical Arts for Immigrant Children’s Learning**  
The place of music and the broader arts within the context of learning and school curriculum is still contested. Pamela Perry (2002) makes the statement that, “no other public institution is as critical for the development of the identities youth will carry into their adulthoods as schools” (p. 10). Many people ask whether music and the arts should be included as a significant part of student learning. Both my broad experience as an educator
and my research on the impact of music and movement on the learning experiences of young children indicate to me that music and the arts should have an essential place in school curricula and be more readily accessible in society at large. Exactly what its content and methods of presentation should be for best practices is far from clear, however. Failure to resolve this issue and the more general, related issue of adequately representing diversity in the U.S. public school system has led to placement of an undue reliance on standardized testing. Describing the accountability movement as “driven top-down by political forces,” Christine Sleeter and Carl Grant (2007) have determined that the emphasis on accountability has “increasingly taken educational decisions out of the hands of educators” resulting in their “deprofessionalization” (p. 22). Mired in this “accountability craze, teachers are ordered to get students ready for the tests. Consequently, instruction concentrates on passing the test, often at the expense of the ‘total’ child” (p. 22). Sleeter and Grant also point out that new policies focusing on accountability have not in fact improved the quality of teaching in schools in poverty areas but instead “had only altered the terms under which unequal education was delivered” (p. 22). Since the approach of teaching to the test fails to consider other realms that make up the world of the child, it does not, in fact, improve teaching quality in poverty area schools.

I have sought out research on children and immigrant communities as well as learning in immigrant groups through the arts. I have delved into writings on dance, movement, music and ethnomusicology but have not found very much written on transmission of ethnocultural arts to children within immigrant communities. Yet, children’s earliest experiences, as we know, impact the direction of their lives for many years to come. Many studies exist on children’s educational experiences, but the vast
majority of these are centered on institutional teaching and learning. The experiences children bring with them into school environments form the foundation of how children learn. A contextualist ontology can help to address these concerns as it allows for “a multiplicity of realities, rather than a single reality” (Tudge, 2008, p. 59). Do children’s early impressions influence their lives more profoundly than we may realize? Is the way custom is imparted, as well as other significant information rooted in cultures, critical to the manner in which young children learn? In other words, do these early experiences create a kind of template that forms a basis of how children (and adults for that matter) receive and process information and interact with their surroundings? What role does the community play in helping to shape one’s identity? Is family the key factor in this process or are there other equally important and influential characters and interactions that indelibly impress upon a child’s development? Jonathan Tudge (2008) contributes, “Theories [such as cultural-ecological theory] that fit within a contextualist paradigm are those that take seriously the complex interconnections among individual, interpersonal, and contextual aspects of development” (p. 73).

In addition, Olga Nájera Ramírez (1989) addresses the great lack of scholarly attention in the area of folkórico dance. In fact, within the United States, there has been one other effort to document Mexican folkloric music and dance in a master’s thesis by Loes M. Solomon in 1941. Solomon’s thesis aimed to provide “a better understanding of the Mexican as he is found in Los Angeles, and [it] should help in the appreciation of his songs and dances, which he has brought with him from Mexico” (1941, p. 24). It was part of the requirement for a degree in physical education at the University of California at Los Angeles. No studies I have found focus on the transmission of the Mexican musical arts to
children. The present study will probe these questions and concerns within the context of the learning and teaching of folklórico music and dance.

The sense of folklore as tied to national heritage predominates in many Latin American countries (Rowe & Schelling, 1991). William Rowe and Vivian Schelling (1991) explain the usage and significance of the word ‘folklore’ in Mexico. The authors state, “[S]ince the 1920s the Mexican state has used peasant cultural traditions as marks of national identity, the word folklore is charged with positive connotations of national unity, giving a positive valuation to the decontextualization it implies” (1991, p. 64). Ramírez draws attention to the role of folklórico dance as having been critical to the hegemonic struggle between nations. In Mexico, the idea of mestizaje, a vision of cultural assimilation to create a national unity, has taken hold more effectively than in other Latin American countries. In fact, Fondo Nacional Para el Fomento de Las Artesanías (FONART) (National Foundation for the Promotion of Handicrafts), an official Mexican organization established with the purpose of international promotion of national folklore, has been ahead of other Latin American countries in promoting folklorially-inflected products as an expression of national culture (Rowe & Schelling, 1991).

There is, nonetheless, a void in research that follows the pathways and forms of these promotional efforts particularly with regard to the growth of Mexico’s national culture in a transnational population of young children. Recognizing a deficit in this domain, I became motivated to carry out ethnographic research on young children’s learning through musical culture outside of mainstream school environments. My aim is that the insights gained through this research could potentially be applied as educational resources to young children of Mexican heritage as well as others in various learning
environments. Critical knowledge gained at the local level within the community could be a crucial determinant in helping to inform school curricula and pedagogical approaches in order to enliven and elevate learning in the United States. As knowledge producers, honor and value is contained within the everyday practices of all peoples; knowledge inherently connected to “folk” practices often contains links to survival strategies transmitted through the ages, whether related to courtship, healing, or the transmission of social values which make up a system or web of cultural practices. Alan Lomax (2003) recognized that “the very act of preserving and presenting folklore [...] is valuable” (p. 114) and that we can find in every culture “a very deep sense of values that deserves to have its place in the sun” (p. 116). It is regrettable that those in positions of power influencing our educational system have relegated folk knowledge such as art, dance, and music to the farthest reaches of what is important to teach. Joe Kincheloe (2008) realizes that “a profound understanding of such ‘dishonored’ views of the world can help critical theorists/pedagogues not only help subvert oppression but also rethink the nature and production of knowledge and selfhood for individuals from diverse backgrounds” (ix).

Over the years in my roles as artist-teacher and a teacher in early childhood classrooms, I have considered how the musical arts impact the lives of children and the place music and dance hold as a way of knowing in the context of learning. My work with children and the arts, especially in music and movement, have shown me that engagement in the arts can be transformative in children’s learning environments and that the arts do indeed have the capacity to express and reflect the culture of a society, ethnic group, or the classroom. The arts offer a window to another way of life and thought through the enactment of cultural values of many and diverse societies together with their wide range
of imaginings. Jack Zipes remarked that the esteemed utopian Marxist philosopher, Ernst Bloch, held an “optimistic belief in the potential of art to provide not only hope for a better future but also illumination toward the realization of this goal” (Bloch, 1988, p. xii).

Should music and the broader arts be included as a significant part of students’ learning? Amanda Konradi and Martha Schmidt (2001) state, “Education is one of the most fundamental institutions in the United States. It is seen as the key to financial security for individuals and political security for a democratic system” (p. 393). Can the arts and music make a difference in adaptation and learning as immigrant children transition to a new society? As Guadalupe Valdés (1998) has expressed, “the journey from where they came from to becoming ‘American’ will take a very long time indeed. [It] has become increasingly clear [...] that newly arrived immigrants from non-English speaking countries encounter serious problems within our educational system” (p. 4). In this ‘land of democracy,’ the United States professes to extend ‘equal rights to all’, but instead we find astounding disparity. “America may be the land of opportunity, but it is also the land of inequality” (Lareau, 2003, p. 3). Xue Lan Rong and Judith Preissle (1998) examine how immigration interacts with race, ethnicity, nationality, gender, social class, residential location, and ways in which theories and practices of schooling address these issues. The authors suggest the demographic changes brought about by the post-1965 diversity of immigrants require “a wide variety of services” (p. x). In order to work well with immigrant children their recommendation is for educators to “understand immigrant, cultural and ethnic diversity in communities in the United States, examine and clarify their own racial and ethnic attitudes, and develop appropriate pedagogical knowledge and skills” (p. x).
In lieu of a curriculum representative of our population’s diversity that would contribute to a meaningful education and learning success, the U.S. educational system of the twenty-first century, largely driven by corporate interests, relies upon standardized testing. The new diversity of the population in the United States requires us to *rethink* not only what to include in curriculum but how to go about presenting it as “intercultural communication is often plagued with misunderstandings” (Gumperz, 1996, p. 471). John Gumperz has assessed that the “formerly relatively homogeneous and largely monolingual European-based societies are well on their way to being transformed into systems resembling the multicultural environments known to us from the anthropological descriptions of Caribbean, Southeast Asian, or African societies” (p. 471). He traces communication problems to the lack of understanding of cultural differences and urges teachers to learn something about their students’ cultural backgrounds (Gumperz, 1996). Lomax (2003) understood the devastating consequences of:

[A] profit-motivated society smashing and devouring and destroying complex cultural systems which have taken almost the entire effort of mankind over many thousands of years to create. We have watched the disappearance of languages, musical languages, the sign languages, and we’ve watched whole ways of thinking and feeling in relating to nature and relating to other people disappear (p. 115).

Research on second language acquisition and bilingualism in immigrant children and youth, which so far has dominated this effort, is important but insufficient to provide an understanding of all their needs. Critical research, so far scant, which “systematically considers the multiple social worlds in which immigrant youth develop” (Suárez-Orozco & Todorova, 2003, pp. 5-6) in tandem with language research, could provide a wider spectrum of important data that is sorely lacking and much needed. It is vital for us to
overcome our lassitude and instead kindle “our epistemological curiosity mov[ing] us to search for diverse sources of information” (Kincheloe, 2008, p. viii).

The present study challenges a general but prevalent belief that new faces and voices coming to the host society are “less skilled than their American counterparts” (White & Glick, 2009, p. 1) although as Michael White and Jennifer Glick aptly comment, “the universality of this generalization holds better in mythology than it does in fact” (p. 1). How can minority groups and immigrants ever hope to succeed in such a system? “[T]he cultural distance, the demographic distinction, and the vagaries of economic absorption raise questions about how well immigrants and their children do in their new environment” (p. 1). It is incumbent upon those of us who work with children of immigrants to find more comprehensive and equitable ways of teaching them.

In looking at the social world of the immigrant community, learning styles, cultural capital, and social class factors at play need consideration and attention; all these factors affect what immigrant children bring with them to the mainstream school system, not just their level of language proficiency. It is also essential to address and reflect on social class bias in mainstream schools and its impact on children. For instance, we might find that the so called “good” schools in affluent areas often include music and arts education, resources that are all too often missing from the economically-disadvantaged schools where, in all likelihood, high percentages of immigrant children will be found.

As Arthur Applebee (1996) reminds us, “the power of education is intimately bound up in the social and cultural traditions within which education is set” (p. 1). This puts a moral onus on us to increase the power of education along with agency among immigrant community children and youth by legitimating and encompassing a broader set of social
and cultural traditions than we have so far done. Upholding the arts as an integral component of education would help to re-balance the overemphasis on conceptual development of individuals at the expense of cultivating the whole-person, a view that has dominated education in the United States. Inclusion of music and the arts reminds us of the importance of the body in learning. Embodiment theory is relevant here, for it suggests that the “body, our corporeal reality [is] at the center of the knowledge-building process” (Hesse-Biber & Leavy, 2008, p. 6).

**Considering Relevant Research**

Although having a focus other than music and arts education, the “Funds of Knowledge for Teaching” is a pioneering effort to use the rich resources within the immigrant community to assist efforts to boost literacy skills of poor minority students. This research, employing a sociocultural approach to instruction, was a collaborative project between education and anthropology and was spearheaded by Luis Moll at the University of Arizona. The premise was that “existing classroom practices underestimate and constrain what Latino and other children are able to display ‘intellectually’” (North Central Regional Educational Laboratory, 1994). The belief is that tapping into ‘hidden’ resources at home and in the community boosts learning motivation. This approach is transformative; diversity becomes a pedagogical asset through the process of “engagement with the everyday conditions of life” allowing teachers to learn from their students (Moll & Gonzalez, 2004, pp. 699-700). “[If] we are to appropriate pedagogically the richness of diversity, including its multiculturalism, it is certainly insufficient to simply acknowledge diversity” (p. 700).

The theme of reciprocity and exchange was encouraged by the funds of knowledge concept (Gonzalez, Moll, & Amanti, 2005). By tapping into the sociocultural resources in the
homes and communities of Mexican children in the Southwest, the Funds of Knowledge project enabled the creation of stronger bonds between the local community and the classrooms which “yielded a more productive and integrated learning experience for the students” (Sandoval-Taylor, 2005, p. 163).

My research on the involvement of children in Mexican folklórico dance classes also provides a case study, which extends the general findings of the Funds of Knowledge for Teaching project to a musical arts-related setting. It looks at the rich artistic resources within an immigrant community and the transformative effects of music and arts-related learning. It also provides data on the contribution of musical culture to variations in cultural values, and the effects of these variations on perceptions of the “real world” and of diasporic and self-identity. Social identity “as constructed through complex processes of relationality and representation [...] is a process not a thing, and is constantly under renegotiation” (Wade, 1997, p. 81).

The concept of identity is complex and as some suggest paradoxical. (Hall, 2003) Stuart Hall has determined that critique and deconstruction of this term in various disciplines are “in one way or another critical of the notion of an integral, originary, and unified identity” (p. 1). Globalization has produced dramatic changes in societies and world culture. These changes have brought about a more complex notion of diaspora and have caused diasporas themselves to shift (Rinderle, 2005). My interest is to examine how musical culture may be a part of this diasporic identity and self-identification of Mexican origin children in the New York City region. How do children gain an identity within an ethnic community? In order to address issues of identity as children may experience it, my research looks at various ways in which the children attending the Nochtlaca dance
program connect to *mexicanidad*. Through this research, the concept of *mexicanidad* and its associated markers will be determined with input from the study participants. How *mexicanidad* may be conveyed to the children as they participate in musical culture in the dance classes and the community and what effects, if any, the experience has on their identity is central to my investigation. Information on their participation in the musical arts within the community of the *Nochtłaca Dance* Company and its influence on identity formation were gathered through data collected on the following research questions: *What are the markers of mexicanidad within the dance program and classes of Nochtłaca Dance Company? What values of Mexican heritage are learned through the music, song, and dance? How do these values engender or contribute to transnational identity and adaptation of the children within the diasporic Mexican community in New York City?*

Numerous complexities exist when attempting to examine the terrain of culture and identity. Addressing issues of identity, culture, and music, Simon Frith (2003) makes this point:

> [I]n talking about identity we are talking about a particular kind of experience, or a way of dealing with a particular kind of experience. Identity is not a thing but a process – an experiential process which is most vividly grasped as *music*. Music seems to be a key to identity because it offers, so intensely, a sense of self and others, of the subjective in the collective” (p. 110)

This interpretive case study also explores the importance of dance as a form of expressive non-verbal communication. According to Judith Lynne Hanna (1987), the exploration of “dance in some of its complexity as human thought, feeling, and action is to explore the nature of being human: such is the challenge” (p. xix). Expressing her views on a theory of non-verbal communication, Hanna describes dance as “a whole complex of communication symbols, a vehicle for conceptualization” (p. 26). She also remarks,
“Substantively, information necessary to maintain a society’s or group’s cultural patterns, to help it attain its goals, to adapt to its environment, to become integrated or to change may be communicated” (p. 26).

The importance of dance to ethnic culture is underlined by a case study of Chileans in Norway. For Chilean immigrants in Norway, the preservation of folk dance traditions contributed to reclaiming their culture (Knudsen, 2001). For many, they had not participated in their native music and dance in Chile, but in this new environment “the immigrant situation spurred a new interest in specifically Chilean cultural expressions” (p. 64). My case study, with its special focus on children and youth, will build on some of the findings of Knudsen’s study but give the added value that attention to a specific age group within the ethnic culture can bring.

In the United States of America, early views of cultural assimilation considered the culture of the ethnic group as something to leave behind in order to embrace the culture of the new host society. In reference to a classic account of assimilation by W. Lloyd Warner and Leo Srole (1945), Richard Alba and Victor Nee (1997) remark that ethnic groups “unlearn[ed]’ their ‘inferior’ cultural traits (inferior, that is, from the standpoint of the host society) in order to successfully learn the new way of life necessary for full acceptance” (p. 827). In contemporary American society, the culture of the immigrant group is often still marginalized by the larger society. For those who do not participate in the immigrant’s community, it is an invisible world. The voices of those involved in this immigrant community—children, family members, and members of the dance company—should be heard in order to realize the potentiality and meaning that musical culture holds within this ethnic community. Exploration of social worlds of immigrant groups, in this case the people
who comprise the Mexican dance community participating in *Nochtla*c*a’s* dance classes, can be a doorway to understand other ways of learning. In recognition that a pluriethnic society holds invaluable and limitless possibilities toward realizing human potential, Kincheloe realizes the essentialness of “getting beyond the multilevel limitations of traditional Western epistemologies, and [the need] to subsequently mov[e] to new multilogical regimes of knowledge production” (2008, p. 21).

The growing diversity of the immigrant population in the United States has shifted attitudes regarding immigrant learning. Pedro Noguera (2004) explains, “gross generalizations about the relationship between immigrant status and academic performance have lost their appeal and explanatory power” (p. 180). This research focusing on children in the Mexican dance community offers a window into a way of life for these families and can extend our own knowledge of different cultural worlds by bringing new awareness to unfounded beliefs we might hold that result in unproductive views about other cultural practices and values. In a pluriethnic society such as the United States, as immigrants adjust to living in the new society, there is the likelihood of cross-cultural influences. Adaptation and ongoing alteration of the host society inevitably occur in the process, as Alba and Nee (2003) discuss, as it responds and is reshaped by its mutable constituency. The process of assimilation is not so linear or orderly. Immigrant identity, as Douglas Massey (2010) argues, “is not a primordial sentiment passed down through the ages or inherited from a ‘pure’ national culture abroad, but a dynamic repertoire of practices, beliefs, and behaviors that are subject to constant readjustment and reorganization in response to changing circumstances” (pp. 23-4). As Massey further expresses, “no one knows exactly how the assimilation of Latin American immigrants will
unfold or what configuration their identities will ultimately take” (p. 24), but this study offers a perspective on how transmission of musical culture is a fundamental means of carving out a social arena for the community in my research.

A historical context is provided in Chapter 2 on the dynamics of the relationship between Mexico and the United States; Chapter 3 provides background on Mexico’s diverse communities, regions and culture; an overview in Chapter 4 includes the history of music and dance through the ages, with a focus on their central role as well as the dynamic changes through the periods of Mexico’s development; and the ethnographic dimension of the research I carried out is contained in Chapters 5 through 8.

The contribution of this case study with its focus on dance and musical learning among Mexican-American children in the New York metropolitan region offers a critical perspective on: children, whereas previous work, such as the Knudsen study on Chilean immigrants to Norway, addressed dance but did not differentiate age groups; probing the implicit knowledge of music and dance processes and enactment, unlike the Funds of Knowledge of Learning study, which focused on cultural resources within the Mexican mainstream school experience but did not examine arts and music as rich resources for consideration; the Mexican immigrant community in the New York metropolitan area, whereas, previous studies have focused mainly on Mexican Americans in California, Texas, and the Southwest. The provision of a novel and valuable case study on the relevance of ethnic music and dance to the ongoing discussion of several important issues in early childhood education for an immigrant population is sorely needed.

The range of this research encompasses the benefits of viewing diversity and multiple social worlds as an asset, not a liability, in generating positive pedagogical
outcomes. It also calls for contemplation of a holistic approach to learning that is sensitive to and esteems other realms of learning, departing from the mind-body dualistic lens [the ‘body’ as well as the ‘mind’] and the value of non-verbal communication (Hanna, 1987). It additionally weighs the advantages of pedagogical approaches that consider the criticality of differences in culture, social class, and learning styles on the educational experience. Further, the research investigates a nuanced understanding of matters of identity, including elements of diasporic identity, and the cultural environment as it lends itself to the development of self-identity and self-esteem for children and youth in an immigrant culture.

Now that a pedagogical context has been provided for the study of Mexican music and dance instruction to children within the Nochtla-cal Dance community, it is relevant to consider the historical background of the Mexican presence in the United States, its reception, and its extent, then and now. This comprehensive window on such an extraordinary past, which has been relegated to the shadows of historical documentation, ushers in a more dynamic view of present-day realities and on the place of educational policies and practices within these realities.
CHAPTER 2
The Complex Relationship Between Mexico and the U.S.

*America is not so much a tradition to be carried on as it is a future to be realized.*
Octavio Paz

Mexico and the United States are neighbors. Mexico, however, has a history that far outdates that of the U.S. by thousands of years. Its long entailed history is marked by cycles of major conflict, which has been the case for many great civilizations, but it is no small feat that urban societies flourished and endured there for centuries. It was an era when “[r]itual permeated the political” (Berrin & Pasztory, 1993, p. 33). Rather than ask why they fell apart, we might consider what the milieu was that allowed them to last for such an extraordinary amount of time. And yet, with such a vast history, we rarely find Mexico’s past, and those of other Mesoamerican societies, right alongside accounts of the Ancient Greeks and Romans. How could this be so?

Many studies that have come into being in very recent times provide insightful perspectives from Chicana/o, Native American, feminist, postcolonial and cultural studies. This range of voices previously absent from the dominant discourse confronts “crucial challenges to patriarchally driven Anglo-American and Eurocentric theoretical assumptions and literary practices” (Aldama, 2001, p. xi). Inclusion of these contemporary critical views and “debates in comparative transethnic cultural studies challenge Anglo-America’s protected status as the exclusive holder of cultural and literary value” (p. xi).

Within the existing literature on Mexican Americans and immigrating Mexicans settling in the United States, I have found very little research on the sociocultural influences of music and the arts and how these traditions are carried on in their lives as well as their
children’s. I have investigated Mexican musical culture in order to determine the aspects that are a crucial part of their transnational journey and to ascertain what if any impact these cultural influences have had on them in their transition. Is learning through the musical arts a significant part of this metamorphosis and of shifting identity? And if so, how does this occur? These questions focus on culture as practice, taking into account the multiple dimensions of the experiential processes (inclusive of practices, strategies, and adaptations) encompassed in its usage. A discussion of the varied uses and construct of culture is explored further in Chapter 3.

A shared cultural heritage as expressed in music and dance provides opportunities for participation. Musical culture as a social activity can be a force in shaping and reshaping cultures and societies. An example of this force in action is the preservation of Cueca folk dance traditions that contributed to reclaiming the culture of Chilean immigrants in Norway (Knudsen, 2001) previously mentioned in Chapter 1. My research brings to light how participants in the current study of Mexican folkloric music and dance, like the Chileans with Cueca, were drawn to this musical culture as a way of learning about and connecting to Mexican identity.

The Role of Community Organizations in Fostering Cultural and Social Capital

Implicit knowledge embodied in Mexican folkloric music and dance (fólklorico) is transmitted to the new community through the Nochtłaca Dance Company, an outside-of-school community organization. As ethnomusicologist Jane Sugarman (1997) points out, “[t]he implicit status of many community understandings most certainly accounts for the inability of individuals to verbalize about certain aspects of musical practice” (p. 30). Knowing the history of one’s own sociocultural heritage is highly valuable as it lends to
conscious awareness a way of being in the world. How do members of particular cultural communities come to know what is known? “This requires an attention to practice: that is, to the ways that individuals learn of aspects of social life and then draw upon their understandings to formulate their actions” (Sugarman, p. 30). Making explicit the inherent knowledge of the ethnic musical culture within the community can be a source of empowerment and self-knowledge at the individual level and collectively.

The Nochtla Dance Company has taken on the role of conveying Mexican culture and sensibilities to Mexican-American youth. Cultural practices and strategies can stimulate agency giving rise to power and “all forms of power require legitimation” (Swartz, 1997, p. 89). The dance company’s instructors and administrators have all negotiated their way through and around the American dominant culture. Through the action of building a school for Mexican musical culture, feelings of pride in upholding this heritage and associated practices can be shared and passed along. While contributing in this manner, at the same time, some of the company’s members who recalled the shame they had at times experienced as Mexican Americans in various contexts and regions in the U.S., felt that advancing Mexican folkloric music and dance in the New York area could guard against this new generation of children experiencing such shame. These motivating factors underlie the work they carry out. By offering Mexican dance classes, company members have afforded the children of New York’s Mexican community opportunities to enhance a sense of Mexicanness in their day-to-day lives as well as in their interactions within American society. In this way, the Nochtla Dance Company acts as a cultural producer within the New York metropolitan region and its Mexican population. As David Swartz (1997) has noted, the role of cultural producers is key “in legitimating the social
order by producing symbolic capital through symbolic labor” (pp. 93-4). As Swartz put it, “[c]ultural producers mediate the relationship between culture and class, between infrastructure and superstructure, by constituting cultural markets, or fields, that are vested with their own particular interests” (p. 94).

Pierre Bourdieu’s research on social class as a site of dominance, subordination, and symbolic violence can be applied to the cultural levels —dominant American-ness and dominated Mexican-ness— of concern to the Nochtla Dance Company. In this context, cultural levels can be seen, like Bourdieu’s social classes and status groups, as sites of lifestyle collectivity. Competence in social interaction and performance within and between levels of culture constitutes cultural capital. There is little doubt that the interface of cultures has contributed to the history and progress of humankind and “intermingling inevitably comes from human movement and migration” (LaFromboise, Coleman, & Gerton, 1993, p. 395).

**Bounded Space or Negotiated Boundaries? – Considering Multiple Identities**

Sociologists as well as other social scientists broadly acknowledge “the premise that culture cannot be ignored in studies of stratification” (Lareau & Weininger, 2003, p. 598). When cultural capital becomes divided between dominant “highbrow” culture and non-dominant cultural activities, the cultural arena becomes a space of symbolic violence. Within this framework, there is a high degree of expectation that all immigrant groups will assimilate into the dominant American culture. “In using the term ‘symbolic violence’ Bourdieu stresses how the dominated accept as legitimate their own condition of domination” (Swartz, p. 89). Many immigrant groups attempt to resist the dominant American culture by inculcating their youth with perspectives, values, and lifestyles from
the cultural origin of the homeland. The Nochtlaca Dance Company is no exception. The
dance company holds performances and classes to instill *mexicanidad* (Mexicanness)
within Mexican-American youth. While this may be seen by some as a power struggle
between two cultures—one dominant and one subordinate—it can also be seen as the
development of multiple identities within the youth. The Nochtlaca Dance Company’s
desire to instill a positive sense of Mexicanness in the children they teach can be
considered in an alternate theoretical frame than one opposing American cultural
domination. *It is possible to hold more than one identity at a time.* An alternative viewpoint
is one that says multiple identities offer more richness and complexity than a singular or
uniform identity, and that the tendency to take on more than one identity adds to an
individual’s social and cultural capital. In this view, multiple identities can be seen as
positive and various, rather than set within a context of dominance and subordination.

Carola Suárez-Orozco and Irina Todorova (2003) address the fact that recent
research on immigrant youth has mostly considered educational outcomes acknowledging
that they can often be “important predictor[s] of adjustment to a new society.” They also
note, however, that “[m]uch of this research pays particularly close attention to such
domains as second language acquisition and bilingualism [...] little work [...] systematically
considers the multiple social worlds in which immigrant youth develop” (pp. 5-6).

Discourse on research of second-culture acquisition suggests five different models,
which Teresa LaFromboise, Hardin Coleman, and Jennifer Gerton (1993) find “are not
mutually exclusive” (p. 401). The five models that are focused on in their review are:
assimilation, acculturation, alternation, multicultural and fusion presenting a hypothetical
model referred to as *bicultural competence*. This concept is supportive of the notion that
the practices within one culture do not as a rule cancel out the practices of another culture. Out of the five models they discuss, the alternation model shows that "it is possible to maintain a positive relationship with both cultures without having to choose between them" (p. 399).

A question then arises: Is it possible to maintain distinction through difference without being entrapped in a bounded social collective perceived as subordinate? What would constitute cultural competence in a social space that allows for more fluid boundaries? If cultural competence can be seen as a "multilevel continuum of social skill" then it becomes possible that "the more levels in which one is competent, the fewer problems an individual will have functioning effectively within two [or more] cultures" (LaFromboise et al., p. 396). The dominant interpretation of cultural capital has been "assumed to denote knowledge of or competence with 'highbrow' aesthetic culture (such as fine art and classical music)" (Lareau & Weininger, 2003, p. 568). Nonetheless, Annette Lareau and Elliott B. Weininger have considered "a broader conception of cultural capital" (p. 569) and that "competence in highbrow aesthetic culture becomes merely one empirical possibility among many others" (p. 586). Although discourse within the social science community has noted a distinction between dominant and non-dominant forms of cultural capital, much of the theoretical literature overlooks the aspect of a non-dominant form (Carter, 2003, p. 137). As Prudence Carter has addressed, "Cultural capital is context-specific and its currency varies across different social spaces where struggles for legitimation and power exist" (p. 137). A broader definition of cultural capital can contribute to further understanding "not only how myriad cultural resources convert into capital within the wider society, but also how this occurs in lower status communities"
Bourdieu draws substantially on “French structuralism and its linguistic model in formulating his sociology of symbolic forms” (Swartz, 1997, p. 84). As Swartz describes, “Bourdieu posits that the fundamental logic of symbolic processes and systems, beginning with the language itself, is one of establishing differences and distinctions in the form of binary oppositions” (p. 84). As such “these paired oppositions are shared by all, are social in origin, and are used to enhance power relations in social life” (p. 85). Bourdieu’s work reframes the oppositional forces at play in the whole of the social order “reveal[ing] this ‘deep structure’ of domination and subordination in social life” (p. 85).

Through social interaction we become acquainted with one another and this can lead to networking and the formation of alliances; all are forms of social capital. The Nochtlaca community-based organization provides opportunities for people with shared cultural interests and ethnic values to connect with one another thereby reinforcing a shared identity and creating a ‘comfort zone’ within the society at large. In this manner, the Nochtlaca Dance organization becomes a meeting ground.

The capacity to convey perspectives and gain an enhanced sense of self could increase if immigrant communities better knew the impact of their history within a larger scope not only of the United States but within world history. The messages passed on to children in discussions of their own histories and culture at home as well as in their communities do not match information from the North American school curriculum. The seminal work of the twentieth-century Mexican-American scholar, Américo Paredes and his ground-breaking study of Mexican-American folklore is a substantial contribution that “make[s] powerful additions to the ongoing critical revision of the heretofore unquestioned
prerogatives of the entire narrative of American cultural nationalism" (Saldívar as quoted in Paredes, 1994, p. xi). Instead of learning about the revolutionary Plan of San Diego (1914-15) in South Texas, which was a "plot for a full-blown rebellion against American imperial domination of former Mexican territories" (Paredes, p. xiii), the history of Mexicans' struggles in the United States are lost to Mexican students and others. In schools, they never hear about the oral histories from students' cultural communities.

[The stories] told by the old men must compete with other official histories of revolutionary resistance that the children are learning from their books in their American schools: stories not about the Plan of San Diego but about George Washington... and Marion the Fox and the British cavalry that chased him up and down the broad Santee (Paredes, p. xviii).

If educational institutions were to include histories of Mexicans and other Latino groups (or histories of other ethnic groups for that matter), what would such a curriculum look like? Who would determine the contents, how would it be taught, and who would be deemed qualified to teach it?

The function of learning Mexican folkloric dance for children, and by extension the larger community, promotes symbolic capital. “Symbolic capital is a form of power that is not perceived as power but as legitimate demands for recognition, deference, obedience, or the services of others” (Swartz, 1997, p. 90). Self-interest exists in all practices seeking to garner legitimation, which is often “misrecognized.” The concept of misrecognition is key for Bourdieu and can be equated with the Marxist idea of “false consciousness” (p. 43). “Misrecognition denotes ‘denial’ of the economic and political interests in a set of practices" (p. 43). Participation in the dance is an act of engaging in symbolic violence in the struggle against U.S. cultural imperialism. Therefore, when the parents bring their children to the dance classes weekly, they do so in the hopes of equipping them with the necessary
cultural capital to succeed in life and to continue on the path carved by their ancestry made manifest in the present time. Reinforcing cultural roots can help in the successful transition to the new society. In so doing, social bonding develops; building connections with others of like mind and the sharing of values contributes to social capital, simultaneously increasing economic potential through these developing networks. Applying Bourdieu’s theory, Swartz (1997) has recognized “[t]he purely economic cannot express itself autonomously but must be converted into symbolic form. There is, therefore, ‘symbolic power’ as well as material or economic power” (p. 90).

**The Question of Diversity in the United States**

The uniqueness of our society, particularly urban centers, is precisely the undeniable reality of a broadly diverse population with varied backgrounds. Acceptance of the wide range of people from various countries in our educational institutions would allow curricula to be more relevant to student learning. The use of stories, songs, and other elements contributing to cultural continuity and related to children’s own ethnic backgrounds engender very basic human connections. Rather than embracing diversity, opportunities for sharing children’s various histories are scarcely considered. What then are the educational expectations of these children who live between two or more cultures? Upon entering the terrain of the U.S. school system one encounters an environment with an “implicit purpose [to] conserv[e] the social and economic status quo through the perpetuation of institutional values and relationships that safeguard dominant power structures” (Darder, 1991, p. 4). What becomes of children under such conditions?

**Academic failure for non-mainstream children is a complex problem with no easy solution nor a single approach. Guadalupe Valdés (1996) examines multiple factors,**
including culture and class, in order to shed light on the academic failure of children of Mexican origin. She notes that “programs that have endeavored to alter or reverse educational outcomes for poor, disadvantaged, or at-risk children have reflected the thinking of theorists who have worked within the deficit-difference paradigm [resulting in] narrow solutions to far broader problems” (p. 29). Highly aware of the perception of deficit regarding working-class and poor Mexican communities, the Funds of Knowledge project, previously discussed in Chapter 1, sought to alter these perceptions by documenting the strengths and resources of the knowledge held within their households (González, Moll, & Amanti, 2005). It provides a creative alternative to the deficit-difference paradigm.

**Family Relationships, Cultural Continuity and Educational Institutions**

Skills and knowledge, situated within a group of people and practiced in their everyday lives, continue to be cultivated and circulated at the institutional level of family. The centrality of family matters is paramount for Latino families. It is of interest to note that while the family in Latin America holds a place of supreme importance both historically and presently, Elizabeth Kuznesof (2005) identified a notable absence of children and childhood in the literature. She reasons, “One possible explanation for the neglect of childhood as a topic by Latin American historians is that colonial Spanish and Portuguese law codes determined that the care and nurturing of children were private functions, and fell into the corporate sphere of the family” (p. 859). Tradition and family, particularly women as culture bearers, are crucial to the continuance of the native language and culture of the homeland. “There is an intimate relationship between the successful adaptation of the entire Mexican family to North America and children’s academic success [...] If children manage to retain a strong cultural self-identity and maintain a sense of belonging to their
sociocultural community, they seem to achieve well in school” (Trueba, 1998, p. 260).

The debate still continues concerning educational reform and the best practices for educating very young children. Barbara Beatty (1995) asks the question, “To what extent does modern American society value the culture of young children?” (p. xiii). From the late eighteenth into the nineteenth century, questions arose concerning whether the responsibility of educating young children should be a concern of the public or private domain (Beatty, 1995). Preschool experiences are said to support cognitive and social enrichment for early childhood development (Lunenburg, 2000) and attendance in appropriate preschool programs has been an indicator of future academic success. The aim of preschool experiences is to enable children to transition successfully to school and reduce the likelihood of poor school adjustment outcomes such as school failure, unemployment, and poverty (Lunenburg, 2000).

Data reveal inequities exist, however, with regard to adequate preschool centers across socioeconomic levels and ethnic groups (Fuller, 2007). Many preschool centers are deficient in offering a rich learning environment that includes music and the broader arts. Many music educators, as well as others in the field of learning, are convinced that the musical arts, used effectively, have been a way for students to look at and compare their individual histories and cultures. Nevertheless, in her research on music in early childhood programs, Carol Scott-Kassner (1999) frequently found no music curriculum or planned music lessons in the classrooms she observed. Patricia Campbell’s examination of the place music holds in children’s lives uses first-hand accounts of children’s thoughts and ways of valuing music in their lives. She observes, “They socialize, vent emotions, and entertain themselves through music” (2000b, p. 32).
Writing on the political and cultural struggle over early education today, Bruce Fuller (2007) notes that Latino families rely on means other than daycare in raising their young children. He considers an important point about cultural assimilation and questions “whether institutions of early learning should act to advance forms of knowledge, language, and social behavior that are valued by reformers, but still feel rather foreign to parents and their local communities” (p. 230). Valdés comments on the U.S. Department of Education publication *What Works* (1987), which discusses ways to increase parental involvement and includes a list of activities and recommendations in support of children’s educational success, saying, “this seemingly innocuous statement [makes assumptions] about how families should live their lives” (1996, p. 33).

The way in which formal education is regarded within one’s own cultural group can hold sway, shaping children’s attitudes toward its meaning and value accordingly. John Ogbu (1992) points out:

The relationship between the minority culture/languages and the mainstream culture and language is different for different minorities. And it is this difference in the relationship that is problematic in the ability of the minorities to cross cultural and language boundaries and that calls for understanding in order to enhance the success of intervention and other efforts (p. 7).

Parents from all ethnic backgrounds want their children to succeed. In her study on Mexican-origin families and schools, Valdés found across the board the views expressed by the parents she interviewed were very positive toward education (p. 152). While interviewing David in my study we touched on the subject of education:

The middle class, uh, the lower middle class where I come from, everybody pushes — “you have to go to school, you have to go to school.” You know that’s the only way you’re going to get somewhere (2010).
For Mexicans, the concept of *educación* (education) encompasses academic learning along with a high importance given to non-academic moral training inclusive of understanding right and wrong, good manners, and respect for other people. Reciprocity among family and friends is valued and cultivated (Browning-Aiken, 2005, pp. 172-73).

In the Mexican community, music and dance are not extraneous to learning but are a core part of personal and social development, a means of imparting social skills. The relationship between education and the economy has been well researched. For many immigrants, their “relative lack of progress in the U.S. economy is ironic given that most came to the United States with a firm belief in the American Dream of equal opportunity and individual advancement” (Massey, 2010, p. 243). As Douglas Massey has found, “the construction of identity in the United States [has] had more to do with what happened to [immigrants] after they arrived in the country” (p. 244).

**Identity, Otherness, and Opportunity in the U.S.**

The idea of equal opportunity in a democratic society is one that ideally celebrates and embraces human diversity in a polycultural society. Words and phrases that conjure images can be powerful signifiers. In our own nation’s history the wide circulation and use of a formulaic phrase “to define its cohesion and historical purpose [has been] the ‘Melting Pot’” (Luedtke, 1979, p. 3). Luther Luedtke suggests that the “loose and imprecise” usage of the term often “evokes a painless blurring of differences” (p. 3). He examines a “collateral phrase” which is lesser known, the ‘Smelting Pot’ coined by Ralph Waldo Emerson (p. 3).

The difference between the word ‘melt’ and ‘smelt’ is substantial and a matter worthy of consideration. According to Merriam Webster, ‘melt’ is defined as “loss of outline or distinctness,” whereas, ‘smelt’ implies fusion with an accompanying chemical change. In
the case of melt, it is the state of matter that changes, wherein the process of smelting separates impurities from the substance producing an actual change of composition and metal of a higher grade. In its early usage, a theatrical play in 1908 by Israel Zangwill entitled *The Melting Pot* portrayed the New World “not only as an asylum but also a divine crucible which would fuse the peoples and customs of the world into a new humanity to carry forward the civilizing, and spiritualizing, of the world” (Luedtke, 1979, pp. 5-6). The use of the term ‘Smelting Pot’ connected two areas of exceptional interest to Emerson: race and natural science. In an expression of disdain for the politics of racist elitism, which moved him toward an egalitarian cosmopolitanism, he wrote:

> I hate the narrowness of the Native American party. It is a dog in the manger. It is precisely opposite to all the dictates of love and magnanimity: and therefore, of course, the opposite of wisdom. It is the result of science that the highest simplicity of structure is produced, not by few elements, but by the highest complexity. Man is the most composite of all creatures (Emerson in Tharaud (Ed.), 2010, p. 533).

The construction of ‘other’ comes about from a way of perceiving awareness of self or as Tzvetan Todorov (1999) states, “the discovery *self* makes of the *other*” (p. 3). ‘Other’ then is “other in relation to myself, to *me*; or else as a specific social group to which *we* do not belong” (p. 3) [Italics in original]. How can we conceptualize difference without becoming mired in the morass of misperceptions and misrepresentations of ‘other’ that have been perpetrated through the lens of Western imperialism? Linda Tuhiwai Smith (2012) has identified research as “a significant site of struggle between the interests and ways of knowing of the West and the interests and ways of resisting of the Other” (p. 2). Expanding our lens on the social, historical, political, and economic contexts and their interplay becomes imperative if we are to find alternative and more useful approaches that support humanity and move us toward a more holistic education.
Immigrants and Education: Relevant Background

The story of the immigrant is as varied as the number of people who seek a new and different way of life. In the last third of the 20th century immigration to the U.S. has again been on the rise (Portes & Rumbaut, 2001); this trend has continued into the 21st century. Immigrants and their children now constitute approximately 12% of the total American population (U.S. Census, 2010). From its very beginnings, United States history has been characterized by the changes brought about by immigrants coming to its shores from distant lands. Over the years, the dynamics of the ever-shifting population of U.S. inhabitants have resulted in the emergence of conflicts regarding schooling and the aim of the dominant culture of aligning the nation’s inhabitants with Anglo-Saxon culture. Richard Alba and Victor Nee (2003) probe questions regarding differences of national origin and cultural backgrounds in the current wave of immigrants. Do these differences “negate in a fundamental manner the assimilation pattern experienced by earlier European and East Asian groups?” (p. ix). According to Alba and Nee, many in the social science community and others seem to believe this is so:

argu[ing] that today’s immigrant populations face an essentially novel predicament: either they maintain their cultural and communal distinctiveness, thus selectively acculturating while keeping some distance from the mainstream, or they will be forced into the position of racial minorities, imposing great disadvantages on themselves and their children (p. x).

In the early twentieth century, questions surfaced as to how to teach immigrants of various European backgrounds in order for them to adapt to an American way of life. The work of Jane Addams with predominantly European immigrant children at Hull House in the late eighteen and early nineteen hundreds, stressed the importance of the arts and opportunities for children “to use [their] hands with ease and pleasure, not upon the
narrow basis of fitting [them] for factory life [...] but in order to retain that power of unfolding human life which is implicit in the play instinct” (2002, p. 421). As Johan Huizinga observes, “pure play is one of the main bases of civilization” (1955, p. 5).

Today in the twenty-first century, we have yet a different population of immigrants whose needs are quite distinct from those who immigrated at an earlier time. The newest wave of immigration, which began in the 1980s, is the largest group of immigrants since 1910 (Portes & Rumbaut, 2006). The great diversity of immigrants coming into the country, largely from the developing societies of Asia, Latin America and the Caribbean Basin (Alba & Nee, 2003, p. ix), is once again shifting the racial and ethnic makeup of the U.S. population. The changing population of this country will shape its future direction. Our system of education has been inadequate in serving the needs of this new and different wave of immigrants. Alejandro Portes and Rubén Rumbaut (2001) comment, “Whether this new ethnic mosaic reinvigorates the nation or catalyzes a quantum leap in its social problems depends on the forms of social and economic adaptation experienced by this still young population” (p. xvii). Undoubtedly, appropriate educational environments and curricula suited to the needs of this very diverse burgeoning population is a serious issue.

**Transnationalism: Bridging the Great Divide**

One of the largest minority populations in the United States is now comprised of Latinos whose numbers are quickly multiplying due to “immigration and higher fertility” (Alba, 2009, p. 5). Alba (2009) notes that the projections of the 2008 U.S. Census Bureau indicate that the Latino presence “could account for nearly one of every three Americans by the middle of the century” (p. 5). Right now, 10% of Mexico’s population is living in the United States, which takes into account more than 30% of the U.S. foreign-born population (Dreby,
The relationship between the United States and Mexico is complex, with a shared border of 2,000 miles between the countries, which as Alexandra Délano (2011) points out, has “determined the existence of an exceptional bilateral relationship between these nations” (p. 27). According to Délano’s research, “In 2009, Mexico was the third most important trading partner for the United States after Canada and China, and the United States is Mexico’s main market for exports and suppliers of imports, with an estimated total turnover of trade of $305 billion dollars in 2009” (p. 27).

Despite the fact that the largest population of Americans living abroad is in Mexico and 98% of Mexican migrants are in the United States (Délano, p. 27), the border between the two nations has often separated Mexican families. The noted Chicana activist writer Gloria Anzaldúa describes the U.S.- Mexican border as an open wound: “[E]s una herida abierta where the third world grates against the first and bleeds. And before a scab forms it hemorrhages again, the lifeblood of two worlds merging to form a third country—a border culture” (2007, p. 25).

There is a growing body of literature related to border issues; references to “the militarization of the border” frequently appear in discourse of the U.S.-Mexico border and borderlands (Lugo, 2000). Alejandro Lugo makes the point that “concepts of ‘borderlands’, ‘border crossings’, and ‘the border’ are not synonymous” (p. 356). The simple act of crossing the border has been conflated with the more problematic issue of border inspections and border patrol. Anzaldúa (2007), a pioneer of border theorizing, distinguishes between ‘borders’ and ‘borderland’:

Borders are set up to define the places that are safe and unsafe, to distinguish us from them. A border is a dividing line, a narrow strip along a steep edge. A
borderland is a vague and undetermined place created by the emotional residue of an unnatural boundary. It is in a constant state of transition. The prohibited and the forbidden are its inhabitants. (Anzaldúa, p. 25).

Joanna Dreby (2010) has contributed to our understanding of the problems caused by the distance between parents and children. Her work focuses on the separation of families due to current policies that have made it increasingly difficult for Mexicans to cross the border between the United States and Mexico. Dreby notes, “Divided by borders and by the lifestyle differences involved in such separations, Mexican migrants and their children find ways to make their relationships with each other meaningful. These efforts are not easy” (pp. ix-x).

In years past, families lived on both sides of the border and went back and forth as part of their daily lives; it was not so problematic. When I interviewed David, the artistic director and co-founder of Nochtłaca Dance Company, who was born in a Mexican border town of a Mexican father and an American mother (from Kentucky), he shared some of his early experiences while growing up in Juárez, Chihuahua. We talked about the shared border between Mexico and the U.S. and his experiences crossing over into Texas:

David: I mean it’s a border town, so you cross… and we crossed to do some shopping, we crossed to see movies every once in awhile...

Pamela: And, there weren’t the issues with crossing that there are now?

David: No, I mean there was always a border—I remember always crossing the El Puente, you know, the bridge and you say something: Hi, how are you? I’m an American citizen...
because we were American citizens because my mother was an American citizen (2010).

Justo, another of the Nochtla Dance company co-founders, grew up on the U.S. side of the border in El Paso, Texas. His experiences reflect crossing from the U.S. side into Mexico. On a weekly basis they would visit their family members who lived in the Juárez region in northern Mexico.

*Justo:* Growing up on the border you don’t... I didn’t realize it until I left, but you really don’t— you get a really clear sense of what is Mexico and what’s the United States and I had never— until I left El Paso— realized that the border isn’t... the Mexican border area isn’t all of Mexico. My impression was that all of Mexico was like the border area.

He and his family routinely crossed the border, as he put it “legally”, and the extreme tensions that exist today were not so prevalent then. The border police, however, were still a presence.

*Justo:* I would go jogging along the irrigation canal with a friend of mine, and we would always be stopped by immigration... After awhile they get to know you.

In New York City, thousands of miles away from the U.S. Mexican border, it is easy to distance oneself from how living in the border areas of both countries colors one’s experience of life.
Justo: Well...you know, when you live on the border you see it all the time. Even now, you know, like two weeks ago my brother told me about somebody... Somebody broke the fence because they were running away from immigration. We literally live a mile away from the Rio Bravo [As referred to in Mexico and known as the Rio Grande in the U.S.](2010).

Difficulties surrounding border issues have increased and led to more Mexicans staying in the United States. Consequently, increasing numbers of Mexican immigrants are settling in places where there previously were few. In the past twenty-five years, we have witnessed for the first time an ebbing of the circular pattern of Mexican migration (Dreby, p. 7). Although policies in the United States developed with the aim of controlling the flow of illegal immigrants coming for work, they have not succeeded. Dreby observes, “Mexicans continue to come north, and they are not returning home as they used to” (p. 8).

As a result of tighter border control, the New York metropolitan area is one destination that has seen a great increase of Mexicans over the past 15 to 20 years making them one of the fastest growing ethnic groups in New York City. According to Arlene Dávila (2004), Mexican immigration to New York City was evident as early as the 1940s, however, “[...] it was only from the 1980s onward that immigration peaked, making Mexicans a relatively large chapter in the new Latino immigration to the city” (p. 156). As Robert Smith (2003) points out, “Census experts estimate that Mexicans will soon become the largest Latino minority on the East Coast” (p. 94). Although there is an extensive body of research literature on Mexicans who settled in the United States in California and Texas, and other
regions such as areas in the Southwest, little documentation is available on Mexicans in New York City. Much of the existing data have been gathered primarily in Texas and California where there have long been a high percentage of Mexicans.

The formal history of the United States taught in many of our schools has for the most part obliterated the role of Mexicans. Some of the lived history of Mexicans, however, has been established through a rich oral tradition included in Mexican ballads. Maria Herrera-Sobek (1993) explains, “One of the oldest forms of recording historical events is oral poetry: epic saga, romance, ballad. It is in this tradition that the Mexican immigrant folksong anchors its historical roots” (p. xix). Herrera-Sobek tells us that all of the historical periods of Mexican immigration are recorded in Mexican corridos and canciones.¹ “In these lyrics one detects the varied emotions of men and women who leave their country for a foreign land. [...] We come to know the immigrant as a multidimensional, true-to-life individual, not a stereotypical, abstract entity” (Herrera-Sobek, p. xxii). The following is an excerpt from a corrido, (a narrative folk ballad):

**El emigrante (The Emigrant)**

\[\begin{align*}
A\  México\ yo\ le\ canto & \quad I\ sing\ to\ Mexico \\
con\ mucho\ gusto\ y\ [afán] & \quad With\ great\ joy\ and\ eagerness \\
aunque\ yo\ esté\ de\ este\ lado & \quad Even\ though\ I\ am\ on\ this\ other\ side \\
no\ importa\ que\ esté\ legal & \quad I\ don't\ care\ if\ I\ am\ a\ legal\ resident \\
de\ mi\ tierra\ no\ me\ olvido & \quad I\ do\ not\ forget\ my\ land \\
siempre\ la\ iré\ a\ visitar. & \quad I\ will\ always\ go\ visit\ it.
\end{align*}\]

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Yo\ les\ digo\ a\ mis\ amigos</th>
<th>I\ tell\ my\ friends</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>no\ olvidemos\ nuestra\ tierra</td>
<td>Let\ us\ not\ forget\ our\ country</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

¹ Most experts agree that the roots of the corrido [a type of Spanish villancico] can be traced to the romance ballads brought from Spain during the Conquest in the soldiers’ musical repertoire (Herrera-Sobek 1993, p. xxii). In contrast, the term canción, (equivalent to the word song in English) designates “any musical composition that has words in it […] Basically the canción differs from the corrido in that the latter is characterized by its narrative content. [M]ost corridos tell a story. The canción, on the other hand, tends to be more sentimental and lyrical (as opposed to epic) leaning toward topics of love and loss of love” […] Both corridos and canciones may incorporate immigration as a central theme (1993, pp. xxiv-v).
allá fue donde nacimos
no hay que avergonzarnos d’ella
y siempre que recordarla

That is where we were born
Let us not be ashamed of it
And always keep it in mind
Because our country is beautiful.

Children who cross the border must make numerous changes in the course of adapting to a new home, culture, and society. Lisa García Bedolla (2005) discusses “internal migration” referring to it as “an ongoing process of psychological, social, and cultural accommodation undertaken by immigrants and their children” (p. 1). Mexico remains in the hearts, thoughts, and souls of immigrants along with the wish that their children in this new land will be able to inhabit the spirit of Mexico even if not living on that land itself. “Mexicans dream the vision of green land in the crowded apartment complexes of one of the largest cities in the world, in mountain villages, and the squatters’ camps that house the assembly plant workers along the northern border” (Shorris, 2004, p. 8). The transmission of Mexican arts and culture are vital to maintaining tradition and can also trigger the invention of new forms as adaptive strategies.

Treatment of Mexican Immigrants and Their Children in the U.S. Educational System

Although the history of Mexican migration has long been entwined with the history of the United States, only very recently have significant numbers of Mexicans come to the New York metropolitan area. It is estimated that over a half million people of Mexican origin are in New York (Smith, 2006), and they are the fastest growing immigrant group in the New York City area. A pressing need, therefore, exists for research that is concerned with the circumstances, conditions and way of life of Mexican immigrants and their children in the New York City area. Marcelo Suárez-Orozco (1998) observes, “Perhaps no other issue is in
more urgent need of serious scholarship than the children of immigrants. In the area of
children, the research is quite scarce” [my emphasis] (p. 418).

On a national level, with the surge in migration from Mexico to the United States in
recent years, comes a sharp growth in the number of Mexican children entering U.S. public
schools (Cortina, 2003). Regina Cortina points out, “In many cities the sudden growth in the
number of Mexican-born children, and their American-born siblings, has resulted in
uncertainty about who these children are and how to educate them” (p. 9). Many issues
have existed and are ongoing regarding the education of children of Mexican origin in U.S.
schools. “Although much research has been done to further understanding of the issues
facing Hispanic Americans in schools, many areas of the problem remain virtually
unexplored” (Suárez-Orozco, 1991, p. 37). Research related to the educational conditions
for Mexican-origin children has looked at segregation, attrition, school finance, language
and bilingual education, and testing (Valdés, 1996, p. 15). My study explores an area that
we heretofore have known little about. The overwhelming dominance of Mexicans among
Latino immigrants in the United States and their escalating presence in New York, and
particularly in urban communities in general, makes the educational needs of native
Mexicans and their U.S. descendants an urgent and practical concern.

Mexicans have been crossing borders “since the seventeenth and eighteenth
centuries when their involvement in the initial colonization of the Southwest began”
(Herrera-Sobek, p. xxii). A history of migration between Mexico and the United States has
existed since the signing of the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo after the United States-
Mexican War in 1848. It was then that the international boundary between the two
countries was set at the Rio Grande (Herrera-Sobek, p. xix). Nearly half of Mexico’s territory
was surrendered to the United States along with about one percent of its population (Délano, 2011, p. 59). As a result of the treaty, Mexicans living in those territories that had been acquired by the United States were given the option to return to Mexico or become U.S. citizens (Délano, 2011). In accordance with the new treaty:

[R]esident Mexicans [had] the option of returning to Mexico or declaring themselves permanent resident aliens in the United States. If they chose neither option within one year, they would become American citizens with, according to the treaty, ‘all the rights of citizens.’ These new citizens and their descendants were commonly referred to as Californios (Strum, 2010, p. 4).

For a thirty-year period, which began in 1876, Mexico’s dominant ruler was Porfirio Díaz. Under his presidential regime, industry and modernity expanded at the expense of human rights. As Philippa Strum (2010) states:

His administration sought to better Mexico’s economy by encouraging foreign investment, the commercialization of agriculture, and the fashioning of large haciendas (ranches or farms) capable of producing exportable crops. The haciendas were created by seizing what had been communal lands, and as many as 5 million Mexicans soon found themselves landless [....] The Mexican Revolution, which began in 1910, was in large part a reaction to the Díaz regime (p. 5).

Over the next ten years, the civil war took its toll perpetrating massive upheaval and causing the deaths of hundreds of thousands in Mexico (Strum, p. 5). The Revolution was responsible for a ten-year period of instability and violence resulting in inflation, starvation, and unemployment. Mexicans were devoid of personal security forcing 10% of the Mexican population to migrate northward to the U.S. (Aldama, 2001). “By 1910 over 100 million acres of Mexican land were under American control, resulting in mass displacements of indigenous campesinas/os communities and families” (Aldama, p. 56).

The early 1900s saw a great influx of immigrants to the United States. During this era those Mexicans who had been displaced from their lands as a result of actions taken
under Díaz’s rule began coming to the U.S. in larger numbers. The expansion of the railroad into the “American West” brought about an increased need for laborers. The turmoil of ten years of war in Mexico was the economic push to leave their homeland and the pull was the emergence of a developing economy in the post-American Civil War period. U.S. agribusinesses with an increasing demand for laborers were now turning to Mexicans as a cheap supply of workers (Strum, 2010). “Mexicans would replace Chinese and Japanese farmhands and layers of railroad tracks” (p. 5).

When the United States entered into World War II, large numbers of the country’s men went off to war leaving a gap in manpower and jobs needing to be filled. During the years of 1942-1964, bilateral agreements between Mexico and the United States brought about the Bracero Program, which organized the supervision of labor contracting of Mexican emigrants to the United States. This was a critical period in the migration history of the United States and Mexico since, as Délano explains, “the structure of the migratory flows was consolidated during these years and the governments’ policies for managing the flows began to be defined more clearly” (p. 83). It was the first time common rules between the two governments were established from both sides to administer the hiring of Mexican laborers in the United States (Délano, p. 83). An awareness of discrimination on the part of the Mexican government led to the inclusion of a clause in the agreement, which stated, “Mexicans entering the United States as [a] result of this understanding shall not suffer discriminatory acts of any kind” (Strum, p. 33). This, however, would not prove to be the case. The next section describes educational differences stemming from segregation related to social class and ethnic distinction.
The Case of Mendez vs. Westminster: Brown’s Not Black, but Is It White?

A fear exists in American society that largely prevents the inclusion of the histories of other ethnic cultures in our schools’ curriculum. This xenophobic bias calls into question issues regarding our national identity. Mexicans have long been viewed as part of the underclass. In December 2011 at an event sponsored by the Center for Puerto Rican Studies (CENTRO) in New York City, I met Sylvia Méndez who was the featured speaker that evening. I had known a little about the case of Mendez vs. Westminster, but not many of the details. Sylvia recounted that she promised her mother before she died that she would surely share the facts of this historic case as widely as possible. She and her sister have been touring college campuses around the country in order to keep that promise.

Segregation of Mexican children in schools was evidenced in the Southwest as far back as 1892 (UCLA Chicano Studies Research Center, 2004). Many years passed before Mexicans would be heard on this issue in a U.S. court of law. In the 1940s, a group of Mexican American and Mexican parents (who later became U.S. citizens) protested the segregation of their children in separate schools designated for Mexican children (Strum, 2010). Their actions led to the landmark legal case Mendez vs. Westminster preceding Brown vs. Board of Education in 1954 by nearly 10 years. Mendez paved the way for the landmark U.S. Supreme Court decision of school desegregation but is little known and often overlooked in education history. The court case was brought against the Westminster School District in California and three other Orange County School Districts on March 2, 1945 by Mexican and Mexican-American parents who banded together because their children were not allowed to attend the Anglo schools (UCLA, 2004). The Mexican-American children were sent to “Mexican schools” which had inadequate or unsafe
conditions and were often located in buildings of inferior construction (UCLA, 2004). Carey McWilliams, a lawyer activist writing on Mexican-American history described the Anglo Westminster School as “handsomely equipped,” and having “green lawns and shrubs” while the ‘Mexican’ Hoover School had “meager equipment match[ing] the inelegance of its surroundings” (Carey McWilliams quoted by Strum, p. 35).

It would take the courage and actions of Gonzalo Méndez, who was born in Mexico in 1913 in the state of Chihuahua, to bring about change in these conditions. Following his brother who was under threat from Pancho Villa’s regime in Mexico, Gonzalo migrated with his family to Westminster, California in 1919. Young Gonzalo attended the Westminster Main School as did other Mexican and Anglo children in the school district (Strum, p. 35). Méndez continued his studies at the Westminster school until he reached the fifth grade (by 1927 or 1928) when the family’s financial situation made it necessary for him to work in order to contribute to the family’s funds (p. 35). He worked in citrus groves as a field hand whereupon he met Felipe Gómez, who had migrated from Puerto Rico, and his daughter, Felícitas, who he would later marry. Their marriage and Felícitas Gomez’s status as a U.S. citizen would eventually enable him to become an American citizen; he was naturalized two years before the Mendez trial in 1945. Some years after they were married in 1935, they opened a café in Santa Ana’s Mexican barrio.

During the early years of World War II, they prospered enough to be able to buy three houses; Gonzalo, however, wanted to try his hand at running his own farm (Strum, p. 36). “[I]n 1943 their banker told them about the Munemitsu’s, a Japanese-American family [who owned a farm in Westminster and] had been ‘relocated’ to an internment camp” (p. 36). Without tenants on their land, the Munemitsu’s were aware that Japanese-
American farm owners were apt “to lose possession of their untenanted farms and find it difficult if not impossible to reclaim them” (p. 36). A lease agreement was drawn up between the two families allowing Gonzalo and Felícitas to tend their Westminster farm until the Munemitsu¬s were able to return (p. 36). Gonzalo and his family made their way back to Westminster. By this time, the Méndezes had three school-aged children: Sylvia, Gonzalo Jr., and Jerome (Strum, 2010). The family spoke both Spanish and English in their home but “in fact, the family spoke more English than Spanish at home” (p. 37). The day came for the children to register for school. Gonzalo’s sister, Soledad Vidaurri, took the three Méndez children along with two of her own to the same Westminster Main School that Gonzalo had attended some years ago. Gonzalo had not realized the extent to which “segregationist attitudes had hardened, and the separation of Anglo and Mexican-American children was almost total” (p. 37). Soledad was told she could register her two children (who had lighter skin tone than her brother’s three children) but not the three Méndez children. They were outraged upon finding out they would need to bring them “to the Hoover School, which was located in a different school district and whose 152 pupils were all Mexican or Mexican-American [...] Gonzalo went to the Westminster school the day after his children were turned away and spoke to the principal, but his children were still not permitted to register” (Strum, pp. 37-8).

Méndez appealed to the Westminster school board and later the Orange County school board without success. Instead of being discouraged, this blatant injustice fueled the fire of their determination to attain what they believed to be their rights as American citizens. They were introduced to a sympathetic and well-to-do Jewish lawyer, David Marcus, who was the son of immigrant parents, and whose second wife was Mexican born.
His specialization was immigration and criminal law. Marcus had recently won a case on
discrimination against Mexicans and Mexican Americans on the issue of the use of a public
swimming pool in San Bernardino (Strum, 2010). ‘The 1940 census reclassified Mexicans
as white if they were not ‘definitely Indian or of other nonwhite race.’ [ . . . ] Mexicans were
officially not black, nor were they ‘Indians’; they were ‘white’” (p. 10).

At that time, there was a California education law permitting the segregation of
other children from Anglos, but it made no mention of Mexican Americans. Marcus believed
that Méndez’s case would be strengthened if they could prove that segregation of Mexican-
American students was occurring in other Orange County school districts in addition to
Westminster. In order to find this out, a grassroots effort to find and interview parents in
other communities began (p. 41). They did indeed find other situations that paralleled their
own in these communities. Despite their continued efforts to meet with school boards in
order to come to terms to unify the Mexican children with those at Anglo schools,
seemingly no progress was made. It became apparent that litigation against the Board of
Education would become unavoidable. One of the first decisions to be made by Marcus was
whether the Mendez case should be brought to state or federal court.

Because the California education law permitted the segregation of Indian and Asian
students but did not mention Mexican-Americans, Marcus could have argued in
state court that the Orange County educators were violating state law by adding a
group of people without authority. [Were that successful, it] would have left the
door open for California legislators to rewrite the law to include Mexicans. [I]f
Marcus won the case in California state courts, the decision would apply only to
California. It would have no weight in the other southwestern states that segregated
Mexican-American students (Strum, p. 54).

It was ultimately determined in March of 1945 that the case would be filed in
federal district court. Children of Mexican descent were prevented from attending Anglo
schools and were considered to be socially, intellectually, culturally, economically, and
morally inferior. Joel Spring (2005) remarks, “Anglo and Mexican children knew that segregation was intended to separate the superior from the inferior” (p. 230). Mexicans were seen as a means of providing cheap manual labor and education was not viewed as a necessity to develop this labor force. The provision of a separate education for Mexican children was less costly to the Anglo community who saw equal education for these children as a burden to them. It was believed that “segregation served Mexican-American students well” (Strum, p. 111). The argument against the Mexicans was that they were handicapped by their English language deficiency and absences during the crop-picking season. In addition to these controversies was the issue of the Mexican children being characterized as “dirty”; accordingly, they could not be admitted to the main school with the other children since “the three Mexican schools are the only schools that offer shower facilities to the children” (Strum, p. 110).

Seven months after the trial’s end, Judge Paul McCormick rendered his final decision in February 1946 based on a constitutional violation of due process guaranteed by the Fourteenth Amendment (UCLA, 2004). Still later as part of the nation’s civil rights’ movement, many of these issues comprised the debate over federal bilingual educational policy. The Federal Bilingual Education Act (BEA) of 1968 arose out of an activism supporting improved educational opportunities for Mexican Americans (San Miguel, 2004). Guadalupe San Miguel, Jr. (2004) informs us that the proponents of bilingualism “supported perspectives that viewed cultural resurgence as the key to minority academic and socioeconomic success and significant education reform as an instrument of political empowerment” (p. 2). Those opposed to bilingual education were in favor of limited school reform and against inclusion of non-English languages (San Miguel, 2004).
Having provided a bricolage of experiences of Mexicans in the United States and related issues of immigration, the U.S.-Mexican border, segregation and discrimination, especially as those in Texas, the Southwest and California have been affected, a context has been created for understanding the experiences and challenges facing Mexican immigrants to the East Coast. In particular, my research focuses on ways in which Mexicanness (mexicanidad) has been vitalized through the transmission of Mexican music and dance in the classes attended by children in the New York’s metropolitan region.

**The Setting of The Present Study**

The second floor dance studio was in a sturdy, but not particularly inviting, multi-storied commercial building, in Queens, one of the outer boroughs of New York City. It was a short subway-train ride from midtown Manhattan and a short walking distance from the subway station in Queens to the building. Once inside this building, two flights up on the second floor, was where the studio rooms for the Mexican dance classes were to be found, alongside various other classes of dance and the martial arts. The dance company rented two of the available studios for a two-hour block of time on a weekly basis on Saturdays. Mothers, fathers and other family members faithfully accompanied their children every week, climbing the long two flights of stairs often carrying strollers and other provisions for their infants and toddlers, while preschooleers and other siblings attended the dance classes. They came from various regions such as other parts of Queens, Brooklyn, and New Jersey. Some traveled considerable distances to get there; they were not just from the immediate local area.

I was immediately and simultaneously intrigued by, as well as impressed with, the level of engagement the children had in their dance classes. An expressed interest initially
arose from the larger community, which led to the formation of ongoing dance classes. Specifically, several members of the dance company were performing at a school some years ago. After their performance, a parent approached them inquiring if classes were available for her child to learn Mexican dance. This started the ball rolling to offer children’s classes in the community. An initial grant enabled the dance company to be able to offer classes on a sliding payment scale, allowing a family to pay whatever they could afford even if it were only one dollar a year. With the support of the grant, they were able to get the classes underway and attract and increase the number of families coming to the children’s classes to learn Mexican dance. The flexibility of their monetary policy is essentially what has allowed families to be able to afford to bring one or more of their children to the dance studio every week. This policy makes access affordable and equitable to everyone no matter what the level of each family’s financial income is. This approach also differs greatly from studios and organizations of dance and musical arts servicing many middle-class communities wherein sizable sums often need to be paid to allow children the opportunity to learn such arts. The teachers are paid for their services; administrators, however, offer their services and receive only a modest monthly stipend of about one hundred dollars.

The locations of the interviews for this study varied. One person was interviewed in a conference room at the midtown campus of the Graduate Center of the City University of New York, while another member was interviewed in his apartment. I began yet another interview in the retail store of another participant and finally completed that interview, along with all the other dance company members interviewed for this study, months later in Branson, Missouri. I was on location with them in Branson for a little under a week while
the company and the musicians were participating in an international performance festival in this small Midwestern city.

*The Study’s Participants*

What do an actuary turned theatre director, a costumer and clothing storeowner, an accounts manager with an M.B.A., two recent college grads with backgrounds in jazz and modern dance, and more than fifty children of Mexican heritage have in common? The rhythm of life as it is expressed in the art and performance of Mexican folkloric music and dance (*danza folklórica* also referred to as *baile folklórico*). They are the people who are the heart of this study.

*Other Grassroots Organizations*

In New York City, the diversity of ethnic minorities makes this urban center a unique and rich place for exposure to and interaction with many immigrant groups. Can an immigrant group retain its identity while assimilating into a new society?

Along with *Noctlaca Dance Company*, the focus of my study, there are a number of organizations from the Mexican community changing New York City’s cultural landscape. New York City’s urban community includes a wide range of ethnic groups and community grassroots organizations that present many cultural events to the public. *Mano a Mano: Mexican Culture Without Borders* is one such organization. *Mano a Mano* began under the Community Cultural Initiative of the Center for Traditional Music and Dance (CTMD) in the year 2000. The purpose of the Community Cultural Initiative is to partner with immigrant and ethnic communities in order “to maintain the vibrancy of performing arts traditions” (CTMD).
Mano a Mano developed out of the recognition of the Mexican community’s rising profile; they became an independent New York-based nonprofit organization in 2006. Their mission is “celebrating Mexican culture in the United States and promoting the understanding of Mexican traditions among immigrants, artists, educators and the general public.” The board is comprised of diverse ethnic backgrounds but about 80% are of Mexican heritage. According to its director at that time, the organization serves approximately 15,000 persons in direct service activities with about 60% of that population being Latino.

I was introduced to Mano a Mano in 2004 through a program offered on the monarch butterflies from Michoacán held in Central Park. I was planning to travel to Mexico that summer to do research for my master’s thesis. Upon returning to the States, I met with the then director (a folklorist who is not of Mexican heritage) and agreed to volunteer on some upcoming projects so as to learn more about Mexican culture as it was being expressed in New York City. My experiences with this grassroots community since then have included participating in building an altar for Día de los Muertos or “Day of the Dead”, marching with the Mexican group in the annual Halloween Parade in New York City, selling Mexican refreshments, and singing in the posada during the Christmas season. Participating in these cultural events and activities allowed me to become acquainted with Mexicans in New York City as well as with some of the issues they face in adapting to a new culture.

For the past several years, in late autumn the yard of St. Mark’s Church-in-the-Bowery located in the East Village has been transformed into a site of celebration for Día de los Muertos, which generally occurs on the second day of November. The week leading up
to this day is filled with many ritual celebrations to pay tribute to the spirits of loved ones who have died. These ritual practices, which honor deceased relatives, have been carried on for more than 3,000 years in Mexico despite the efforts of the Spaniards to eradicate them when they conquered these territories. Stemming from Aztec and other Meso-American civilizations, they believe that the dead come back during this period in the performance of ritual ceremonies. The building of the altar and use of skulls is part of the week-long ceremony at St. Mark’s Church. In Mexico the holiday continues for an entire month.

The Mariachi Academy of New York located in Manhattan’s East Harlem neighborhood claims to be the first school on the East Coast “dedicated to educating young girls and boys in a celebrated and cherished musical tradition of Mexico” (Mariachi Academy, 1/21/2012). It provides classes in Mexican music for Mexican and non-Mexican students for ages 7-17. Some of the children in this study who attend classes in Mexican music and dance, also go to the Mariachi Academy to learn to play traditional Mexican instruments.

The Mixteca Organization, Inc. a grassroots community-based organization located in Brooklyn, New York came about as the result of “a group of concerned community members” who felt compelled “to address a host of critical needs in health, education, social and legal issues facing the burgeoning Mexican and Latin American immigrant community in Brooklyn” (Mixteca, 1/21/2012). Their mission is to support the underserved community “providing access to services that enhance immigrants’ quality of life” and helping them to attain sustainable social and economic development.
Considerations Regarding Cultural Transmission

The journey to become an American takes far more than crossing national borders. Immigrant families must make numerous changes in the course of adapting to a new home, culture, and society. The culture of the native country accompanies the immigrant to the new society, and often their new lives are an intermingling of that which is familiar and that which is unfamiliar lived in a strange, unknown environment. In *The Life and Times of Mexico*, Earl Shorris (2004) describes Mexico as an old country, adding “one of the world’s few original civilizations grew up there” (p. xiii). He continues:

> It is nothing like the United States, not even when it speaks English or sings rock and roll or drinks Coca-Cola at McDonald’s. There is a difference in the vicinity of the heart between Mexico and the United States. If we ignore it and try to think of both countries in the same way, there are bound to be mistakes (p. xiii).

In the ever-changing fabric of U.S. society, what aspects of the native’s cultural practices follow immigrants? What aspects may change? The traditions and customs that immigrants bring with them to the various regions in which they settle in the United States are not limited to only those whose shared roots designate them as members of a particular ethnic enclave. In urban centers, elements of the ethnic group culture are often made available to others in the wider society through events in social spaces encouraging “outsiders” to participate. The blending of historical factors with the lived world in the present may influence the role of tradition resulting in an ‘invented tradition.’ Eric Hobsbawm and Terence Ranger (1983) define ‘invented tradition’ as “a set of practices, normally governed by overtly or tacitly accepted rules and of a ritual or symbolic nature, which seeks to inculcate certain values and norms of behaviour by repetition, which automatically implies continuity with the past.” (Hobsbawm & Ranger, 1983, p. 1). He continues, “[...] where possible, they normally attempt to establish continuity with a
suitable historic past” (p. 1). The ways in which one’s culture is practiced and shared can effect contextual change in the tradition, adapting it to a specific population and related circumstances. We may often see these transformations within American society as immigrant groups make adjustments and find their way as part of a new society. The society, in turn, also changes and adapts in response to immigrants and their customs. In other words, this process is bidirectional.

Jacques Derrida (2001) considers Kant’s contribution on a law of cosmopolitanism proposing the notion of “universal hospitality without limit” with the potential to bring about “condition[s] of perpetual peace between all men” (p. 20). Massey (2010) comments, however, that many Americans hold the belief that “it is the responsibility of immigrants to adapt to U.S. society as unobtrusively as possible, without imposing costs or inconveniences on natives and without changing American life as it existed before their arrival” (pp. 1-2). Inevitably, in order to succeed within the host society, the minority group must assimilate to the mainstream culture. Richard Alba and Victor Nee (1997) explain that from the point of view of the minority group, “acculturation […] takes place in the direction of the mainstream culture, even if on another plane that culture is itself changing through the ingestion of elements from minority cultures” (p. 864).

There may be a need to share one’s own culture as a means of adapting to the host culture; pride in sharing one’s culture can function as an adaptive tool in maintaining identity and developing skill sets to negotiate identity within the dominant mainstream culture. The notion of a collective identity is shaped within these forces. Iris Young (2000) defines a social group as “a collective of persons differentiated from others by cultural forms, practices, special needs or capacities, structure of power, or privilege” (p. 153).
Music as a form of cultural expression can communicate social values as well as historical information. So too with dance traditions carried forward from the period of the Spanish Conquest of Mexico. Many are still performed today and are a means of teaching history to people (de la Torre Castellanos, 2009). Most forms of knowledge are transmitted through social discourse, and music as well is acquired through interrelationship in the social sphere. Alfred Schutz (1964) comments, “The bulk of musical knowledge—as of knowledge in general—is socially derived” (p. 168).

Jocelyn S. Linnekin (1983) suggests, “tradition is a conscious model of past lifeways that people use in the construction of their identity” (p. 241). Music and the arts are a means of communication—a means of understanding through exploration of human thought, feelings, cultural beliefs, and values. Writing on dance and a theory of non-verbal communication, Judith Hanna (1987) remarks, “Substantively, information necessary to maintain a society’s or group’s cultural patterns, to help it attain its goals, to adapt to its environment, to become integrated or to change may be communicated” (p. 26).

The present study looks at ways in which the native culture can impact transnational identity and sociocultural adaptation. The concept of identity is complex and as some suggest paradoxical (Hall, 1996). Stuart Hall has determined that critique and deconstruction of this term in various disciplines are “in one way or another critical of the notion of an integral, originary, and unified identity” (1996, p. 1). Globalization has produced dramatic changes in societies and world culture. These changes have brought about a more complex notion of diaspora and have caused diasporas themselves to shift (Rinderle, 2005). My interest is to examine how ethnic tradition (with a particular focus on
the musical culture and customary performance practices) may be a part of this diasporic identity and self-identification of families of Mexican origin in the New York City region.

In order to have a more comprehensive grasp of Mexican ethnic identity and immigrants coming to the New York City area, it is essential to become acquainted with a broader background in order to develop an understanding of the impact of these multiple formative influences. This background includes geography (shifting borders, regional differences within Mexico; history (especially with regard to U.S.–Mexican relations); and politics (with particular attention given to the formation of nationhood). These domains provide an important context to this study and their discussion is undertaken in the next chapter.
CHAPTER 3

Communities and Culture of Mexico: Its Diverse Regions and People

Every view of the world that becomes extinct, every culture that disappears, diminishes a possibility of life . . . Octavio Paz

The diversity of Mexico extends to its people and culture as well as its varied geography. Is there a collective view of what is deemed to be Mexican? If so, what might that be? What are our assumptions when we hear the term ‘Mexican’? “Mexican historians have long claimed that the study of the history and culture of Mexico begins with the basic understanding that many regional ‘Mexicos’ have always made up the nation” (Garcia, 2002, p. 2). Regional differences need to be taken into account in order to understand Mexico today. The practice of some cultural traits may be limited to within the borders of specific regions, states or localities (Garcia, 2002, p. 67).

Traditions and Culture

In the United States, although multiple generations of Mexicans have lived in areas such as California, Texas, the Southwest and even parts of the Midwest, those who live in the New York City metropolitan region as a family—parents and their offspring—in the numbers now being seen, are relatively new. How long-standing customs and traditions will be kept and carried on within this newly arriving population remains to be seen.

People of Mexican origin coming to the New York metropolitan area may not share the same histories as other Mexicans and Mexican Americans who have settled in various other U.S. regions. It is necessary, therefore, to consider and examine those events that have forged Mexico’s national identity and its associated unified culture of mexicanidad.
The idea of nationhood did not come about organically, but was rather, as Rick López (2004) suggests, crafted. The period after the Mexican revolution, which ended in 1920, was the pivotal epoch when a national culture came into being. “Mexico was a culturally and politically fragmented country” and “a unifying identity had to be created” (López, 2004, p. 90). In post revolutionary Mexico, national identity was built around a national culture rather than one that was patriotic or civic (López, 2004). While patriotism was being promoted and galvanized in Mexico, it was simultaneously being stimulated among working-class migrants who had come to the United States. The Mexican anthropologist Manuel Gamio, who we will soon learn more about, has suggested “that it was in the United States that migrants, who had previously looked to their home communities rather than toward the Mexican nation, learned what it meant to be Mexican and speak of Mexico with love” (p. 90).

The lives of the participants who are central to my study have been impacted and shaped by myriad events that have forged their personal histories. The life of the dance through the ages, along with its related music, and the many pathways of their transmission, have been influenced by multiple forces—a fusion of experiences. The present study captures the people who influenced the children, their approaches to teaching folklórico, and portrays aspects of the continuation as well as the transformation of what was learned in the process. It is the day-to-day events of common people that often remain untold in historical accounts. Fragments of life from past generations are frequently absorbed into and embedded in the content and structural form of music and dance. Emma Pérez (1999) takes issue with how history has been recorded, noting that “Historians are trapped by the pitfalls of chronology” (p. xix). She keenly discerns “a linear temporality [is
not] the only means for speaking and writing history” and acknowledges, “that fragments coexist” (p. xix) in history.

Historical fragments, in all likelihood, are to be found in the music and dances of the Mexican people. My stance is aligned with many in dance research and dance history such as John O. Perpener and Shelley C. Berg, and those in ethnomusicology, such as John Blacking, Alan P. Merriam, Robert Stevenson, and Steven Loza among others, who agree that music and dance are a rich reserve of cultural values and beliefs. These arts are often overlooked by other scholars and specialists who privilege instead written accounts that largely do not come from common people, and, therefore, largely do not reflect everyday lived experiences. Mexican musical culture has been carried on and continues to be passed on within the dance community and among the children forming this study; the process, however, is not a linear one.

Writing on how musical systems are derived, ethnomusicologist John Blacking (1987) observes that they are “neither from some universal emotional language nor from stages in the evolution of a musical art: they are made up of socially accepted patterns of sound that have been invented and developed by interacting individuals in the contexts of different social and cultural systems” (p. 20). I would extend this interpretation to movement patterns as well as music associated with the dances. Blacking comments further, “If they have been diffused from one group to another, they have frequently been invested with new meanings and even new musical characteristics, because of the creative imagination of performers and listeners” (1987, p. 20). Such has been the case with music and dance of Mexico.
Developing Pride in Mexican Heritage and Culture

What are the thoughts of Mexican immigrants and Mexican Americans on what it means to be Mexican? The esteemed Mexican writer and poet Octavio Paz (1961) comments on the plight of Mexicans:

Man is alone everywhere. But the solitude of the Mexican, under the great stone night of the high plateau that is still inhabited by insatiable gods, is very different from that of the North American, who wanders in an abstract world of machines, fellow citizens and moral precepts (pp. 19-20).

As Mexican immigrant communities continued to develop within various regions of the United States, their culture also grew. When people move their culture does not stay behind, and like many other immigrant groups “the Mexicans who entered the United States brought with them their cultural traditions and ways of life. Their Mexican culture provided them with a strong sense of community—an important survival strategy as they lived, worked, and raised their children in their new country” (Garcia, 2002, p. 21). In this way, Mexico remained alive to them even though they now made homes on the other side of the border in the United States. Living within an Anglo society, many maintained their languages, whether Spanish or an indigenous tongue, and continued to prepare traditional Mexican foods (Garcia, 2002). Music and dance were also vital to recreating the life they had known in Mexico and to allow their heritage to live on.

In the first documentation of its kind on Mexican immigrants in the U.S., Manuel Gamio (1930), the noted Mexican anthropologist, observed:

Birthdays, or rather ‘saint’s days,’ are celebrated with music and dancing, as are also baptisms and weddings. There is usually a small hired orchestra, or perhaps a piano may be rented or hauled to the scene of the fiesta. Suppers of Mexican food, enchiladas, tamales, are served (p. 76).
In conversation with Alfredo, one of the present study’s participants who is from the same area of some of those in Gamio’s study, I asked, “What about family parties...Was there dancing?” His response was, “Yeah! A lot! My family is like—traditional dancers. When they go to parties they dance traditional—called vendimia—because they give thanks to God.” I write down the word as I show it to him to check my spelling and ask more about the meaning of the word vendimia. Alfredo, tells me, “Vendimia is basically when you have cosecha (harvest)... cosecha means when you have all the — I’m from village, right?” (He and his family are from Puebla.) “And, when they like uh... collect all the fruits, or... corn or whatever they have on the field, they do a small party in the family. And, that small party the name is vendimia because they give thanks [to] God for all the fruits and vegetables and everything we can collect at that time.”

_Pamela_: So on those occasions there was...
_Alfredo_: They dance, they celebrate...
_Pamela_: Music?
_Alfredo_: Yeah. They have like...traditional music...or like a dance—they dance one with each other so... They have basically small parties. It’s not for all people. It’s not for everybody. It’s for the people who live in the house (2010).

Gamio carried out a study reflecting the Mexican immigrant experience in the years 1926–27. His findings were published in 1930 under the title, _Mexican Immigration to the United States: A Study of Human Migration and Adjustment_. Gamio interviewed immigrants who came to the U.S. in 1911 right after the beginning of the Mexican Revolution. In the words of one of the immigrants in yet another volume of interviews, “One thing is sure; I would rather die before changing my citizenship. I was born a Mexican and my parents always told me never to change from being a Mexican citizen because one never ought to deny one’s country nor one’s blood” (Elías Gonzáles interview in Gamio, 1969, p. 126).
Gamio’s work, influenced by the ideas of Franz Boas on the concept of culture rather than race, would play a pivotal role in the underlying movement of nationalism, which modernized Mexico (Brading, 1988). David Brading describes Gamio as “prob[ing] native culture in the spirit of a pathologist analysing the physical decay of the patient” (p. 84). He was the first to employ the four fields of anthropology, which integrated linguistics, physical anthropology, ethnology, and archaeology in the excavation of the site of the ancient city of pyramids, Teotihuacan. “Manuel Gamio possessed the academic credentials and the political authority to carry out the first interdisciplinary anthropological project ever in Mexico” (Berrin & Pasztory, 1993, p. 67).

**Mexican Identity and the Idea of Mestizaje**

When the Spanish vanquished the indigenous peoples of Mexico in the sixteenth century, they caused an unprecedented shift, which “created a highly stratified society” (Garcia, 2002, p. 6). As intermarriages took place between Spanish settlers and Mexico’s indigenous population, the mixing of heritages and blood produced an entirely new group called “Mestizos’ who eventually formed the majority of present-day Mexican people” (p. 6). In modern Mexico the ideology of *mestizaje* was spread in order to unify the diversity of people in Mexico. “The mixed-race individual would come to serve for many as a symbol of racial and therefore national unity” (Hedrick, 2003, p. 4) or as Alan Knight (1990) expressed it, “*mestizaje* and nationhood were equated” (p. 85). The concept of *mestizaje* is also known in other Latin American countries; nonetheless, in many ways Mexican discourses have become exemplary in Latin America regarding ideas on race (Hedrick, p. 4). Tace Hedrick addresses the point [relative to the twentieth century] that Mexico stood apart from other Latin American countries since “nowhere else was the state itself, and by
extension its various cultural and scientific ministries, quite so concerned with the promotion of certain aspects of both mestizaje and indigenism” (p. 4).

Some critical events in Mexico’s history further illuminate this concept, and how it links to the development of change in modern times. With such a salient nationalist history, how is it that many Mexicans have become disenfranchised and disconnected from an illustrious past? Perhaps more importantly, what histories have become subordinated by other dominant ones? Pérez (1999) argues, “traditionalist historiography produces a fictive past, and that fiction becomes the knowledge manipulated to negate the ‘other’ culture’s differences” (p. xviii).

Consequently, these evolving circumstances have impacted—whether directly or indirectly—participants in this study. It is for this reason that I provide the following historical background.

**A Brief Historical Background of Nineteenth to Early Twentieth Century Mexico**

Gabino Barreda was responsible for the transplantation of French positivism in Mexico toward the latter part of the nineteenth century (de Beer, 1966, p. 9). While studying medicine in Paris, Barreda was influenced by the lectures of Auguste Comte who “chose the new faith in science on which to build his doctrine” (pp. 9-10). Barreda applied Comte’s theories to Mexico in the belief that liberty and social order would be key to achieving growth and progress in the country. “The political power of the church was to be undermined. A new system of education entrusted to Barreda [and] Benito Juárez [Mexico’s president] was adopted” (p. 12). A set of scientific truths proven “through observation and experimentation” would substitute for “all preconceived notions and ideas based on skepticism and intolerance” (p. 12). Barreda believed that “intellectual order resulting from
this new educational system would be the key to social order” (p. 13). Under the Juárez administration, he established the Escuela Nacional Preparatoria and became its director (p. 12). The new educational curriculum emphasized mathematics and the sciences with no attention devoted to studying philosophy or national literature (p. 13).

During the period known as La Independencia, (The Independence) the adoption of positivism sustained and became “the ideological basis employed to justify the long regime of Porfirio Díaz and his party of Científicos” (de Beer, p. 14). Octavio Paz (1961) characterizes the Díaz dictatorship as “a return to the past” (p. 129) and remarks, “Díaz appeared to be governing according to the ideas in vogue: he believed in progress, in science and in the miracles of industry and free enterprise. His ideals were those of the European bourgeoisie” (p. 129). It would be, however, a turning away from European influences and embracing a more distant past of the indigenous and Indian values that would cement national unity and forge the modernization of Mexico (Hedrick, 2003).

Strife and unrest escalated throughout the nation, ultimately leading to the outbreak of the Revolution of 1910 and continuing to 1920. According to Paz, “The Revolution began as a demand for truth and honesty in the government” (1961, p. 136). Pérez makes the point that the historical moment of the Mexican Revolution introduced a population to an area [of the U.S.] that was previously Spanish and Mexican (1999, p. xviii).

**The Mexican Revolution and Its Impact on Changes in National Education**

In the early part of the twentieth century a group of intellectuals banded together to form *El Ateneo de la Juventud (Atheneum of Youth)*, which was formally established on October 28, 1909. The common cause originally uniting them “was the discontent with the educational system of Mexico under the official doctrine of Positivism” (de Beer, p. 21).
This group of young men consisted of twenty-six charter members who are described as “well known and prominent in their fields” (de Beer, p. 20). Among the organizing members were the noted philosopher and writer Antonio Caso, distinguished poet and essayist Alfonso Reyes, the famed painter Diego Rivera, and José Vasconcelos, “one of the most promising lawyers of his generation” (Encinas, 2002, p. 1). The express purpose of the group was “a struggle against the demoralization produced by the Porfirian era” (de Beer, pp. 98-9).

The path Mexico would take when the Mexican Revolution ended was unclear. “Vasconcelos and his associates sought another dimension for man and society, and this was the opportunity they saw in the Mexican Revolution” (Jaén, 1979, p. xiv). These men did not envision Mexico becoming “a new materialistic state” following “the technological development of the United States, and guided by the incentive of the dollar and personal comfort. Neither the capitalist materialism of the United States, nor the communist materialism of Russia was the model to follow” (p. xiv). Vasconcelos knew that educational reform would be pivotal to restructuring Mexico and much of the work he did “was based on common sense” (de Beer, p. 108). Vasconcelos became the first rector of Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México (U.N.A.M.) (Stavans, 2011) when it gained autonomy from the Department of Public Education in 1920. He was considered by many to be a visionary writer but was also seen as a controversial figure. Vasconcelos served as Mexico’s Minister of Education during the years 1921 to 1924 (Encinas, 2002). As Ilan Stavans states that, “Vasconcelos was instrumental in building the educational system that allowed Mexico to become a modern nation” (p. 3). During his ministry, vocational training schools were set up. “Under his guidance the widespread printing of classics, practical manuals, and
textbooks was promoted; libraries were established and teams of teachers sent out into every corner of the country” (Anhalt, 2003, p. 148). His ministry became “a haven within the state for intellectuals and artists to turn their ideas into action” (López, 2010, p. 130).

The “problem” of the Indian was widely recognized to be a core issue of national, economic, and social unity, especially in Mexico and Peru (Hedrick, 2003, p. 5). “So what was to be done with the Indian? While the United States government dealt with its Indian ‘problem’ by further marginalizing them on the reservations, Mexican nation builders pursued a different path” (Lewis, 2006, p. 176). Vasconcelos supported the principle that “the indio and the blanco be educated together” (de Beer, p. 109) which was fundamentally connected to the concept of mestizaje. This built upon Gamio’s accomplishment of “reinstat[ing] Anáhuac [meaning Aztec] as the glorious foundation of Mexican history and culture” as well as his promotion of official indigenismo making sure that the national society of a modernized Mexico would include Indian communities (Brading, 1988, p. 76).

Manuel Gamio served as undersecretary of Public Education in 1924 under Vasconcelos (Hedrick, 2003). “Vasconcelos took (and to some degree transformed) the idea that the physical and cultural act of race-mixing would be beneficial to Mexico—to produce, as Gamio put it in 1916, ‘the new nation of blended bronze and iron’” (Hedrick, p. 5).

Lay missionary groups were formed to teach the basics of hygiene, farming, carpentry, reading, and writing (de Beer, p. 109). In addition, “poets and artists were invited to live with indigenous groups to arouse and interest them. Vasconcelos asked for their collaboration ‘como quien presta servicio militar de la cultura’” (p. 109) (to be militant in the service of culture). Vasconcelos believed that education and culture were to be accessible to all, and, as Paz states, “He wanted to base our school system on tradition”
(1961, p. 153). During his tenure gymnasiums and outdoor swimming pools were built and a school for physical education was established in order to train physical education teachers (de Beer, p. 109).

Another outstanding contribution “as an expression of popular art” (de Beer, p. 109) was the support and promotion by Vasconcelos of mural paintings, such as those of Diego Rivera, José Clemente Orozco and David Alfaro Siqueiros. The subsequent movement of muralism led by these artists “used public art as a means of enlightenment” (Stavans, 2011, p. 37). These muralists “played a [great] role in defining the nation to itself and the rest of the world” (Rochfort, 2006, p. 43). Vasconcelos commissioned them in 1922; the first works were painted on the walls of the Escuela Nacional Preparatoria in the middle of Mexico City. Rochfort noted the artistic works of these painters shifted from a style steeped in European imagery to birthing an art that was rooted in Mexico’s land, people, and experiences. Their creations began to express social and political themes of the times (Rochfort, 2006). “They provided the visual vocabulary and narratives of nation in monumental and publicly accessible images that encoded the history, experiences, traditions, and culture of peasants, workers, Indians, and artisans that came to be defined as the Mexican pueblo” (Rochfort, p. 43).

Although Vasconcelos’s writings elaborated on many things, people, and ideas, it is always the relationship of these to himself and his experiences that are central (de Beer, p. 90). According to his biographer, Gabriela de Beer, “One cannot separate the man from his work. They form a complex unit, made up of many parts” (p. 90). As de Beer points out, the Revolution of 1910 and questions of race are prominent in his works, and he is closely identified with these themes. Vasconcelos’ name still resonates among many people. He has
had a decisive impact on “Chicano activists, intellectuals, and political leaders looking for self-definition during the civil rights era” (Stavans, 2011, p. 4). Despite this influence, his works are not widely read. Criticism of his visionary works is not baseless. Stavans sums it up this way: “Reading Vasconcelos [...] is an arduous task: the abyss between what he says and what he means is profound” (p. 2). *La Raza Cosmica* (“The Cosmic Race”) first published in a Spanish edition in 1925, has become a classic and its opening essay, *Mestizaje*, is considered “prophetic” (Stavans, p. 4). In this well-known essay he postulates “mestizos, the crossbreed of Spaniards and the aboriginal population in Mexico and Central America during the colonial period from 1519 to 1810, are slated to dominate the world. He calls this the Cosmic Race, and, interchangeably, the Brown Race” (pp. 4-5). Further, as Hedrick (2003) notes, Vasconcelos suggested Indians “would eventually die out [leaving] a modern nation of mixed Indo-Hispanic mestizos who, [...] since they could not return to the ways of their (Indian) ancestors, would have no choice but to make of themselves a bridge into the future” (p. 4). Although he knew the country’s unity was contingent upon the incorporation of indigenous cultures into the national fabric, he could not disengage from a classical liberal humanistic persuasion, a view that promoted popular native handicrafts, though they were considered crude, as useful “raw materials for elite artists” (López, 2006, p. 29). López comments further on the matter, “Vasconcelos saw all the lower classes as uniformly uncultured yet redeemable by Western humanism” (2006, p. 29).

In 1922, the Mexican government under the initiative of Vasconcelos invited Lucila Godoy Alcayaga, better known by her pseudonym, Gabriela Mistral, a Chilean teacher and poet of Basque lineage, to come to Mexico “in order to collaborate in the plans of the Educational Reform that the Mexican government was initiating and in the organization
and foundation of public libraries.” *(con el fin de colaborar en los planes de la Reforma Educacional que iniciaba el Gobierno de México y en la organización y fundación de bibliotecas populares.)*

([http://www.gabrielastralfoundation.org/web/index.php?option=com_content&task=vie
ew&id=27&Itemid=189](http://www.gabrielastralfoundation.org/web/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=27&Itemid=189))

Gabriela Mistral’s success as a teacher and director of rural schools in Chile as well as her poetry and publications had brought her name to the attention of José Vasconcelos (Felder, 1996). “In order to develop what would become one of the most significant educational campaigns that Latin America had ever known, he required the assistance of dedicated, energetic, and highly respected young educators with original ideas, people like Gabriela” (Anhalt, 2003, p. 148).

Her ideas on education stemmed from the belief that “the curriculum should address not only the intellectual issues but practical ones as well—agriculture and industry, for example—and emphasize the uniqueness of Hispanic American culture, relying less on European models. It should be current, relevant, and meaningful” (Anhalt, p. 148). Thus Mistral became influential in Mexico’s educational mission particularly concerning the plight of indigenous people and how they would be situated in the new direction of nation building. Gabriela Mistral was “admired for her unending fight to achieve social justice for marginalized populations through educational opportunity” (Darer, 2003, pp. 52-3). She traveled far and wide working with rural teachers and developed a literature curriculum in public schools (López, 2010, p. 289). She stayed in Mexico for two years making a substantial contribution to Mexico’s educational reform especially that of rural education.
As part of her efforts in Mexico, Mistral joined the Rural Mission Project set up by Vasconcelos and “became involved with the traveling library program as well as with the maestros misioneros, a hearty band of idealistic young teachers who traveled through the mountains on muleback carrying books and supplies to remote villages” (Anhalt, 2003, p. 152). This group of young teachers had the task of “educating future teachers through ‘example, virtue and intelligence’” (p. 152). Gabriela Mistral gained recognition as “a precursor of pedagogical tenets and educational democracy” (Darer, 2003, p. 52) and in our time many still consider her as “an agent of educational change” (p. 52).

As a life quest, she fully dedicated herself to universal education (Darer, 2003, p. 53) and eloquently communicated a concern for “the well-being of the forgotten masses—the Indian, the woman, the child [and she held a] fervent devotion to a united Americas, nuestroamericanismo, [as] she called it” (Anhalt, p. 148). The book Lecturas para mujeres (readings for women) was another meaningful contribution, which included pedagogy and several forms of literature such as essays, short stories, and poetry in order to encourage women’s literacy (Darer, p. 52). The publication of Ternura: canciones de niños (Tenderness: children’s songs) in 1924 dares to question “the assumptions of a male-centered discourse” and takes a serious look at lullabies, fairy tales, and children’s tales (Vailakis, 2003, p. 118).

After leaving Mexico, Mistral gained further recognition and fame as a poet whose unique humanitarian voice of her time ultimately led her to be honored as the first Latin American to win the Nobel Prize in literature. She is the only Latin American woman upon whom this honor has ever been bestowed (Felder, 1996). On her first trip to the United States in 1924, she addressed the Pan American Union in Washington, D.C. setting forth
“her concept of ‘dissimilarity without inferiority’ with respect to the Latin and Anglo-Saxon cultures of the Americas” (Cohen, 2003, p. 5). In 1946, the United Nations requested that she make the first worldwide funding appeal on behalf of poor children and her “Appeal for Children” led to the founding of UNICEF.


Although it cannot be denied that Vasconcelos’ crusade brought about “one of the most consistent state commitments to the creation of national culture and the expansion of public education in the twentieth century” (Vaughan, 2006, p. 157), the transition did not proceed without obstacles. The post-Revolutionary nationalism became “the new ‘religion’ of the country” (Knight, 1990, p. 82) and “like the sixteenth-century Spanish missionaries, rural federal schoolteachers became redeemers” (Vaughan, p. 158). The government embraced the work of applied anthropologists, and as Knight suggests, men such as Manuel Gamio and Alfonso Caso were the great champions of indigenismo. “‘Indian’ customs, music, dance, and rituals were rehabilitated and woven into a new tapestry of folkloric nationalism” (Knight, p. 82). Education toward a goal of national unity nevertheless proved to be problematic for those assigned the task of carrying out this project, since “unincorporated’ indigenous ethnic groups represented a great threat to the nation’s future stability and prosperity” (Lewis, p. 176). The most momentous period of change occurred in the two decades following 1920 and the SEP (Secretaría de Educación Pública/Secretariat of Public Education) became “Mexico’s most important agent of social engineering” (p. 176). The indigenous population resisted many of these efforts causing the SEP and the federal government to reckon with “the limits of its monolingual and
monocultural curriculum and endorse (briefly) a more plural vision of the Mexican nation” (p. 176).

The education agenda proceeded well in some areas but not so well in others. In the Mayan highlands, for example, “socialist education was doomed” since the indigenous population with good reason, “distrust[ed] monolingual ladino teachers and a curriculum that either ignored or attacked their culture” (Lewis, p. 188). The circumstances were different in Oaxaca where indigenous Zapotecan elites in the town of Yalalag went into a partnership with the SEP (p. 188). “Even after federalization, Yalalag’s bilingual indigenous elite retained control over the school and selected its teachers” (p. 188).

Rural school programs they sought to implement “had deep flaws” (Vaughan, p. 159). Coming from cosmopolitan and bourgeois conceptions, the ideas they attempted to inculcate were not well matched to rural needs, practices, and resources (p. 159). Policies were aimed at “remak[ing] the family in the interests of nation building and development” (p. 160) and a strong focus included efforts to mobilize children’s patriotic development (p. 160). Mexican postrevolutionary educators were highly aware of “an international milieu of developmentalist thinking and social engineering designed to nationalize citizens in the interest of order, production, and military defense in a competitive global order” (p. 158). Not only was John Dewey’s concept of child-centered ‘learning by doing’ approach a known entity, but as noted by Mary Kay Vaughan, “Perhaps no country in the world more faithfully adopted [his] notions” (p. 158). Boys and girls learned patriotism through participation in such activities as “cooperative gardening and marketing, competitions in crafts and agriculture, the organization of sports teams, and folkloric performance at patriotic festivals” (p. 161).
The Importance of the Popular Arts in Nationalizing Mexico

Meanwhile from across the Atlantic, a group of Mexican artists and intellectuals living in Europe who had been watching the impact of the Mexican revolution from afar “answered a patriotic call to come and help to rebuild the nation” (López, 2006, p. 23). In 1921 this same group organized public celebratory expositions on behalf of the centennial of Mexico’s independence. Among multiple events two stood out as being most innovative: the Exhibition of Popular Arts and the Noche Mexicana (Mexican Night). Best Maugard conceived of the Noche Mexicana; Gerardo Murillo, better known as Dr. Atl, along with his associates, Roberto Montenegro and Jorge Enciso, organized the Exhibition of Popular Arts (López, 2006). Both events conveyed the quest for an indigenous-based national identity that the organizers “hoped might help unite the historically fragmented, war-torn population” (López, 2006, p. 23). The refashioned image of native crafts “from symbols of peasant backwardness into integral components of Mexican identity” (López, p. 23), and how indigenous cultures were envisioned in playing a role in nation formation were not in accord (López, p. 23). The events “clashed in their assumptions about the relationship between Indianness and Mexicanness” (López, p. 23). These public centennial events were an important stepping-stone in reformulating folk culture into a common national culture and spreading the concept of mexicanidad. “The centennial needed events rooted in rural popular culture” (López, 2006, p. 24). During the Porfrian era, much as preconquest civilizations were avowed, contemporary indigenous people were disparaged. In his experimental garden party, Best reframed the rural poor as Indian with the conviction that “the germ of true Mexicanness” was in their culture (López, 2006, p. 30). “While Vasconcelos felt that Western art and Greek classics should be used to elevate the depraved
masses, Best advocated the adoption of popular aesthetics ‘as a base from which to move forward [and] evolve’” (López, 2006, p. 30) so as to produce genuine Mexican expression.

The ideas and efforts of Enciso and Montenegro produced the Exhibition of Popular Arts, and were considered among the most important events in the history of popular arts (López, 2006, p. 30). In contrast to *Noche Mexicana*, the Exhibition of Popular Arts rounded up “high-quality popular arts” from all regions with “the assumption that these diverse arts shared a common aesthetic basis that [...] might reveal an inherent national cohesiveness” (p. 30). The exhibit exposed the public to a wide range of artifacts from all over Mexico valorizing the idea of indigenousness and radically redefining aesthetic value itself (López, 2006). Mexico’s handicrafts embodied “an entire collective history, of a race, and of a nation” (López, 2006, p. 38). Performances were part of the display; the public heard folk singers as well as Miguel Lerdo de Tejada’s *Orquesta Típica del Centenario* and witnessed Yucatecan dancers as they ate fresh tamales and chocolate from decorated booths Dr. Atl summed up the importance of the popular arts when he declared, “after revolutionary passion, [they were] *lo más mexicano de México: las artes populares*” (López, 2006, pp. 32, 38)(what’s the most Mexican of Mexico: the popular arts) [italics original; translation slightly modified]. The emergence of *mestizaje* as a concept unifying the nation was predicated upon the belief “that to be truly Mexican, one had to be part indigenous or at least […] embrace the idea that indigenousness was vital to the national consciousness” (López, 2006, p. 36).

**The India Bonita Contest**

In the beginning of the new year of 1921, a beauty contest was sponsored by the newspaper, *El Universal*, on behalf of the Mexican Centennial celebration, much as it was
also a way of promoting the periodical (López, 2002, p. 299). Mexico had seen beauty contests before but “no periodical or magazine had ever thought to adorn its pages with the ‘strong and beautiful faces’” of Mexico’s “lower class” indigenous women (p. 299). The newspaper’s articles described characteristics such as “an oval face, dark skin, braids, perfect teeth and a ‘serene’ expression” as markers of what was to be sought out in those Indian women considered “bonita” (pretty) and eligible for the contest (López, 2002, p. 303). The promoters considered these “not just signs of Indianness, but specifically features they wanted to mark as positive Indian characteristics” (p. 303). Ultimately when a winner was chosen, an article written by Manuel Gamio was published, “explaining how an Indian could be considered beautiful” (p. 303). Many years later, as memories slipped by the end of the twentieth century, the India Bonita Contest was conflated with the previously all-white Miss Mexico pageant.

As Mexico’s middle and upper classes were ‘taught’ to appreciate that which was ‘authentically Mexican’ (that is, things indigenous), the India Bonita became a popular symbol of the promise of postrevolutionary Mexican society—both the embodiment of Mexico’s Indian present, and the image of the ideal rural recipient of postrevolutionary transformation (López, 2002, p. 326).

Following the discussion on culture and identity in the next section, pertinent history related to music and dance is included to help illustrate how transitions during the various periods of Mexican history have impacted the styles and performance of Mexican folkloric dances, music, and songs. This abridged history will help to shed light on how the transformation that transpired in the postrevolutionary era, which sought to uphold and reinvigorate pre-Cortesian Mexico, may have influenced traditions carried on within the Nochtla Dance community and in turn be infused in some way within the children’s dance classes in New York City today.
Music and Dance as Mexican Cultural Tradition

Culture is ordinary: that is the first fact. Every human society has its own shape, its own purposes, its own meanings. Every human society expresses these, in institutions and in arts and learning [. . .] A culture has two aspects: the known meanings and directions, which its members are trained to; the new observations and meanings, which are offered and tested. These are the ordinary processes of human societies and human minds, and we see through them the nature of a culture: that it is always both traditional and creative; that it is both the most ordinary common meanings and the finest individual meanings. We use the word culture in these two senses: to mean a whole way of life—the common meanings; to mean the arts and learning—the special processes of discovery and creative effort [. . .]

Culture is ordinary, in every society and in every mind (Williams, 1997, p. 6).

The term ‘culture’ is frequently used and is reported to be in the top one percent of the most looked up words on Merriam-Webster.com, yet it is hard to pinpoint one definition that covers all its meanings. Culture as a concept has been much debated, and Jerry Kerlin (2004) suggests, “culture has no standard, universal definition” (p. 7). Alan P. Merriam (1964) explains it simply as “man’s cumulative learned behavior” (p. 21). Another view informs us, “Shared by members of a community as social beings, culture is a system of ideas about the nature of the world and the expected behavior of people in it. Ideas are encoded in public symbols, literary texts, art, drama, religious practice, and dance” (Hanna, 1988, p. 28). The viewpoint on culture described by Octavio Paz (1961) is “a complex of values created and shared in common” (p. 26). Other distinguishing markers of culture noted by Kerlin are “collective consciousness, conscience, ideology, and cosmology (worldview) passed along from generation to generation extragenetically” (2004, pp. 7–8).

Cultural anthropology is that branch of anthropology in which studying the variance of cultures in human societies is a central concern. Notions of culture in the anthropological sense have been discussed as ways of life, values, and beliefs, while to large extent arts and media have fallen within a humanistic domain (King, 1997, p. 2). There are varying
accounts of cultural studies as an academic field, and “there is no agreed standard
genealogy of its emergence as a serious academic discipline” (Denzin, 2001, p. 3124). It can
be said, however, that the study of culture in cultural studies is not so much interested in
the aesthetic or literary but rather the political as “located in the popular or the everyday”
(Denzin, p. 3121).

The sovereign entity of the nation state came about in the sixteenth century
(Wallerstein, 1997) and it is of interest to consider that “Side by side with the emergence of
such nation-states, each with frontiers, each with its own invented traditions, the world has
been moving, so it is said, towards a world consciousness, a consciousness of something
called humanity” (Wallerstein, p. 92). In Europe the development of cultural studies as a
discipline stemmed from “the nineteenth-century concern with the role of culture in nation
formation” (Graham & Labanyi, 1995, p. 2). Subsequently, during the period of the 1930s to
the 1950s, interest arose due to the uneasiness related to the growth of mass culture
(Graham & Labanyi, p. 2).

As can be seen, defining culture is not a simple task. Proponents of cultural studies
reject “definitional precision” instead preferring “everything [to remain] up for grabs”
(Gray & McGuigan, 1997, p. xiii). It has been noted that, “According to [Stuart] Hall, Cultural
Studies arose from a concern that major cultural transformations were taking place in
society, not least in working class culture, yet none of the ‘traditional’ disciplines were
addressing them” (King, p. 2). Responding to this concern, the Centre for Contemporary
Cultural Studies was established in 1964 at the University of Birmingham. Born of
subversive intent, there was a conscious concern with regard to changing the practice of
how knowledge is produced (King, p. 3). Cultural studies advocates also greatly resisted
“the very idea of disciplinarity and its connotations of policing the borders of knowledge” (Gray & McGuigan, 1997, p. xiii).

The further development of cultural studies as a field gains complexity with the rise of globalization, which has spawned an image-driven, worldwide mass culture, in which concepts of personal and social identity are ever shifting, nuanced, and incongruous. The process of globalization has produced dramatic changes in societies and cultures around the world. The burgeoning globalization, “a new form of global mass culture” which Stuart Hall (1997) identifies as American (p. 27), in effect resembles the ‘great and powerful Oz’ behind the curtain manipulating cultural production and consumption. This global culture of the masses further confounds the meaning of culture. It appears that in the world’s history we have not moved toward a homogenized culture—quite the contrary. Instead it is a world that grows more culturally complex, and as Hall’s work makes us aware, people have acquired multiple cultural identities (King, p. 16). “Increasingly, one goes through life picking up identities [and] identity construction is never finished” (p. 16).

The concept of identity is complex and as some suggest paradoxical (Hall, 1996). Hall has determined that critique and deconstruction of this term in various disciplines are “in one way or another critical of the notion of an integral, originary, and unified identity” (1996, p. 1). Global changes have brought about a more complex notion of diaspora (Rinderle, 2005, p. 294) whereby the continual flow of people, money, goods and information have led to “separate places [becoming] effectively a single community” (Clifford, 1994, p. 303). Shifting global conditions have altered the way in which the term diaspora is invoked (Clifford, p. 302). Previously, the defining model of a ‘diaspora’ showed a relationship between scattered communities and their inclination to return to an
ancestral homeland. Current discourse, however, shows this no longer is the operating paradigm, and instead of the homeland being the center, the diaspora network may be multiply centered (Clifford, 1994). James Clifford states, "Diasporas also connect multiple communities of a dispersed population" (p. 304). He also importantly notes, "multi-locale diaspora cultures are not necessarily defined by a specific geopolitical boundary" (p. 304).

As will be seen in the chapters that follow, the participation of people within the Nochtłaca Dance community is not bounded by a shared connection to the physical site of Mexico as the ‘ancestral homeland’. Rather, what appears to apply is Clifford’s statement that “diasporic forms of longing, memory, and (dis)identification are shared” (1994, p. 304). Susana Rinderle argues that persons of Mexican descent living in the United States are a diaspora since their experiences reflect the following: a history of physical displacement; cultural dislocation and hybridity; a yearning for homeland; structural displacement and a complex structural relationship between nation-state and diaspora; alienation from the hostland; and a collective identity defined by the relationship between homeland and hostland (Rinderle, 2005, p. 295). “Signifiers in the form of ethnic identity labels can be an important aspect of diasporic identity and self-identification” as Rinderle explains (p. 295). Despite the very different lives of Mexicans who live in various regions of the U.S., a shared notion of Mexicanness feeds into a collective identity.

Mexican identity and mexicanidad distinguish and prevent one from being merged into a non-specific Latino identity in the United States. The term Latinidad has gained usage in mainstream America. Building a case based on the animated television series, Dora the Explorer, Nicole M. Guidotti-Hernández (2007) discusses the construction of Latinidad telling us, “Latinidad and Latino/a identity can potentially create a false sense of
universality of cultural practice, language, and skin color” (p. 216). The terms ‘Hispanic’ and ‘Latino’ are non-specific (Beltrán, 2010), and the tendency to homogenize people of Latin American ancestry produces further distancing from a cultural and historical past. Cristina Beltrán (2010) raises the point that “Latino pan-ethnicity has been fostered by a climate of xenophobia in which the regional and cultural history of all people of Latin American descent has been erased” (p. 7). The construction of a Latino identity is an important aspect when we consider culture as a site of power and its political implications. Pan-ethnic group identification may be advantageous in the political arena, however, “Latinidad presumes that Latinos as a group share a common collective consciousness” (Beltrán, p. 5). Hall addresses the point that “Identity is the ground of action” (1997, p. 42) and so following that line of thought, the erasure of identity by way of the construction of Latinidad and a non-specific Latino identity may potentially lead to inaction and a resultant malaise. Rinderle (2005) suggests, “Issues of diasporic identity and self-identification may be particularly relevant in examining intracultural and intercultural communication involving members of U.S. ethnic groups—particularly Hispanics and/or Latinos, and more specifically those of Mexican origin” (p. 295).

**Mexicanos and Chicanos**

How Mexicans began to take on the identity of “being Mexican” in the United States is a multifaceted story. The term *pocho* appeared at least as far back as 1930. Manuel Gamio’s definition seems to have been adopted, and he characterized a Pocho “not as a Mexican living in the United States, but as an American of Mexican origin” (Leal 1977, p. 115). In one of Paz’s first essays examining Mexican identities, “The Pachuco and Other Extremes”, the word pocho is nowhere to be found perhaps because he was highly aware of “the
demeaning nature of the word” (p. 115). It seems the word pocho fell out of use, but instead
the term Pachuco came into play. Pachucos were associated with a rebellious deportment
and elaborate dress and wearing zoot suits became their signature. Paz wrote on the
behavior of the Pachuco observing “[he] does not want to become a Mexican again; at the
same time he does not want to blend into the life of North America. His whole being is
sheer negative impulse, a tangle of contradictions, an enigma” (1977, p. 117). The Pachuco
was rejected in American society and in Mexico as well (Leal, 1977). “If the Pachuco did not
want to become a Mexican again or blend into the life of North America it was because he
could not do either” (p. 117). Paz believes the Pachuco to be the precursor of the Chicano,
however, Chicanos organized “under political principles” (p. 118). Rather than rejecting
their Mexican heritage, Chicanos embraced it.

The first usage of the word ‘Chicano’ as recorded in the Merriam Webster dictionary
was in 1947, however, its actual usage may go back further. Members of the Chicano
Movement were American citizens, many with Mexican-born parents. This movement
coincided with the issues and period of the Civil Rights Movement and gathered
momentum on the heels of the Black Nationalist movement in the 1960s. Cesar Chavez and
Dolores Huerta led migrant farm workers to organize “the United Farm Workers Union
whose strikes, boycotts, and victories against the state’s agribusiness would become the
soul and inspiration of the Chicano Movement, as well as a national and international
symbol of the struggle for social justice and equal rights” (Garcia, p. 136). Thus the term
‘Chicano’ has been associated with an ethnic and political identity. During this time cultural
nationalism in the U.S. was heightened highlighting “cultural pride as a source of political
unity and strength capable of mobilizing Chicanos and Chicanas into an oppositional
political group within the dominant political landscape” (Garcia, p. 137). Additionally ‘Chicanismo’ as an ideology helped to bring about “a collective ethnic consciousness directed at bringing about social change for Mexican and Mexican-American communities” (p. 137).

Octavio Paz was interviewed by José Armas about the differences between the Chicano and the Mexican (or Mexicano). The following is part of that dialogue:

*Armas*: Do you see any difference between the Chicano and the Mexican?

*Paz*: It is obvious that there are differences. There is a great difference, of course, between a Mexican and a Chicano.

*Armas*: Are these differences cultural, social, political, or national?

*Paz*: We both have the same origin. We are fundamentally the same, but we have had an independent history. The War with the United States, and then a series of catastrophes that have taken place in Mexico have forced part of the Mexican population to migrate to the United States. As a result a large Mexican community was created, and little by little it has been transformed into the Chicano movement (Leal, 1977, p. 120).

From 2004 to the present, I have attended various Mexican cultural events in the New York metropolitan area and no one I have met who has recently come to the New York area has self-identified as Chicano or Chicana. I have frequently heard a person say she or he is from Mexico and quickly adding the name of the local area of origin, such as Ciudad Juárez or Puebla. In fact, during a conversation I had with a young Mexican woman on the subject of Chicanos, she said she felt the term carried a derogatory connotation. Perhaps this was a leftover impression passed along from the use of the word pocho. In my experience, the only persons that have self-identified as, or not shied away from, a Chicano identity in the New York City region have been those whose family history is rooted in California, Texas, or the Southwest.
In her seminal work, *The Decolonial Imaginary: Writing Chicanas into History*, Emma Pérez (1999) states her belief that “to settle upon Chicano/a experiences as only immigrant erases a whole other history, the history of a diaspora, of a people whose land also shifted beneath them” (p. xix). Pérez observes, “From the earliest historiographic essays to more current ones, scholars have consistently argued for a conceptual framework that addresses transgressive Chicano and Mexicano experiences in which culture is understood globally” (p. xviii). She conceptualizes “a paradigm that would analyze systems of thought that construct cultural identities carved by a complex history” (p. xviii).

From pre-conquest times to the present, culture has indeed been a locus of negotiation, contestation, consent and resistance involving relationships of power (Denzin, 2001) playing an important role in the transitions and development in Mexican life. Writing on popular culture in Mexico, Néstor García Canclini (1993) associates the term culture with understanding, reproducing or transforming the social system and applies the term to “all practices and institutions involved in the administration, renewal, and restructuring of meaning” (p. 10) extending beyond “the realm of beliefs, values, and ideas” (p. 10). Using the word culture to describe, “both lived practices and artefacts or performances, understood as symbolic systems” (Graham & Labanyi, 1995, p. 5) can be of particular value for my present study. Helen Graham and Jo Labanyi (1995) underscore that “all cultural forms—whether lived practices or artefacts and performances—have an underlying narrative: culture can be defined as the stories people tell each other to explain what and where they are” (p. 5). The second point made by Graham and Labanyi is “culture is a site of power that is always negotiated and contested” (p. 5). Gray and McGuigan (1997) also make the point that cultural studies can “be concerned with anything meaningful, usually
seen in connection to power relations” (p. xiii). Music and dance can act as a site of power in their ability to mediate feelings and a sense of belonging to a group through symbolic representation. The group association and related symbols foster solidarity signifying a group identity. In turn, this process lends to the establishment of social visibility and public identity (Bhabha, 1994) within the greater social sphere.

To cover the entire history of Mexico in regard to its musical culture would make this dissertation too unwieldy. The numerous functions of music and dance throughout world history, and more specifically, its foundational role in Mexico’s ancient civilizations and its transitions, nevertheless, constitute the need to include some important and pertinent background. In the next chapter some highlights of the significant periods and influential events will be explored.
CHAPTER 4

Music and Dance: Their Historical Significance

[T]he whole of man’s life requires the graces of rhythm and harmony . . . [in] that having improved their bodies they may perform the orders of their minds . . .

Plato, from Protagoras

Why study Mexican folkloric music and dance? Principally, because music and dance are basic to nearly every society. “La danza comienza en la naturaleza. Seres animados e inanimados originan movimientos de danza” (Bruno Ruiz, 1956, p. 9). (Dance begins in nature. Animate and inanimate beings originate dance movements.) Dance and music are born of the spirit and expressed through the body. Mary Louise Serafino (1988) claims that music is a universal acquisition and that this ability is not attributable to some special trait or talent or accessible only by formal musical training. No culture that we know of lacks music according to ethnomusicologist Bruno Nettl (2005), who remarks on its uniqueness, “[M]usic does something to a person, something not done by anything else in nature or culture” (p. 131).

Musical activities located within a community and cultural context, lead its members to the acquisition of music and dance. Sadly, in our technology-driven society musical experiences are predominantly heard and/or seen through an electronic device with fewer and fewer opportunities for involvement in live music-making. Currently, in the U.S., professional music and arts organizations as well as arts and music programs in schools are struggling to survive. In 2009, the pop singer Linda Ronstadt, of Mexican-American heritage, testified in front of a U.S. Congressional Committee on behalf of Appropriations for the National Endowment for the Arts. In her testimony she stated:
Increasingly, people’s experience with music is passive. We delegate our musical expression to professionals. Music cannot be learned without both listening and playing. We need to teach our children to sing their own songs and play their own instruments, not just to listen to their iPods. Do we really want our children’s musical experience to be limited to the mainstream commercial music that is blared at them continually? They deserve and are fully capable of learning to express themselves in the more subtle and profound ways of traditional and classical music (Ronstadt, 2009).

Another important point of her appeal was that “In the United States we spend millions of dollars on sports because it promotes teamwork, discipline, and the experience of learning to make great progress in small increments. Learning to play music together does all this and more” (Ronstadt, 2009). Instead of supporting our musical evolution, we are on the slippery slope of becoming increasingly unmusical. Christopher Small (1998) keenly observes that, “Schools themselves [...] can contribute to this process of demusicalization” (p. 212). And yet, the urban landscape, along with suburban and rural ones, are filled with people listening all day long to *something* through all those electronic devices. Are people readily able to identify which instruments exactly produce the sounds they are downloading and listening to? Scheduled to begin a school residency as a teaching artist, one day some years ago, I came to introduce myself to the children in a kindergarten class with a large population of Latino/a youth in order get to know the members of the class before I worked with them. When I told them we’d be making music during my weekly visits, one five-year old looked at me questioningly and asked, “DVD?” Invited to several schools to perform, Ronstadt herself also found that the children “think music comes out of their television or computer screens, not out of people’s hands and mouths” (Ronstadt, 2009).

Small asks the question, “[H]ow is it that so many people in Western industrial societies believe themselves to be incapable of the simplest musical act?” (p. 210). The
answer to the question he poses is that “they have been actively taught to be unmusical” (p. 210). People need to connect to music even if they have come to believe they themselves cannot create it. This thing we call music “is not a thing at all but an activity, something that people do” (p. 2). For centuries, across regions and cultures, people have been “musicking” (Small, 1998) through the very human body and soul expressions of music and dance.

**Dance Through the Ages**

*Salome was a dancer,*
*She danced before the king.*
*And every time she danced,*
*She wiggled everything.*
*“Stop,” said the king,*
*“You can’t do that in here.”*
*Salome said, “baloney”*
*And kicked the chandelier.*

(folk rhyme)

In *World History of the Dance*, a comprehensive study, Curt Sachs (1937) noted: “The dance is the mother of the arts. Music and poetry live in time; painting and architecture in space. But the dance lives at once in time and space” (p. 3). Significantly woven into the fabric of life in nearly every society, “dance becomes a sacrificial rite, a charm, a prayer, and a prophetic vision” (p. 4). In addition to all the aforementioned, “It summons and dispels the forces of nature, heals the sick, links the dead to the chain of their descendants, it assures sustenance, luck in the chase, victory in the battle; it blesses the fields and the tribe. It is creator, preserver, steward and guardian” (p. 4).

As man developed through the ages, the expressive and impulsive movements were, as noted by Margaret H’Doubler (1940), “probably characterized by a passion for rhythm”
(p. 4). As women and men came to the realization that more could be achieved living and working in groups, the individual became part of a larger unit. The feeling of participating in a group, as H’Doubler who pioneered dance in the field of higher education suggests, “must have had both a restraining and a stimulating effect upon [human] activities” (1940, pp. 4–5). As individual desire was transformed, it was exhibited instead as custom enacted within the group so that “dancing reflect[ed] a widening range of human circumstances and adventure” (1940, p. 5). A range of emotions too—love, hate, fear and anger—went from denoting an individual to a conformed group identity. “Dance derived its major importance from its function as an integral part of the social and religious life. For primitive man there was no such thing as religion apart from life. Religion was life—it included everything” (1940, p. 5). Sachs further illuminates the role of dance:

From its deep and far-reaching influence it will be apparent that in the life of primitive peoples and of ancient civilizations scarcely anything approaches the dance in importance. It is no art that disregards bread; on the contrary, it provides bread and everything else that is needed to sustain life. It is not a sin, proscribed by the priest or at best merely accepted by him, but rather a sacred act and priestly office; not a pastime to be tolerated only, but a very serious activity of the entire tribe. On no occasion in the life of primitive peoples could the dance be dispensed with. Birth, circumcision, and the consecration of maidens, marriage and death, planting and harvest, the celebration of chieftains, hunting, war, and feasts, the changes of the moon and sickness—for all of these the dance is needed (1937, pp. 4-5).

Robert Stevenson (1952), the first scholar to write a historical survey of Mexican music in English, also indicated that Spanish accounts described Aztec music as having no independent function from religious and cult observances, and that “music as an art (in our sense of the word art) was a concept alien to their mentality” (p. 16). From an early account of Mexico as given by the Spanish missionary, Fray Juan de Torquemada, we read: “One of the principal things which they had in all this land was Songs and Dances, as much to
solemnify the Fiestas of their Demons as to honor Gods whom they thought to honor in this manner and for their own joy and solace” (quoted in Chávez, 1940, p. 5).

William McNeill (1995) discusses participation in collective ritual and the arousal of emotions in both dance and drill in human history. He emphasizes the importance of coordination of movement and rhythm noting two corollaries:

First, throughout recorded history, moving and singing together made collective tasks far more efficient. Without rhythmical coordination of the muscular effort required to haul and pry heavy stones into place, the pyramids of Egypt and many other famous monuments could not have been built. Second, I am convinced that long before written records allowed us to know anything precise about human behavior, keeping together in time became important for human evolution, allowing early human groups to increase their size, enhance their cohesion, and assure survival by improving their success in guarding territory, securing food, and nurturing the young (p. 4).

Despite the existence of numerous and elaborate examples of scenes depicting rhythmic movement of group activities exhibiting “the emotional affect of rhythmic movements and gestures,” McNeill found that “scientific investigation of what happens to those who engage in such behavior remains scant and unsystematic” (p. 5). With so much attention focused on learning and the brain, it seems we have, nevertheless, skipped over a most important part of ourselves—our bodies. As Carla Hannaford (1995) reminds us, “we have missed a most fundamental and mysterious aspect of the mind: learning, thought, creativity and intelligence are not processes of the brain alone, but of the whole body” (p. 11). We are sensate beings. Our increasing reliance on machines and technologies, nonetheless, has contributed to the creation of artificial environments, which disconnect us from our bodies as part of nature, and the natural world as the basic foundation to our life on earth. It is the body that connects us to life on our planet; without it we cannot exist. Yet oftentimes, within academia, research on the body has been relegated to a position of
relative unimportance. “Sensations, movements, emotions and brain integrative functions are grounded in the body. The human qualities we associate with the mind can never exist separate from the body” (p. 11). Dance, then, is a very human expression; it celebrates life in the body.

**Mexican Folkloric Music and Dance in Perspective**

Music and dance, as Patricia Leavy (2009) noted, “[...] always produced by social actors situated in groups, can offer many insights into the peoples and cultures that produce [them], including identity issues and points of similarity and difference across ethnicities” (p. 104). Many differences and similarities exist in dance and music across Latin American countries; numerous identifiable differences can be seen, as well, at a regional level.

Probing the deep history of Latin America’s popular dances, John Charles Chasteen (2004) discusses Latin America’s national rhythms as being at once music and dance. Even though enjoyment of music is commonplace and far-reaching, Chasteen points out that, “few people make it” (p. 11). Social dance, contrasted with music, attracts broader participation and “studying dance offers a look at the lives of ordinary people” (p. 11). He further concludes: “Dance, even more than music, speaks to collective identities of various kinds [and] plays a part in generating those identities” (p. 11). The Spanish encounter and conquest resulted in dramatically altered forms and content of autochthonous music and dance. “This dance-of-two, in which the couple danced face to face without touching, is the archetype or ancestral form of all Latin America’s national rhythms. It emerged (probably in Mexico) during the 1500s and soon spread throughout Latin America” (p. 13). Referring to Latin American national rhythms as transgressive, in that they often crossed a ‘color line’ (p. 11), Chasteen suggests, “transgressive cultural forms challenge social controls” (p. 5).
Oddly, in sharp contrast, the United States, a land shaped by diversity, where many of Mexican heritage reside:

[…] has no dances of its own, no dances which are expressive of the race which is an amalgamation of all races, no dances which are truly American. Each race has its dance, but there has been no dance to express the spirit of the [human] race to which all these others have together given birth” (H'Doubler, 1925, p. 26).

Cultural change, adaptation, and continuity are a prime concern of this study. Change is inevitably part of life. Steven Loza (1993) researched changes within the Mexican musical community of Los Angeles and noted, “The musical life of the Mexican people in Los Angeles has always taken and continues to take many forms; these forms of change, tradition, and survival can be traced back centuries” (p. xviii). It became apparent to me that to develop an understanding of how indigenous knowledge has changed or sustained itself through various forms of music and dance up to the present, it would be helpful to know more about pre-Conquest Mexico. Musical culture (music and dance) offers a means to encapsulate beliefs and ideas in their original formation, expression, and structure. The noted anthropologist Robert Redfield (1935) raises the point that making a distinction between Spanish or Indian influences is not as significant as the effect of modernizing forces that bring about “the loss in folk-ness, and the becoming more city-like of life” (p. 41). In today’s world, commercial vampirism drives the desire for instant gratification in consumerist societies on a global scale. The numbing effects of Western modernity have caused many of us to feel distanced from the sense of vitality imbued in folk culture. Modernity, as described by Charles Taylor (2002), is the “historically unprecedented amalgam of new practices and institutional forms (science, technology, industrial production, urbanization), of new ways of living (individualism, secularization, instrumental rationality), and of new forms of malaise (alienation, meaninglessness, a
sense of impending social dissolution)” (p. 91). Self-absorption in our day is pervasive and clearly exhibited in the widespread practice of taking “selfies,” that is taking pictures of oneself by holding a camera at arm’s length, in practically any and every conceivable circumstance from funerals to toilet poses. For many, modernizing forces have changed what motivates us to dance, too. “El hombre de ‘cultura moderna’, danza buscando placer y egolatría. El antiguo mexicano, danzaba para adornar lo divino. ¿En cuál de los dos triunfa el espíritu?” (Bruno Ruiz, p. 31). (Modern man dances looking for pleasure and self-satisfaction. The ancient Mexican was dancing to extol the divine. In which of the two does the spirit triumph?)

**The Spanish Rupture of Ancient Mexico: Its Transformative Impact**

The Spanish Conquest caused a radical transformation in societies to which music and dance were of central significance. During pre-Columbian times, in the land today known as Mexico, there resided “hundreds of ethnically and linguistically distinct states, tribes, and communities, each with its own history, rivalries, and internal divisions” (Lewis, 2006, p. 177). It must be added that each level of these communities had its gamut of arts. The Spaniards did not arrive to a primitive land but rather they found distinctive and highly developed civilizations. Carlos Chávez, the esteemed Mexican composer, observed, “Before Europeans arrived on this continent, there flourished in Mexico civilizations or cultures which present-day archeology and history are learning to understand and relate to each other” (1940, p. 5). These civilizations existed and endured well before the arrival of the Spaniards in the beginning of the sixteenth century as Earl Shorris (2004) succinctly and dramatically states:
More than thirteen hundred years before the so-called discovery of America, there were city-states and complex alliances among them. Some rulers were elected by an aristocracy of warriors, priests, and scholars. These city-states developed literatures, science, a religion with many branches, architecture, civil societies, sanitation systems, theater, music, dance. It was a world of its own, civilized and murderous (p. 19).

Accounts of ancient aboriginal music in pre-Colonial Mexico have been both favorable and unfavorable. The unfavorable reports can be traced back to the vivid descriptions provided by one of the early Spanish conquistadors, Bernal Díaz del Castillo (Stevenson, 1952, p. 3). In the words of Stevenson, “It is too much to expect that the conquerors who fought with Cortés should have been able dispassionately to have evaluated Aztec music. The memory of their own battles must surely have been too immediate and overwhelming” (p. 4). Some of the Spaniards were selected by the Aztecs to be sacrificed, and of course, these experiences color their compatriots’ written accounts. The following short excerpt is from a longer transcription of Bernal Díaz wherein he describes such a sacrificial ceremony: “The Mexicans offered great sacrifice and celebrated festivals every night and sounded their cursed drum, trumpets, kettle drums and shells, and uttered yells and howls. Then they sacrificed our comrades […]” (p. 4).

Unfavorable verbal and visual depictions held sway over the presiding view of Aztec music until the 1920s. Mexico had been profoundly shaken, indeed, substantively altered by the Revolution of 1910. The post-revolutionary period coincided with the movement underway in Mexico supporting indigenous modes and tied in with the concepts of mestizaje, mexicanidad, and Mexican identity. It fostered a profound shift in transnational contexts “toward things native” and “away from Europeanized artificiality” and spanned artistic circles across Europe, Russia, the Americas, India, and Japan (López, 2006, pp. 23-4). Other world affairs at this time stimulated interest in the indigenous arts of Mexico and
coincided with profound changes in European art concepts; marked by admiration for ‘primitive’ arts and cultures and most particularly by the emergence of musical works such as _Le Sacre du Printemps_ by Igor Stravinsky and Sergei Prokofieff’s _Suite Scythe_ (Stevenson, p. 5). Carlos Chávez, who crafted a new Mexican art music, during this period supporting “a return to pre-Conquest musical ideals,” believed pre-Spanish music “expressed what is profoundest and deepest in the Mexican soul” (Chávez quoted in Stevenson, p. 6). Chávez found a way of musically describing an “imagined Indianness.” His compositions “integrate[d] the distinct sounds of the Mexican vernacular into a national art music” (Velázquez & Vaughan, 2006, p. 102).

**Early Civilizations in Ancient Mexico**

The name Mexico is derived from the Aztec war god’s name, _Mexitli_ (Slonimsky, 1972, p. 214). Other great civilizations in this land predating the Aztec were Maya, Toltec, Olmec, [Zapotec], and Yaqui from the [northern] Sonora tribe, who resisted the missions longer than any other group (Stevenson, p. 2).

The Maya civilization in the southern peninsular region has roots stemming back to 1,000 BCE and predates the rise of the Aztecs by more than one thousand years. If we go back even earlier, we find the Olmecs whose development in the southern part of Veracruz carried great importance for the Maya (Coe, 2011, p. 51). Anthropologist Michael Coe claims that, “Whether or not one thinks of the Olmecs as the ‘mother culture’ of Mesoamerica, the fact is that many other civilizations, including the Maya, were ultimately dependent on the Olmec achievement” (p. 53). A great many commonalities exist between the different people of Mesoamerica leading to the conclusion that they “must have shared a common origin, so far back in time that it may never be brought to light by archaeology”
(Coe, p. 13). Indeed, it has been revealed, “that much of complex culture in Mesoamerica has an Olmec origin” (p. 4). These shared traits were, as Coe remarks, “more or less peculiar to them and absent or rare elsewhere in the New World” (p. 13). Later, traits considered characteristically “Maya” developed. These included the corbel vault and roof comb, which are architectural features; the Long Count—theyir complex numerical and calendrical system; hieroglyphic writing; the stela-altar complex and many others (p. 24).

What forms of Mexican music and dance have endured to the present day?

Over the years, many influences have come together to comprise what is considered today to be Mexican music and dance. Despite the lack of attention to Mexican folk dance in academic studies, its use and application “as folklore by various groups for different political ends and [that it] has played a pivotal role in the hegemonic struggle in two nations” (Nájera-Ramírez, 1989, p. 30) must not be ignored.

Spanish influence included elements characteristic of Andalusian and Arabic cultures; these merged within different indigenous groups from various regions of Mexico. The Aztec imprint may still be considered the most salient of all (Schoen, 1982). Some aspects of the diverse cultures involved may have clashed while others were melded into new forms. The syncretism brought about in Mexico through the mixing of cultural influences and belief systems endures today. But in many instances, the dance has been reinvented. “In Mexico the dance is an expression of popular religion, originating in pre-Hispanic and colonial times, that has managed to stay alive till present times as a form of devotion associated with the central images of Catholicism” (De la Torre, 2009, p. 19). Earlier, Lafaye noted, “A man is better defined by his beliefs than by his ideas” (1987, p. x). Music and dance give shape and structure to folk beliefs and ideas, these born of a spiritual
dimension, become animated through earthly vessels. Creative expression is made manifest by means of bodly movements as they take form via these modes which possess an ability to convey the wordless, the ineffable.

More than 80 years ago Gamio (1930) found that religious practice of the Mexican immigrant underwent considerable change in the United States but found it was not the case with the folklore (p. 76). He states:

Materially, [the Mexican immigrant] becomes identified with modern American civilization—housing, clothing, domestic utensils, use of machinery, etc.—all these [she/he make their] own. But his folk-lorism is not only retained; it continues developing and spreads to Americans of Mexican origin and even to native Americans” (76).

**Continuity and Change in Passing Along Ancestral Knowledge**

Many traits shared by these various cultures would later be transplanted within the Aztec culture. The dance and its corresponding music were a feature of ritual celebrations and established a historical continuity in “reinventing the myth of the nation” (De la Torre, 2009, p. 20). Mexican dancers today strive to keep ancestral knowledge alive, for instance, the concheros (or Aztec dancers) and the Voladores, who, as they dive into the air and fall from the sky, “die to live.” Canícula, a recent Mexican documentary film about the Voladores de Papantla shows this ritual is enacted to ensure health, fertility, and life’s necessities for everyone (Alvarez, 2011). The Voladores is a dance of ancient times that is still intact and practiced today. (Volador means one who flies.)

**Los Voladores**

Sitting on the large plaza in front of the National Museum of Anthropology (El Museo Nacional de Antropología) in Mexico City in the summer of 2004, I heard what sounded to me like calliope music and followed it to Chapultepec Park across the street. It was here I
came upon los voladores. Certainly what I saw that warm, sunny day was something I’d never before encountered. Not knowing what was before me, my initial impression upon seeing the circle of dancers suspended from ropes in the air was that they were acrobats who “danced.” As Luis Bruno Ruiz explains:

Es una especie de danza de la muerte, aunque por otro lado, hace comprender que el antiguo mexicano tenía la preocupación de la tendencia del hombre por alcanzar la libertad del pájaro, una demostración palpable de primarias inquietudes del alma, o sea inquietudes universales (pp. 31-2).

(It is a kind of dance of death, although on the other hand, it makes us understand that the ancient Mexicans had a preoccupation with the wish of mankind to achieve the freedom of a bird, a palpable demonstration of basic longings of the soul, that is, of a universal restlessness.)

Los Concheros

Taking names of Catholic saints, the conchero groups have reinterpreted and given new life to Aztec deities or divine essences from their indigenous belief system by combining them, and instead evoking icons in the Catholic tradition. This sacred tradition survived through the vision of the ancestors who “took common religious elements, changed the names of the ancient divinities and translated the songs; always struggling to maintain the ritual cycles and their objectives” (González quoted in Huerta, 2009, p. 9). It is said that the dance can be traced to the Battle of San Gremal, which took place in 1531 in Querétaro between the non-Christian Indians and those who were converted. In the midst of fighting, “the sky turned dark and a cross appeared in the sky” and this ended the fighting on both sides. The dance is a means of venerating the cross (Ceseña, 2009, p. 94).

The continuing practices of los voladores and los concheros are an indication that what whispers from a distant past is still kept alive by the sense of ancestral lineage in the
present day. Remnants of customs from other regional areas are also blended into local
music, dances, and practices although not entirely without changes.

In order to develop a deeper understanding of the impact of Mexico’s heritage of
musical culture upon the constituents of the dance community in this study, I have
investigated some of the important characteristics of music and dance of the ancient
Aztecs, as well as of other earlier aboriginal peoples dating from the pre-Conquest period
and onward. The scope of this study will necessarily be limited rather than exhaustive. A
myriad of threads have spun the musical life of Mexico. It should already be apparent that
this history is extraordinarily multifaceted with layer forming upon layer.

Accordingly, what follows will provide an overview and essential contexts that bear
upon the study. Four historic time frames will be briefly reviewed: the pre-Conquest period
covers the years prior to 1521 (also known as the pre-Cortesian period); the Colonial
Period from 1521-1821; the period of Independence from 1821-1910; and The Revolution
of 1910 to modern times.

**Pre-Conquest (Pre-Cortesian) Period**

Descriptions of early aboriginal music and dance prior to the Conquest are primarily, as
Gerard Béhague (1980) states, “from three main sources: archaeology, testimony of
observers during the initial period of contact, and analysis of vocabularies and grammars of
Indian languages” (p. 6). In addition to written accounts recorded by missionaries, some
forms of visual arts may exist as evidence, and archaeological findings of instruments are a
favored method in studying music from buried cultures (Stevenson, 1952). These methods
of analysis enable “a detailed reconstruction of the instrumentation of Indian music”
(Béhague, p. 6), but they leave much room for imaginative interpretations of what life
really was like in the distant past. McNeill comments: "Art, therefore, like literature, can tell us little about the history of community-wide dancing, even if the figures of the Trois Frères cave [known for its paintings located in southwest France] suggest that dancers (perhaps already professionalized) existed in Paleolithic times" (p. 40).

Music of ancient Mexico was not evident apart from religious or civic ceremonies (Slonimsky, 1972, p. 217). Bruno Ruiz also states, "Como se notará, la alta danza mexicana precortesiana era religiosa, lo ha sido esencialmente la gran danza oriental" (pp. 22-23). (As you will notice, the high pre-Cortesian Mexican dance forms were religious, as have been, essentially, all the great oriental dances.) Although the accounts of missionaries are relied upon as clearly providing a general account of music and dance in ancient Mexico, at the same time "missionaries as a group are often accused of having attacked everything Indian" (Stevenson, p. 16). Stevenson also contributes an organizing framework:

The three lines of investigation which have been most fruitfully pursued by Mexican scholars who during recent years have studied pre-Conquest music have been (1) the systematic study of the musical instruments which such peoples as the Aztecs, Mayas, and Tarascans are known to have used (2) the assembling of opinions on Aztec music from sixteenth-century authors who were friendly to Indian culture rather than opposed to it (3) the collection of melodies from certain out-of-the-way Indian groups which even today after the lapse of centuries may still preserve in their music some of the basic elements found in the pre-Cortesian system (1952, p. 8).

In Breve Historia de La Danza en México, Bruno Ruiz writes that many reported accounts of prehispanic dance in the sixteenth century (XVI), especially Friar Bernardino de Sahagún and others such as Motolinia, Mendieta, Dúran, Torquemada, and Landa talk of their grand choreography. Bruno Ruiz observed that none of their accounts, however, provides a deep study dedicated to its aesthetic message (p. 22). "Sólo nos dicen la majestad y esplendor de las fiestas de danza y música, donde participan miles de bailarines, que
asombraban por la perfección técnica con que actuaban” (p. 22). (They only speak of the
majesty and splendor of the celebrations of dance and music, where thousands of dancers
participated and amazed with the technical perfection of their performance.) An important
insight that Bruno Ruiz shares concerns the word Maceualitzlli, which was a night when
religious Mexican dance was performed. Referring to Motolinia's account he says, “Tenían
ese baile por obra meritoria así como en las obras de caridad, de penitencia y en las otras
virtudes hechas por buen fin” (p. 23). (The dance was performed for works of merit, works
of charity, of penance and other events created for the greater good.) In addition, according
to Motolinia, the noun "dance" or "ballet" in Nahuatl (language of the Aztecs) is
Maceualitzlli, from the word Maceua: to dance, to do penitence. Netotilizlli, from Netolli: a
vow, a promise, was also used synonymously (Bruno Ruiz, 1956).

Bruno Ruiz describes the use of masks as having played an important role in
ancient dances of Mexico, “sirve para liberar los secretos del alma” (p. 30). (Serving to free
the secrets of the soul.) Often masks were shaped as the heads of animals,

Lo más importante de los antiguos mexicanos, referente a la danza es que tenían un
concepto de la misma: por ello disfrazábanse de animales que consideraban
mágicos. La mascara era fundamental, pues con ella los danzantes tomaban la forma
de otro ser que estaba al servicio de sus ideas y de su religion (p. 29).

(What was most important for the ancient Mexicans in regard to their use of dance
is that they were conceptual about it: that is why they disguised themselves as
animals that were considered magical (or sacred). The mask was fundamental, as
with it the dancers took on another form in the service of their ideas and religion.)

Owing to the efforts of Friar Bernardino de Sahagún, who helped in preserving Aztec
poetry, we know that their music had lyrical qualities as well, which revealed “the
contemplative and delicate interior life of the Indian poets” (Chávez, 1940, p. 7). In his
research Chávez found: “All this poetry was sung. Its music must have been completely
distinct from the military music and that of the great dance ceremonies” (p. 7). There was another known literary form, also sung. This form of singing expressed, “narrations of stories and occurrences, a form similar to the Spanish romance [ballad] and to the music of the troubadours” (p. 7). (It is highly likely that these were included in civil ceremonies. Chávez, however, has not provided specific information on the circumstances of these types of performances.)

In conversation with David, one of my study’s participants, he spoke of the prevalence of the folk in Mexican schools. While reading Chávez’s description much later, I began to realize there is still an ancestral thread connecting ancient practices and Mexico today:

*David:* [In Mexico, every secundaria, equivalent to middle school] every preparatoria [equivalent to high school] has a dance company, you know, a Mexican folklórico dance company. So, it’s in our blood; we hear it all the time and we see it constantly.

*Pamela:* And, they still have that?

*David:* I think so. You know, I’ve not been involved with a school system, but I know that a lot of the younger folk that I meet here in New York, had that experience or have seen a group or they have a group in their school and so on...

*Pamela:* And, it’s a social space for young people.

*David:* I think so. Yeah, yeah. That’s really what it is. It’s like... you have... cheerleading, you have fencing, you have... I’m just trying to compare stuff that [...] is here [in the U.S. regularly]. Over there [in Mexico] there’s folklórico, there’s poesía coral, which is like choral poetry, there’s other arts activities that are... that are constant.
Social life was well regulated in early Mexico, and “the key word of Mesoamerican society is order” (Todorov, 1999, p. 66). Emphasis was placed on the group or the collective society. The priests who function as the “repository of social knowledge” impact the society as a whole, which in turn determines the fate of its individual members. Todorov remarks: “In Indian society of the period, the individual himself does not represent a social totality but is merely the constitutive element of that other totality, the collectivity” (p. 67).

*The Role of Music and Dance in Pre-Cortesian Mexico*

Musical instruments had a highly important function in the social regulation of life as expressed through music and dance. An account attributed to Torquemada describes the scene:

The Gentlemen, and other Principals and Old men, went in front of the Instruments, dancing and singing. Around them another circle formed and increased the chorus. Those who moved thus in the big Villages were sometimes more than a thousand, and even sometimes two thousand (Torquemada as quoted in Chávez, 1940, p. 6)

Rarely did men and women dance together in pre-Cortesian Mexico, and “[e]rotic themes in pre-Conquest music are extremely difficult to find” (Stevenson, p. 28). On the theme of collectivity, Stevenson further notes, “Music was regarded as essentially a means of communal rather than of individual expression, and, therefore, concerted rather than solo music was the norm” (p. 18). Musicians held a place of esteem in the society. Music was taken seriously and was meticulously prepared; early narratives told of musicians who erred and were “immediately withdrawn from the ensemble and executed” (p. 25).

*Pre-Conquest Instruments*

Our knowledge of pre-Conquest music is largely attributable to the preservation of musical instruments of which an enormous collection still exists (Slonimsky, 1972, p. 214). The ornate carvings on them show an array of figures such as “gods, houses, ceremonial objects,
and dates” (Stevenson, p. 14). The information provided by “the carvings are like pages from the pre-Cortesian codices,” giving insights and important details on “the exact time and place the instrument was to have been used; the exact part it was to have played in the ceremonial functions at which it was heard; the length of time it was to have been sounded; the exact persons who were designated to play upon it” (Stevenson, p. 14). It has been determined that “All pre-Conquest instruments were either idiophones, aerophones, or membranophones. Stringed instruments [chordophones] were entirely unknown in pre-Cortesian Mexico” (p. 9). Reasonable evidence has helped determine that Aztec instruments were capable of producing sounds of a tonal system that included the intervals of the octave, fifth, fourth, and third (Schoen, 1982, p. 25). (For a more detailed account of musical instruments in the pre-Conquest period, see Appendix B.)

One of the pioneers in musical archaeology, François-Joseph Fétis, drew conclusions about Egyptian music based on his study of Egyptian flutes (Stevenson, 1952). Others who followed “conducted exhaustive studies in the music of the ancient Sumerians and Babylonians, and in the music of the ancient Greeks” (Stevenson, 1952, p. 8). In the case of Mexico, Daniel Castañeda and Vicente T. Mendoza used Fétis’s archaeological methods to investigate early indigenous instruments. Castañeda and Mendoza concluded, "An essential sameness prevailed everywhere in the type of instruments used” (p. 8); the same instruments had different names applied to them in the various languages of the pre-Conquest period (p. 8). In the period after the Revolution of 1910, Carlos Chávez would resurrect the use of many of these instruments incorporating them into his musical compositions. In recent times, the celebrated Venezuelan conductor, Gustavo Dudamel, led the Simón Bolívar Symphony Orchestra of Venezuela in a performance of one of Chávez’s

The instruments used by the ancients in Mexico were principally of six types (the English word is followed by the indigenous equivalent in italics): Flutes, *Chililihti*; and ocarinas and panpipes, *Tlapitzalli*; Marine snail shell, *Atecocoli*; Vertical drum, *Huehuetl*; Horizontal drum, *Teponaxtle*; Calabash rasps, *Tzicahuaztli*; and bone rasps, *Omichitzicahuaztli*; Gourd filled with pebbles (like a rattle), *Ayacaztli* (Slonimsky, p. 215).

Ancient Mexican music, tied to religious and civic ceremonies, was critically linked to the fundamental organization of social structure. In this era, Mexicans, like the early Greeks, considered music to be an essential component of educating youth (Bruno Ruiz, 1956). “Existían entre los aztecas casas de la danza llamadas cuicalli o cuicacuilli, en donde también se enseñaba a los jóvenes a cantar, tocar instrumentos músicos, con objeto de formar bailarines conscientes del ritmo y el movimiento” (pp. 24-5). (Houses of dance, called *cuicalli* or *cuicacuilli*, existed among the Aztecs where youth were also taught to sing [and] play musical instruments, with the objective of forming highly conscientious dancers aware of rhythm and movement.) With this insight, we can better understand why music and dance continue to hold a place of importance in Mexican communities today.

Drums had a central role and were integrally connected to movements of the dance. *Huehuetl* were single-skin vertical drums of which there were three sizes: the *Huehuetl* proper was the smallest, followed by the medium-sized *panhuehuetl*, and the largest drum was *tlapanhuehuetl* (Slonimsky, 1972). The *panhuehuetl* and the *tlapanhuehuetl* were both associated with war. *Huehuetl* means drum (*huehue* means elder), *Pan* means upon, and *Tla*, instrument (Slonimsky, p. 216). They are described as being played with the fingers or
hands like the more modern Bongo drum. “El huehuete imitaba a la danza, y el panhuehuete y el tlalpanhuehuete anidaba el grito largo de Guerra, el llamado de batalla” (Bruno Ruiz, p. 29). (The huehuete mimicked the dance, and the long war cry, the call of battle dwelled inside of the panhuehuete and the tlalpanhuehuete.) The following description depicts a scene of the dance formation as well as the hierarchical social structure:

At pre-Columbian festivities, the teponaztli and huéhuete were usually placed on a grass mat at the centre of the dancing area, the dancers—often hundreds—moving round them in concentric circles. The nobility danced in the inner circles, and, to synchronize with the dancers in the outer circles, abbreviated their steps, while those in the outermost circles danced at twice the speed; thus all the circles completed a revolution in the dance at the same time. Choreography, melodic shape and drum rhythms were so coordinated that the rise and fall of the dancer’s arms and feet matched the rise and fall of the melody in the song and the pitches of the drums. A drum terminology based on four syllables and a suffix (ti, to, ki, ko, and -n) must therefore, besides indicating drum rhythms, have related to choreography and song pitch. A noteworthy feature of this system is its duality of consonant and vowel (t versus k, i versus o), which possibly relate to the high or low drum pitch, positions of arms and feet in the dance, the two pitch levels of the Nahualt language, or to the left as opposed to the right hand (Béhague, Stanford & Chamorro, 1980).

These gleanings provide a basis from which to gain but a glimpse of some of the sights and sounds that were a part of life in the pre-Conquest civilization. The arrival of the Spaniards would forever change that way of life. The encounter between Europeans who ventured into “new” territories in the early sixteenth century and “discovered” the indigenous people of those lands, “perpetrated the greatest genocide in human history” (Todorov, p. 5). Both the conquerors and the natives have described this confrontation, and I will include brief excerpts from the two different views. This conflict, as Miguel León-Portilla (1992) aptly states, “was something more than a meeting between two expanding nations; it was the meeting of two radically dissimilar cultures, two radically different modes of interpreting existence” (p. xxxiii). Music and dance played a key role and were at
the core of this radical transformation. The next section provides a cursory account of the
shift precipitated by the Spanish presence.

The Conquest and Early Colonization of Mexico

*Broken Spears lie in the roads;
we have torn our hair in grief.*
*The houses are roofless now, and their walls
are red with blood...*

From *Elegy for Tenochtitlan* (León-Portilla, 1992)

European possession of the territories we now call the Americas “was one of the most
significant occurrences in human history” and had profound influences for the history of
humankind (Fletcher, 2001, p. 483). The world population in 1500 was approximately 400
million with 80 million inhabiting the Americas. “By the middle of the sixteenth century,
out of these 80 million, there remain ten [10 million]” (Todorov, p. 133), which constituted
the destruction of about 90 percent of the population. Tzvetan Todorov states, “If the word
genocide has ever applied to a situation with some accuracy, this is here the case” (p. 133).

Hernando Cortés came to the shores of Mexico in 1519. Spain, as a result, eventually
gained influence over Mexican lands during the colonial period of 1521-1821, and the
concomitant interactions caused profound changes to the aboriginal societies and their
regional musical cultures. In the centuries preceding the Aztec Empire, there arose a
splendid city, “the great city of the gods”—Teotihuacan. Also referred to as the “Ancient
City of Pyramids,” it became one of the great civilizations with a population of more than
100,000 and has been referred to as “the greatest city ever seen in the Pre-Columbian New
World” (Coe, 2011, p. 93). Little by little, the Teotihuacan culture spread and shifted into a
composite culture; led by their great culture-hero Quetzalcoatl, the Toltec Empire grew
(León-Portilla, 1992). It is said that the Toltecs “were superb artisans, devout worshipers,
skillful tradesmen—extraordinary persons in every way” (p. xxx). According to legend, Quetzalcoatl “is forced to leave his kingdom and flees to the east” (Todorov, p. 117) departing with a promise that “someday he would return from across the sea” (León-Portilla, p. xxx).

The ancient Aztecs or Mexicas, (pronounced Meh-shee-kahs) who later would become conquerors themselves (see Appendix A), were a nomadic tribe that came from the north; they could not settle amiably in any of the then flourishing city-states and were described as “undesirable foreigners” (León-Portilla, p. xxxii). Finally, following “a whole series of defeats and humiliations, the Aztecs succeeded in establishing themselves on an island in the lake” (p. xxxii). The ancient codices bring to light that this occurred in the year 1325 marking the initial establishment of Tenochtitlan, situated in what we now know as Mexico City. Todorov poses the question: why did the Indians in the regions Cortés and his men first traveled through not offer more resistance to them? (p. 58). His answer is that: “the Indians in the regions Cortés first passed through [were] not more impressed by his imperialist intentions because they [had] already been conquered and colonized—by the Aztecs” (p. 58).

The “fierce will” of the Aztecs enabled them to overcome all obstacles. Within a century or so, they grew to be independent and developed into the Aztec civilization (León-Portilla, 1992). Under the rulership of Itzcoatl (1428-1440), the power and wealth of Tenochtitlan grew considerably. His nephew, Tlacaelel, acted as royal counselor and was a shrewd advisor. The reinvention of Aztec history has been attributed to him as well as the escalation of human sacrifice. Notably, “exalted praise [was] given to what can only be
called a mystical conception of warfare, dedicating the Aztec people, ‘the people of the sun,’ to the conquest of all other nations” (p. xxxviii).

Due to Tlacaelel’s ability to alter “religious thought and ritual”, although human sacrifice was not unknown in the Valley of Mexico prior to the Aztecs, “no other tribe performed them with such frequency” (p. xxxix). Commenting on the use of human sacrifice, J. Eric Thompson (1966) reasons, that although it is “shocking,” perhaps one can comprehend it is “logical if [one] accepts the premise that the gods need human blood to give them strength to perform their tasks, and its corollary that it is the duty of a devout people to provide it” (p. 283). Capturing victims for sacrifice, therefore, became paramount as Huitzilopochtli-the-Sun, the source of all life, would die “unless it were fed with human blood” (León-Portilla, p. xxxix). Many years hence, as a result of this belief, the Aztecs maintained a perpetual state of war with neighboring Tlaxcala even though they could have easily overtaken them. The warring state served a dual purpose: it provided a means of “testing and training their younger warriors” (p. xli) as well as maintaining a ready supply and “nearby source of victims for their human sacrifices” (p. xli).

Aztec accounts of the Spanish arrival and eventual conquest were recorded in Nahuatl, the native language. Theirs was an oral tradition until the Spanish presence, which involved of numerous missionaries who helped develop a transliterated written version of native tongues. It is known that Nahuas had, and continue to have, a deep concern for their past (León-Portilla, 1992). The elite Indians were taught to write, and it spread to the others from them. It took quite a few years, therefore, for any indigenous histories to actually be written. In the Indians’ heavily descriptive testimonies they assert: “that everything happened because the Mayas and the Aztecs lost control of communication”
(Todorov, p. 61). As expressed in the Maya book of *Chilam Balam*, “Understanding is lost, wisdom is lost” (as quoted in Todorov, pp. 61-2).

The demise of Aztec rulership did not happen immediately after the Spanish appeared at the edge of the Aztec city on that fateful day in November 1519. Cortés, along with several hundred men, is dispatched to Mexico by the governor of Cuba, “but after the ships leave, this governor changes his mind and attempts to recall [him]” (Todorov, p. 54). When Cortés and his men arrive in the port city of Veracruz, he “declares himself to be under the direct authority of the king of Spain” (p. 54). Cortés learns of the Aztec Empire and, led by native guides, heads into the interior in the direction he believes it to be. En route to Mexico City, he and his men enter into battle with the Tlaxcaltecas who will later become their allies against the Aztecs (Todorov, 1999).

Many omens foretold the arrival of beings from the east. Having inherited some of Toltec culture, the Aztec ruler, Motecuhzoma (more commonly known as Moctezuma or Montezuma) welcomed the foreigners believing “the white men must be Quetzalcoatli and other gods, returning at last from across the waters now known as the Gulf of Mexico” (León-Portilla, p. xxv). In this manner, Cortés and his entourage gained entry to this extraordinary city “not only as guests, but also as gods coming home” (p. xxv). They were housed in the royal palace and “the Indians knelt down and adored them as sons of the Sun, their gods” (p. 58). When Cortés and his troops were greeted by Motecuhzoma’s men, they were showered with many gifts amongst which were “garlands of flowers, and ornaments for the breasts, and necklaces of gold, necklaces hung with rich stones” (p. 63).

In the Aztec historical accounts, Cortés and Motecuhzoma exchanged thoughts through two interpreters Cortés had brought with him. One was Jerónimo de Aguilar, a
Spaniard shipwrecked in the Yucatan, who settled there had become fluent in the Mayan language. The other was an Amerindian woman, Malinali (Hispanicized as Doña Marina) who had joined the Spaniards of her own free will; she spoke both Mayan and Nahuatl, which was the lingua franca of the wider central region. Malinali, who later became known as La Malinche, could translate the Nahuatl into Mayan and then Aguilar translated into Spanish for the conquistadors (León-Portilla, p. 31). In this way Motecuhzoma told Cortés that his arrival “was foretold by the kings who governed your city, and now it has taken place. You have come back to us; you have come down from the sky” (p. 64). In turn, Cortés reassured Motecuhzoma, “We have come to your house in Mexico as friends. There is nothing to fear” (p. 65). Doña Marina’s provided services to Cortés as his interpreter and guide and was later also his confidante and mistress (Cypess, 1991). Her essential role supporting the cause of the Spaniards has been greatly criticized throughout Mexican history. La Malinche, a name given to her by the Spaniards, and associated with the deception of her people, has remained quite controversial as a symbolic figure. An archetypal figure, the Mexican ‘Eve,’ her dual identity as mother of the Mexican nation and also its betrayer has been controversial (Cypess, 1991). Paz comments, “the Mexican people have not forgiven La Malinche for her betrayal” (Paz, 1961, p. 86).

Great uncertainty arose as to the nature of the strangers. (León-Portilla, p. 32). Were they gods or were they humans? The magicians, who were the wise men serving as counsel, were summoned but their attempts failed “to harm the Spaniards or to drive them away” (p. 32). The foods they preferred were also another alarming clue that they might not be gods. Motecuhzoma made offerings of blood available to the Spaniards by sending captives to them to be sacrificed in their presence in order to honor the gods. The conquistadors
became disgusted when the sacrifices were carried out, and "They refused to eat the food that was sprinkled with blood [...] it sickened them" (p. 33). Instead, these strangers preferred “the tortillas, the eggs and the hens, and fruit of every variety: guavas, avocados, prickly pears and many other kinds that grow here” (p. 34). His brother, Cuitlahuac, counseled Motecuhzoma warning him: “I pray to our gods that you will not let the strangers into your house. They will cast you out of it and overthrow your rule, and when you try to recover what you have lost, it will be too late” (p. 61).

Despite the spoken words of Cortés to elicit friendship, “When the Spaniards were permitted to enter the Royal House, they placed Motecuhzoma under guard and kept him under their vigilance” (León-Portilla, pp. 65-6). Meanwhile, Cortés learns of a new Spanish expedition on Mexico’s shores sent by the Cuban governor. Accompanied by some of his men, he set off to meet this army, leaving the rest behind under the command of his deputy, Pedro de Alvarado, who was said to be as handsome as he was brutal (León-Portilla, p. 70).

There are varying accounts translated from the codices of the Aztec massacre that took place during the celebration of the Fiesta of Toxcatl, which honors the god, Huitzilopochtli. Several indigenous texts describe the massacre and the importance of the fiesta. As recorded by the Franciscan Friar Sahagún, “It was like our Easter and fell at almost the same time” (León-Portilla, p. 70). While Cortés was away, a “delegation of the celebrants came to the palace where Motecuhzoma was a prisoner” (León-Portilla, p. 71) asking his permission to hold the festival, and it was granted. The Spaniards too encouraged the fiesta, as they wanted to see how it was celebrated (p. 71). The importance of the festival and the centrality of the music and dance to carrying out the ceremony were fundamental to their way of being in the world. (The Aztec records detail many other
rituals carried out leading to the day of celebration. For a more comprehensive telling see *Broken Spears.* ) “All the young warriors were eager for the fiesta to begin. They had sworn to dance and sing with all their hearts, so that the Spaniards would marvel at the beauty of the rituals” (León-Portilla, p. 73). As the Aztec account describes, “The procession began, and the celebrants filed into the temple patio to dance the Dance of the Serpent. When they were all together in the patio, the songs and the dance began” (p. 73). It is here on the Sacred Patio that the massacre occurs:

At this moment in the fiesta, when the dance was loveliest and when song was linked to song, the Spaniards were seized with an urge to kill the celebrants. They all ran forward, armed as if for battle. They closed the entrances and passageways, all the gates of the patio [...] They posted guards so that no one could escape, and then rushed into the Sacred Patio to slaughter the celebrants. They came on foot, carrying their swords and their wooden or metal shields.

They ran in among the dancers, forcing their way to the place where the drums were played. They attacked the man who was drumming and cut off his arms. Then they cut off his head, and it rolled across the floor (León-Portilla, pp. 74, 76).

And, from the Codex Aubin: “After that there was a general slaughter until the patio was heaped with corpses” (León-Portilla, p. 81). Cortés returns to Mexico City only to have to flee at night with the other Spaniards but returns again in 1521 for their final victory.

“The Spaniards burn Mexicans’ books in order to wipe out their religion; they destroy their monuments in order to abolish any memory of a former greatness” (p. 60). There is an ironic twist and uncanny parallel here as “[A] hundred years earlier, during the reign of Iztcoatl, the Aztecs themselves had destroyed all the old books in order to rewrite history in their own fashion” (p. 60).

At this point, in the epic account of events, blood begins to mix and crossbreeding leads to the creation of a new people and a novel culture. “Quiérase o no, la cultura europea a partir de la Conquista, tiene repercusión decisiva en el arte mexicano” (Bruno Ruiz, p. 55).
(Whether we like it or not, European culture left by the Conquest, had decisive repercussions in Mexican art.) The question and construction of ‘other’ needs to be addressed here. It is not that Cortés has no understanding of the Aztec culture; it could be said that he even admires their civilization. As Todorov points out, “The paradox for the understanding-that-kills might be readily resolved if we observed at the same time, among those who understand, an entirely negative value judgment of the Other” (p. 127). In fact, Cortés even considers Aztec natives to be “of much greater intelligence than those of the other islands” (p. 127). They are viewed as being different, and it is this very difference that needs to be subjugated. Nonetheless, it is not only the Spaniards who see the Amerindians as different; the reverse is true, too. “From the European point of view, the encounter meant contact with unexpected and radically different people, but to the Indians, the Europeans’ arrival was equally and perhaps more astonishing” (León-Portilla, p. 185).

The destruction of the Aztec metropolis and the cataclysmic shift to a new and different world-view paved the way for the building of European-fashioned cities (León-Portilla, 1992). The losses during the fall and metamorphosis of the Aztec Empire were monumental:

Most of the pre-Columbian traditions and other testimonies, including books of paintings and glyphic characters, were lost. In this manner, the Mesoamericans were substantially deprived of their historical memory and even of the possibility of reconstructing it, for their ancient priests and sages had been silenced (p. 184).

The Colonial Period (1521-1821)

One agent of transformation in the Colonial era was the use of music in worship. The end of the native way of life brought about a dynamic change in how music and dance were employed as “the church militantly opposed ritual dances and songs” and in 1526, the advent of European music was implanted on Mexican soil. At the behest of Juan Ortiz
permission was granted for a school of dance to be opened “for the embellishment of the city” (Slonimsky, pp. 219-220).

Cortés had brought several musicians with him on the journey. Stevenson notes, “the amazing speed with which European music was taken up and mastered by the Indians immediately after the arrival of the Conquerors affords us convincing proof of the innate musicality of the aborigines” (p. 51). In 1526, a companion of, Cortés known as Ortiz, described as “tocador de bihuela y ensenaba a danzar” [a guitarist and teacher of dance], established a dancing school in Mexico City (Chase, p. 258).

Fray Pedro de Gante, a Flemish musician and cousin of Emperor Charles V (Slonimsky, p. 219), established the first music school in Mexico in 1524. A Franciscan missionary, Fray Pedro learned the Nahuatl language and achieved remarkable results giving the Indians musical instruction. He devised an educational plan and aided by “twelve newly arrived Franciscan missionaries,” introduced the aboriginal elite to European notation and technique (Chase, pp. 257-8). According to Gilbert Chase, “They began by teaching the Indians to copy music neatly and clearly, and after a year of this preliminary training the study of ecclesiastical chant was taken up” (p. 258). Their cardinal mission undoubtedly was “to train musicians for the service of the church, to whose liturgy music was an indispensable adjunct. Before long, Indian singers and instrumentalists were taking part in church services in virtually every village throughout the territory occupied by the Spaniards” (Chase, p. 258). Pedro de Gante’s approach was widely adopted by other missionaries. “His importance as an educator has been stressed by recent historians of education in Mexico” (Stevenson, p. 54). Of note is that one Mexican musician by the name of Sahagún “composed 365 chants in the Aztec language, one for every day of the year”
(Slonimsky, p. 220). Notably, there also was an indigenous polyphonic choir formed as early as 1530 renowned at the time for its “‘remarkable music accomplishment’” (Fletcher, p. 494). It was in Mexico that the first book of musical notation in the western hemisphere was published. As Slonimsky details, “It was an Ordinary of the Mass printed in Mexico City in 1556” (p. 219).

Stories circulated of the interactions of Spanish soldiers with the Indian women. Complaints were made to Cortés that some of his leaders “had carried off the wives and daughters of a great number of chieftains” (Todorov, p. 58). After an investigation, it was concluded: “Most of the women chose to follow neither father, mother, nor husband, but indeed to remain with the soldiers of which they had become the companions” (pp. 58-9). Most, if not all of the conquistadores, lacked knowledge of the indigenous languages. It stands to reason then, that dance and music could and would be used as a form of communication and to enhance interactions with native women. “Se dice que esta clase de danzas fue la que emplearon los conquistadores para danzar con las mujeres nativas, y así sembraron la esencia de muchas danzas que actualmente aplaudimos en nuestro territorio” (Bruno Ruiz, p. 38). (It is said that this kind of dance was that employed by the conquistadors to dance with the native women, and in this way the essence of many of the dances that we currently applaud in our territory was sown.) And so, it is conceivable that in this vein the sprouting of the dance-of-two came into being on Mexican soil. Slonimsky adds, “The dances and songs of contemporary Mexico are entirely Spanish in structure” (p. 217). Even though the form or structure of the dance may have a high degree of Spanish influence, threads of the autochthonous are often fused in the content or manner of the dances.
The eighteenth century saw the introduction of the first opera written by a native Mexican; in accordance with dominant trends, it was performed in Italian. This event “presaged two centuries of Italian domination in Mexican music” (p. 220). By the latter part of the century, composition of secular and religious works flourished and pianos in upper class homes were fashionable. Simultaneously, enthusiasm for European salon dances boomed even though authorities warned against dances wherein both sexes participated, claiming they were “a danger to public morals.” Although this activity became prohibited and punishable by six months’ imprisonment, people were not deterred from dancing (Slonimsky, p. 220).

_**La China Poblana**_

One of the most popular images of the quintessential Mexican woman is that of _La China Poblana_ wearing the favorite national costume, one employed to typify the colorful spirit of old Mexico (Woodward, 1935). Several distinct versions of the legendary _China Poblana_ offer explanations of how the iconic image and the costume eventually forged the lasting “national archetype of the virtuous Mexican woman” (Gillespie, 1998, p. 19) both nationally and internationally. “In the _china poblana_ lies the very essence of Mexicanness” (de Orellana, 2003, p. 65).

The distinctive costume worn by the woman, _el vestido de china_, is predominantly “red and green [...] in the dress, with black and gold ornaments” probably in imitation of Andalusian women’s costumes (Chase, 1959, p. 268). Woodward notes that the costume combines elements of dress from both the native and European influences. The loose cotton “peasant-style” embroidered white blouse, with a scooped neckline, is associated with Indian garments while the skirt appears to be of European origin. Together these
articles of clothing have come to represent the national costume; the combination of the colors of red and green, the skirt, and white, the blouse, are those of the national flag.

Colonel Antonio Carreón, it is said, invented the legend of the china poblana which can be traced back to the enigmatic and venerable Catarina de San Juan said to have been “a mystic and ascetic born in India in 1613,” who turned into “one of the most unique personalities in colonial Puebla” (Tibón, 2003, p. 66).

The swishing of the long skirt with its sparkling sequins, the rebozo (hand-made shawl), and the colorful embroidered flowers adorning the blouse—“all the elements of the traditional costume transport young girls to a kind of fantasy world—not a borrowed one, but our own” (de Orellana, 2003, p. 65). Many of the children watching the Nochtlica Dance Company performances during the time period in which I carried out my research, saw their teacher onstage as the China Poblana dancing the Jarabe Tapatío, one of Mexico’s most popular dances, also known in the U.S as the Mexican Hat Dance. Surely an enchanting and memorable experience for a young child to behold! As Slonimsky clarifies, the Jarabe, meaning “syrup,” descended from the Spanish Zapateado with its rhythm similar to the Mazurka. “It is in three-four time, with occasional interpolations of six-eight time. Despite its European derivation, the Jarabe is stamped with the Mexican spirit” (p. 218).

The Jarabe, most likely, originated from traditional Spanish dance forms such as the seguidillas and the fandango commingling with the zapateado (rhythmical stamping and tapping of the feet), an element typical of the Andalusian region (Sanford 2012). The successive movements and corresponding tempi of the dance range from adagio to presto (Chase, 1959). The jarabe falls within a larger classification of all popular song and dance forms of a generic type called son, which emanated from the peasant or rural areas
(Stanford & Chamorro, 1980). A distinguishing trait of sones (plural) is the unequal triple rhythm based on patterns of six beats. The son is a couple dance characterized by rapid footwork, or zapateado, with the rhythmic stamping of the feet on the ground or upon a tarima (a raised wooden [box-like] platform) (Béhague et al., 1980) producing resonant patterns of sound. Mariachi music itself, so well known and of such wide appeal, derives from son.

La Independencia (1821-1910) and the Revolutionary Period (1910-1919)

Music and dance throughout the period called La Independencia continued to be greatly influenced by European standards. Mexico’s musical scene, as mentioned, was dominated by Italian operas. The Conservatorio Nacional de Música was founded during this period, in 1877 (Béhague et al., 1980). After the Revolution of 1910, sweeping aesthetic and ideological changes stimulated new developments in almost all fields of endeavor.

Merging Ballet and Mexican Folk Dances

Anna Pavlova, the world-renowned Russian prima ballerina, first performed a notable version of the Jarabe Tapatío: it married ballet and Mexican danza folkórica. “One of the first documented experiments occurred in 1919, when Anna Pavlova, […] danced the ‘Jarabe tapatío’ on point in one of her presentations in Mexico” (Nájera-Ramírez, 2009, p. 279). As a result, the dance became known around the world and Pavlova later incorporated it into her performance repertory. La Argentina, a famous flamenco dancer, also performed the Jarabe Tapatío.

The term ballet folkórico came about from the merger of classical ballet and Mexican regional folk dances (Nájera-Ramírez, 2009). “The most well-known dance company of this genre is the Ballet Folkórico de México, founded in 1952 and directed by the late Amalia
Hernández” (p. 279). Several of the participants in my own research study have followed in the tradition inspired by the work of Hernández. They have either taken classes with her company or been influenced by her works. She was a force in the promotion of Mexican culture and created “staged spectacles’ of dance and music, informed by anthropological as well as historical research [on] the people and customs of ancient and contemporary Mexico” (pp. 279-80).

The foregoing overview and related history should serve as a stepping-stone toward understanding the ways in which music and dance have been and remain of great importance to people of Mexico and those of Mexican heritage in other localities and countries, including, most significantly, the United States.
CHAPTER 5

The Mexican Presence and Its Movement in the New York Metropolitan Area

The Sea

A single entity, but no blood.
A single caress, death or a rose.
The sea comes in and puts our lives together
and attacks alone and spreads itself and sings
in nights and days and men and living creatures.
Its essence—fire and cold; movement, movement.

El Mar

Un solo ser, pero no hay sangre.
Una sola caricia, muerte o rosa.
Viene el mar y reúne nuestras vidas
y solo ataca y se repartee y canta
En noche y día y hombre y criatura.
La esencia : fuego y frio : movimiento.

Pablo Neruda (Fully Empowered)

In Aztec cosmology, Cipactli (a Nahuatl word) is the first day of the sacred calendar of 260 days; it is creating order out of chaos—a good day for beginnings—and is symbolized by a crocodile, needing both water and the earth to sustain life. The sacred calendar is shared by all Mesoamerican cultures. I refer to it here not in a precise calendrical usage but instead to mark the beginning of my relationship with the dance community and my presence in the dance classes. I chose other Nahuatl words to punctuate section headings as a way of incorporating a representation of an indigenous presence.

Cipactli (The Beginning)

The first day I visited the studio where the children’s dance classes were taking place was in the summer of 2008. At that time, a young woman, Claudia, a second-generation Mexican American (Mexican mother and Colombian father), was teaching. As I sat in the corner of the studio room watching, I was impressed by how engaged the children were in the activities of the class. Although I had originally
come to the studio to look for early childhood-aged youth singing Mexican folkloric children’s songs in Spanish, or perhaps other indigenous Mexican languages, I quickly became intrigued by what I was seeing in the dance studio classroom that day. Claudia spoke to the children in both Spanish and English. I recall being struck by how her teaching flowed between the two languages. For those who are multilingual, as Suresh Canagarajah (2011) notes, “translanguaging is a naturally occurring phenomenon” (p. 402). In an expanded description, he states translanguaging is “the ability of multilingual speakers to shuttle between languages, treating the diverse languages that form their repertoire as an integrated system” (p. 401).

The dynamics of the class activities captured my interest, and I grew excited at the possibility of further exploration. The initial intention of this study was to investigate the values of mexicanidad (Mexicanness) that can be garnered through musical culture. It further looks at ways in which Mexican heritage is transmitted to children within a Mexican urban community through music and dance activities taught by members of the Nochtlaca Dance Company, a grassroots Mexican folkloric dance and music (folklórico) organization based in New York City. The study reveals the interface between the ethnic group’s social life and the networks formed through their musical activities as they are expressed and carried out within this community. It highlights the role of music and dance of a predominantly immigrant community in an outside-of-school setting, their adaptive function within the larger sociocultural environment, and their capacity for communicating inherent values to
the children. Folklorist Alan Lomax spoke of folklore having a “general ethical tone, a kind of rudimentary approach to life” (2003, p. 116).

As a participant observer, I visited the dance studio regularly during an eight-month period between 2009 and 2010. During these sessions, I observed, made notes, and at times participated in activities carried out in the class setting. There were approximately 35 children in the combined groups but the number of children who participated on a weekly basis varied. Attitudes, feelings, and beliefs about music and dance were expressed in semi-structured, in-depth interviews and informal conversations with study participants. The range of attitudes and feelings, as they developed over the course of the lifetime of each informant, related to their views on music, dance, and Mexican musical arts and culture. The participant responses were audio-recorded during semi-structured interviews and gleaned from more informal interactions. The responses reflect their own dance and music training, acculturation and development, as well as positive and/or negative experiences with regard to Mexican music and culture (Loza, 1985).

**The Organizational Structure of the Noctlaca Dance Company**

The *Noctlaca Dance* Company was founded in 2003 by a group of artists working and living in New York City. The Company has dedicated itself to upholding the traditions of Mexico and Mexican-American cultural expression through dance and music. It is committed to teaching and to producing dance and music programs that promote the “rich diversity of Mexican cultural heritage.” The dance organization includes both a professional dance company in which adults perform Mexican dance in public venues, and a school for young children and adolescents to learn and
perform dance and music of a wide variety within the culture. Classes for non-professional women and men have been added more recently.

While company members were engaged in community outreach in a public school, a mother’s request for her child to take lessons in Mexican dance prompted the idea for the children’s dance program. This pivotal event induced Alfredo, David, and Justo, the founding company members, to think about how to go about making this possible, and it led them to offer classes for children. Eventually, the company founders were able to procure funding. The attainment of funding gave them additional credibility and contributed to their financial stability. Now their basic overhead for studio rental was to be covered as well as other costs. With these vital pieces in place, they could open their doors to any children who wanted to learn Mexican *folklórico* in the greater New York area on a voluntary donation basis. The classes are accessible to children of all heritages. Currently the majority of children participating in this study are first or second-generation immigrants; many are of mixed heritage; most of them, however, have at least one parent of Mexican descent.

**The Making of a Community**

The individuals in this study are ordinary people and yet as I got to know each one of them better through formal and informal conversations and other shared events, I began to understand just how extraordinary their lives are, individually and collectively, and the remarkableness of the work they had come together to do—to share a rich Mexican heritage through the teaching of *folklórico*—folkloric dance and music.
All the company members who participated in this study had varied dance backgrounds and training. A brief overview and introduction to each of those interviewed follows.

David, one of the founders of the *Nochtlaca dance* company, is the oldest of the members that I interviewed. At the time, he was about 50 years old and performed the roles of choreographer and artistic director of the company. David's initial experiences learning Mexican dance were in his high school program in Ciudad Juárez, México. He soon became acquainted with the works of Amalia Hernández and her style has informed some of his own choreographic work. David is a graduate of the American Repertory Theater/Moscow Art Theatre Institute at Harvard University.

Alfredo, another founding member, is the lead teacher of the children's program. He worked mostly with the older children, ages 9-14 years old, but occasionally he taught the younger children. He is an expert costume maker and also a dancer with the professional company. Alberto's dance experience began in school at the young age of eight years old in Puebla, located in the central region of Mexico.

Justo, is also one of the founders and has been the managing director who regularly interacts with the parents and their children. One of his roles is interfacing with the community of parents and children to make sure things run smoothly. He also has been quite involved in the financial stability of the program, procuring funds through grants and other resources. Justo, a second-generation Mexican American who grew up in Texas, began his journey into Mexican *folklórico* when
attending college in Iowa. He is a dancer with the professional company and holds a master’s degree in business.

Claudia grew up in California and her life in Mexican folk dance began at a very young age. She was the very first teacher I saw working with the children back in 2008 and she then held the role of assistant artistic director. Although Claudia was no longer teaching in the children’s program on a regular basis, she contributed her ideas at organizational meetings and had input on dealing with the group’s decisions on specific children’s progress. In addition, she has remained actively engaged in the company’s outreach to bring Mexican dance to schools. A second-generation American, with Mexican and Colombian roots, she too became influenced by the work of Amalia Hernández. Graduating with a BFA in dance and theatre in 2004 from University of California at Irvine, Claudia came to New York City in 2005 and began dancing with the Nochtlaca Dance Company soon afterward. Since 2011, she has been acting as artistic director as well as choreographer and continues dancing with the company.

Maria co-taught both groups of the younger children. She was the lead teacher of the youngest group of children, ages four to six, and had been dancing folklórico with the company for a little more than two years at the time of the study. Born of Mexican parents, she grew up in Las Vegas, Nevada and was introduced to dance classes outside of school in private studios from the age of five years old learning ballet, tap and jazz. As Maria grew older, she entered into modern and lyrical dance training. She graduated college with a bachelor’s degree in psychology.
Soon afterward, she auditioned and was chosen as a student in the Alvin Ailey School of Dance, which brought her to New York City in 2006.

Carlotta also co-taught the two groups of younger children and led the group of children aged six to eight. She began taking gymnastics and this eventually led her to learn ballet, tap, and jazz dance outside of school in private studios in California. Her father is Mexican and her mother was born in the U.S. She too was a dancer with the company for approximately the same length of time as Maria. She also studied at the University of California at Irvine and graduated with a BFA in dance. Both Carlotta and Maria were simultaneously training in Pilates instruction.

Tlamatkeh held the role of musical director. He did not work directly with the children but contributed musical ideas to the teachers of the children’s program. Tlamatkeh’s early background growing up in Mexico included both music and dance, as his mother was a dancer in Mexico. He originally ventured to New York City in 2008 to teach a music course on “The Roots of Latin America” at New York University.

These were the company members with whom I carried out in-depth interviews and regularly interacted with over the years of the study.

**Language in the Community**

The predominant language I heard within the studio classroom was English. Most of the verbal interactions took place in and most directions were given in English, although there were times when Spanish was spoken and incorporated into the lessons, particularly by one of the regular teachers. On occasion when there was a substitute teacher in the class, if that individual’s dominant language was Spanish,
then more Spanish was spoken with the children, but not exclusively. English was always a part of the classes and there were multiple occasions when translanguaging occurred. Some of the children were bilingual while others did not speak Spanish. All of the children appeared to have some level of English comprehension. In the hallway, on the other side of the studio door, one frequently heard parents and other family members conversing in Spanish as they waited for their children taking classes. In this way all children were immersed in the sounds of both English and Spanish when they came to the studios for Mexican dance.

**Early Encounters in the Field**

When it was determined that the transmission of *mexicanidad* through folkloric music and dance would become the focus of my study, I returned in late summer of 2009 only to find out that Claudia was no longer teaching the children. Instead, two young women who were newer members of the dance company would both be teaching the youngest children. I observed two separate early childhood groups ranging from between four to eight years old. The classes were on Saturdays with the first group of four to six year olds ("the younger group") scheduled for 11:00 AM and the second group, which included six to eight year olds ("the older group"), began directly after them at 12:00 noon. The duration of the class was about one hour for each of the groups. Some of the families had multiple children who participated in the classes for the younger groups while some had more than one child of different age groups enrolled in classes. Children who were older than eight years of age attended classes held at the same time interval in a studio room right next to the one for the very young children.
Getting to the studio in Queens, one of the five boroughs that make up New York City, was not a trip just around the corner for most who came to the classes. Quite a few traveled by means of public transportation and had to take several subway trains or alternate modes to get there. One day as I emerged from one of the elevated train lines in Queens, and while making my way down the stairs to the street, I was orienting myself as to which way to go to get to the studio and met one of the mothers. She was with two children who looked as though they were less than ten years of age. I asked her in Spanish if she knew where the dance studio was located. Immediately she asked, “danza mexicana?” We continued talking in Spanish as we walked together to the studio, and she told me they lived in New Jersey which meant their commute to Queens took at least an hour or more.

**Quiahuitl (Rain)**

On the day classes were scheduled to begin, there was a severe rainstorm, the magnitude of which produced street flooding and interrupted public transit services. I found myself wondering while on the way to the studio if children would be there in such weather; the class took place despite the turbulent storm. The weather did not deter the parents and children from making their way through the storm to the site where the dance classes took place. The fact that children came at all that day in such inclement weather attests to the fact that the dance classes held a high degree of importance within the community. Clearly the parents or other family members who accompanied them were committed to supporting their children’s participation and saw to it that they attended despite adverse conditions.
On one level, attending the dance and music classes might be seen as a valuable way of investing in and increasing the development of social and cultural capital within this social community; the deeper and stronger urge for them to connect, however, was to reinforce their shared heritage. In this regard, Randall Collins’ interaction ritual theory comes to mind; it presents a way of thinking about “symbolic representation of group membership, reminding us of interactions that mobilize feelings of solidarity” and by which we seek reinvigoration of social sentiments (Erickson, R., 2007, p. 209).

Once inside the ground floor of the building, which appeared to be in a state of suspended construction, I closed my drenched umbrella and climbed the two long flights of stairs to the floor where the dance studios were situated. Justo, the managing director, warmly welcomed me with a broad smile. After we exchanged greetings in English and he introduced me to Maria and Carlotta, both second-generation Mexican Americans in their early to mid-twenties, the two young women who would be team-teaching the children in the younger groups. A little at a time I would get to know more about them. Right up front, I found out that Maria, fluent in both Spanish and English, grew up in Las Vegas, Nevada. Carlotta, originally from southern California, was beginning to learn Spanish. In addition to dancing in the company and teaching together, both had recently moved to New York City at about the same time two years earlier and were roommates, sharing an apartment in Brooklyn. These were only a few of the parallels in their lives revealed in our conversations.
Getting to Know the New Teachers

Arriving in the studio room that first day of beginning the research, and wanting as much as possible, to be a ‘fly on the wall,’ I found an unobtrusive place on the far side of the room. There I sat on a metal folding chair deep in the corner. Since no children had arrived yet due to the stormy weather, I took the opportunity to break the ice by going over to speak with Maria and Carlotta. In this way I began to learn something about their backgrounds. Beginning in late summer of 2009, and for the duration of the time period of the studio observations, they would be the primary teachers. Both women were initially introduced to dance in extracurricular lessons in studios outside of school in their formative years out west. There were similarities in their dance training as both had backgrounds that incorporated ballet, modern, and tap. By comparison, their introduction to the performance and learning of Mexican dance was far more recent and had begun two years earlier when they became members of the dance company. Their experiences greatly influenced what they brought into the classroom as well as how class content for the children was initially determined.

The one-hour sessions, wherein most movement activities were teacher-directed, also introduced a range of words pertinent to dance. The vocabulary included some ballet terms as well as descriptive language that expressed ideas, feelings, and imagery, but few, if any, words that I heard related specifically to Mexican dance culture. My expectation as to what I would find in a Mexican dance class was quite different than what I encountered that day.
The Studio Landscape

As I soon realized, the fact that there were different teachers greatly changed the approach to how the classes were conducted. A glaring change was that hardly any Spanish was spoken to the children that first day, and the content of the classes seemed to resemble some of the creative movement classes I had opportunities to observe as well as teach over the years. Such classes were frequently available to children in many middle-class American neighborhoods, particularly in private outside-of-school venues. When I finally conducted interviews with the teachers, they discussed how the class content was decided upon. In fact, while talking Carlotta explained:

A lot of it's from our experiences; like growing up we started at a young age, too, so we know how it [dance] transitions as we got older and then also we saw the way that other teachers taught. But [...] I think we're good with kids, like we're children people so you know that you have to make it exciting, you know, make it more fun. Uh, so yeah, it wasn't a thing; it wasn't like we talked about it—just more naturally... [inaudible word]

As Carlotta pauses, she turns to her colleague waiting for her to comment; Maria nods saying she agrees. They often agreed or complemented each other and held a special rapport.

Following the first day of classes, I remember thinking to myself that maybe the study would not work out. After all, I thought to myself, I was there to observe the teaching and learning of Mexican music and dance. When I entered the scene, I had a vague notion as to what I was looking for that fit the images of Mexicanness I
held at the time. My initial surprise by some of what I saw and heard in the dance
classes the beginning weeks waned as I began to realize it was my way of thinking
about what I was observing that needed to shift. I would need to rid myself of the
expectation I was holding onto that was interfering with seeing the larger picture of
what was going on rather than what I thought would happen in such an
environment. As much as I might have viewed myself as being open-minded, I was
confronting my own baggage, which I would need to leave behind, stow away, or pay a
price to carry it with me. I would need to let go of my assumptions as to what I would
encounter in order to embrace and engage with the current situation as it was
unfolding before me. One of the problems of ascribing a set of characteristics to a
particular culture is the tendency to look for only those markers for validation. Thus
“culture” becomes contained, wherein, as my research shows, the flow of
information, and its impact within any given community, more accurately comes
from many sources and influences. My early viewpoint of Mexican culture was that
it consisted of an “overarching macro-structure of rules and meanings” (Collins,
2004, pp. 7-8). What I found instead of a fixed, globally-recognized entity considered
‘Mexican culture’ was a “situationally generated flux of imputed rules and meanings”
(p. 8). As my own lens widened, I gained a greater understanding not only of dance
and music as I observed it during the class in the studio but also of its broader
cultural significance. Dance holds a vital place and significance within this
community, and it could be said that attaining it is taught as a life skill rather than as
a form of entertainment. Enjoyment comes from mastering the skills it takes to join
in the dance while simultaneously becoming a member of the community. Dancing is significant because it is imparted and valued as a life skill.

How did the children develop a concept of what is Mexican? Their sense of *mexicanidad* (Mexicanness), and its very meaning to them, is of vital concern to this study. The attributes of Mexicanness were communicated through the manner in which the instruction was carried out as well as through the more specific content as embodied in the music and dance. Mexicanness is communicated in several ways, which include, but are not limited to, the specific music along with dance movements and associated artifacts designated as Mexican within the community; the forms and feeling-tones of the social interactions displayed, such as expressed warmth, attentive support, responsiveness, and other attributes conveying communal practices and a sense of familism (*familismo*) that promote comportment and social competence within the Mexican cultural context. Bruce Fuller, Alejandra Livas-Dlott, Gabriela L. Stein, Margaret Bridges, Ariana Manguel Figueroa, and Laurie Mireles (2010) draw attention to the work of cultural psychologists who emphasize that, “socialization practices enable young children to become competent participants within the family, situated within bounded cultural expectations and norms” (p. 566). In a study of maternal socialization practices in Mexican American families, Fuller et al. (2010) employ the term *cariño* as characterizing the warm, supportive, and responsive interactions between Mexican (and Puerto Rican) mothers and their children rather than a harsh approach (p. 567). This quality described by Fuller et al. as *cariño* was certainly pervasive within the *Nochtlaca* community.
Coming to the studio for Mexican dance classes on a regular basis creates a social space for a shared reality of the Mexican experience in New York City, an opportunity to re-create Mexicanness on different terrain. This shared group membership and its associated symbols generate solidarity. It was not unusual to see mothers making Mexican crafts, things that were a common part of their lifestyle, while they waited in the hallway where conversations in Spanish often filled the air.

On a typical day, I find my way to the studio room through the long passage walking by many of the parents who sit on metal folding chairs that line the hallway walls. Very few, if any, talk on cell phones as they wait. In fact, it stood out to me when one day a man actually answered his cell phone in the hallway. Visible technical gadgetry is nearly absent. Some talk to each other while waiting, often accompanied by the younger siblings of those who are in classes. One boy used a small inexpensive electronic game while waiting. One day I saw a Mexican mother with a book on Chinese wok cooking. Another day I noticed one young mother in the hallway hand-sewing fine beadwork on a large piece of fabric decorated with bright, shiny emerald-green sequins. Yet another day, I observed a group of several women making cornhusk dolls while their toddlers sat watching quietly or slept in their strollers. Waiting time was frequently spent productively.

As the children grew more proficient in the dance, Mexican costumes, representing symbols of membership, eventually were included and donned during a portion of the class time. Thus an identity of mexicanidad is reinforced in such an environment when the world outside these boundaries offers a sharply different
experience and reality. While certain activities such as beadwork may be common in one social sphere, these very same activities or behaviors can signify ‘otherness’ in the context of the broader social sphere. As Stuart Hall (1996) noted, “identities are constructed through, not outside, difference” (p. 4). Hall describes identities as representations, and therefore, subjectivities. He refers to identity as “the meeting point, the point of *suture*” between the “discourses and practices” and “the processes which produce subjectivities” (Hall, 1996, pp. 5-6). The interactions within the Mexican dance community help us to understand some of the dynamics of the subjective as well as intersubjective social effects. This perspective, as Jane Sugarman (1997) claims, “suggests that musical performance is not so much an ‘expressive form’ that evokes a world of meanings located in other realms of experience, as it is a form of representation that participates fundamentally in constituting those worlds” (p. 27). She notes too that, “It suggests that performance forms be seen both as structured by a range of shared meanings, and as structuring, in their capacity to shape ongoing social formations” (1997, p. 27).

**Observing the Children’s Dance Classes**

*Dancing, being that which gives graceful Motions all the life, and above all things Manliness, and a becoming Confidence to young Children, I think it cannot be learn’d too early, after they are once of an Age and Strength capable of it.* (John Locke, 1989, p. 252).

One of the challenges of exploring this type of research is how to effectively communicate the myriad experiences that transpire during the course of any given day in the classroom and within the extended community participating in the study. The task is not only to convey the perspective of the study participants. Empathizing
is not sufficient and as Thomas Barone (1980) wrote, “Evaluators must not only participate in the qualities of experience seen by the students but they must place them within their own (presumably) broader, more refined perspectives” (p. 31). In order to reconstruct an approximation of the class experience, I provide the following sketch of the initial day I arrived to the dance classes. My attention, of course, could not be given equally to every occurrence in the studio classroom as the study was carried out.

**The Dance Classes (First Week – August 29)**

It is the first week of classes for the late summer/fall program 2009, and it is my first day in the classroom since the previous summer of 2008. The class for the younger group was scheduled to begin at 11:00 AM, but due to inclement weather, no children actually came until 11:25 AM, when a little girl of about five years old showed up. A few minutes later, at 11:29, another girl and a small boy arrived. At 11:31, three more children came—two girls, Ana and Ela, and a small boy, Teo, making six altogether.

When they entered the studio room, both teachers, Maria and Carlotta, warmly received the children, greeting them with a smile. Once inside the studio, the children were asked to take off their street shoes, placing them on one side of the room; some kept their socks on while a couple of them went barefoot. This was part of the established routine of the studio classroom practice and took place consistently every week. The studio floor was a grey colored non-skid marley-type surface (see Appendix C), which lessened a child’s inclination to slide on the floor, reducing the possibility of injuries more apt to occur on a slippery surface.
The class begins with the teachers and children forming a circle in the center of the room. The teachers tell the children to “reach up to the sky and touch...” while looking upward to the ceiling. Immediately following this, they direct the children to reach for their toes and then all slowly roll up their spines. The teachers speak the actions and simultaneously model them for the children. The children’s faces show their eagerness in using their bodies in new ways. The teachers encourage an atmosphere of playfulness—a feeling of aliveness. A sense of enjoyment fills the air of the studio environment.

The encouragement the students are given by the teachers to move in the space is enticing. The room was clean and spacious, about 600 square feet, although the condition of this studio room was a bit drab and sorely in need of a paint job. Paint was peeling on the part of the wall underneath the windows, lending to its dreary appearance. The windows along the far wall of the studio revealed the commercial low-rise buildings prevalent in that area. The greyness permeating the sky that day was clearly visible; a tall street lamp towered from its base on the street below it. In the distance, the elevated “N” train could be seen as it passed by on its track. One of the studio’s fully mirrored sidewalls helped the subdued light from outside to be reflected and dispersed about the room, illuminating it.

Despite the condition of the physical environment of the studio room, the ambiance created by the teachers was warm, child-friendly, inviting, and supportive. They brightened the room, enabling the children to feel comfortable. This quality between the children and the teachers could be described as cariño in the way that Fuller et al. have approached it (2010, p. 567).
From the first day the children in both classes are introduced to beginning ballet movements, and the teachers clearly show both heels touching together as the toes point outward in turned-out first position (see figure left and Appendix C), in which the legs are turned out and the feet form a widened letter ‘V.’ Included also were bits of classical ballet training that incorporated repetitions of the demi-plié (see Appendix C) and subsequent straightening of the legs. In this series, they repeated each exercise four times. To use the body well takes much consistent practice along with the development of an integrated awareness. One aspect of gaining proficiency in dance is through repetition, as is also the case with learning the techniques of music and other art forms. Repetition is not only effective; it is a necessary aspect of learning.

When the act of repetition in physical movement connects to a shared full-bodied sensory experience, what William McNeill (1995) refers to as muscular bonding transpires. He describes how keeping in step during his army drills “somehow felt good.” McNeill claims further, “Words are inadequate to describe the emotion aroused by the prolonged movement in unison that drilling involved. A sense of pervasive well-being is what I recall; more specifically, a strange sense of personal enlargement; a sort of swelling out, becoming bigger than life, thanks to participation in a collective ritual” (p. 2) The physical experience is not separate from an emotional or psychic dimension; but rather a unified or total experience. Such an experience of being fully engaged could also be described as a moment of
deep fulfillment. The fact that the children stayed with the activities for prolonged periods of time shows there was something agreeable that drew them in. Going beyond the first time novelty of the exploring in this context, the majority of children remained engaged in the class activities throughout the months I was in the studio classroom with them.

The teachers first model the selected movements, and then students learn by imitating what they sense and observe. These actions are generally repeated several more times. Writing on “Techniques of the Body,” Marcel Mauss (1973) notes that in the art of using the human body, the child (or adult for that matter) “imitates actions which have succeeded and which [s]he has seen successfully performed by people in whom [s]he has confidence and who have authority over him [or her]” (p. 73).

Mauss refers to what occurs as “prestigious imitation” (p. 73), pointing out that, “It is precisely this notion of the prestige of the person who performs the ordered, authorized, tested action vis-à-vis the imitating individual that contains all the social element” (Mauss, p. 74). In a conversation with Maria we spoke about the children’s opportunities to attend Nochtlaca company performances and the influence this had on them. “Yes. A lot of them got to our performances,” she commented. In fact, many of the children had attended at least one company performance by the age of five. About a week after the adult company performance in September 2009, the teachers asked the children during a break, who had seen the performance and about half of them raised their hand. The teachers elicited further responses as each child was given a chance to describe which part of the performance she or he liked most. When the littler ones participated in periodically
planned recitals, they would see the older children performing. After a recent dance recital, the teachers asked the children what they liked most. Ela responded that her favorite part was, “Watching the big kids dance,” while Teo liked when he was dancing best.

All these events made strong impressions. The occasion to experience the excitement and enjoyment of live, on stage theatrical performance also allows children to get the bigger picture and have a reference for Mexican dance. This kind of opportunity sets it apart from creative movement classes, as children would have little or no occasion to attend a creative movement concert on the order of what might be taught to them in a creative movement class, which does not exist as an art in itself. Ballet and other forms of dance are an entirely different matter. Far more classical ballet and modern dance performances are available in many locations. As may be noted, ballet, as we have seen, found its way into Mexican dance more than a century ago. Perhaps most notably, the eminent Russian prima ballerina, Ana Pavlova, merged these forms.

Dancing in Mexico, Dancing in the U.S.: How Schools Play a Role on Both Sides of the Border

Although all levels of academic institutions were a vehicle for dance to be taught both in Mexico and the United States, the reasons for doing so in the two nations were markedly different (see Chapters 3 and 4). In Mexico, it was consciously decided to incorporate folklórico, which would significantly provide an important means to promote and reinforce nationalism. A new Mexican aesthetic was being forged in an effort to bring about a common identity, and “real unity could come
only by rallying around the ‘authentic’ culture of the people” (López, 2010, p. 7). The revitalization of tradition was seen in the interpretations of many of the dances shaped within the context of local regional influences. The *jarabe tapatío*, for instance, originated in Jalisco, the Huasteca region had its *huapango*, and the Isthmus of Tehuantepec produced the *sandunga*. These particular dances “would be iconized as national culture in music, dance and mural paintings in the 1920s” (Velázquez & Vaughn, 2006, p. 97). Decades later into the 1960s and 1970s, as Olga Nájera-Ramírez (1989) observes: “folklorico groups had become a part of the Mexican tradition—albeit a tradition that had been reconstructed in the nationalist period of post-Revolutionary Mexico” (p. 27). Older Mexican immigrants to the United States recollected learning folk dances in their local communities or as part of their education in Mexican public schools (Nájera-Ramírez, 1989, p. 27).

The subject of dance in schools came up in a discussion with Alfredo (in his thirties at the time of the interview) about his dance background, when I asked him, “How long has dance been a part of your life?” He replied, “I start to dance when I was like eight years old? Because in Mexico, uh, I can say it’s traditional but...really it’s optional. When you go to the school—in Mexico called ‘primaria’ like elementary school—you go and you choose between *folklórico* and physical education.” “I see...” I utter. He continues, “Like what is example like...” I ask him to say it in Spanish and he tells me, “*Educación física... o folklórico*. You can choose any one. Like compared to United States, it’s between *folklórico* and gym or something like that.” As I begin to understand the difference he adds, “So, I choose the *folklórico* and that’s my start—I start with the *folklórico*.”
Wanting to know more, I continue with questions “Did anyone in your family dance or was there any tradition of this in your family?” I’m a little surprised at his answer, “No. I’m the first person in the family to dance folklórico.” When this conversation took place I didn’t know Mexico’s history and the place in it of dance. My next question, “So, it was really influenced by school?” led to his response: “By school, yeah, by school. Because, really I’m so lazy for like exercise... and then that’s what I choose. More like... oh, I can do folklórico because I like the feet, the rhythms and everything so... that’s why I choose that” (2010).

For David, the dance experience in Mexico was different. While interviewing him, I found out that he had begun dancing Mexican folklórico in high school. He was introduced to and learned different genres of dance in his teen years. David shared his reminiscences about the beginning of his dance life:

Yes, in my teen years. [...] I joined—that was in Ciudad Juárez—and then I really liked it a lot. I became a member of the city dance company after that when I was like 18. Um... no, actually before that—[recollecting his memories to himself out loud] when I was 17. Around when I was 16, I became part of the Ciudad Juárez Dance Company, which was a professional level company within the city. And then when I went to... Mexico City—I left and I studied math, and I auditioned for the dance companies, also for Ballet Folkórico de México and Amalia Hernández, and you know I got bitten by the bug, and I got accepted here and there, and then I said, oh, my God! ... so this is kind of cool. And, what I learned there is that the training they gave us was complete. It was theatrics; it was classical ballet; it was modern dance; it was
zapateado; it was repertory for folklórico and also repertory for international dances like malambo [Argentinian/Afro Cuban] and other things. So... for years studying a lot from three to eleven or taking classes and then observing the main participatory company’s performance, rehearsal, being an understudy for several of the roles, it was quite intense. It was wonderful! Since David had an educational degree in mathematics, he hadn’t initially considered himself a professional dancer.

David: For somebody that hadn’t... [thinking] I realized when people started saying that was what they were... dancers. I wasn’t. I was always a mathematician or an actuary, and I just did this for fun because I was good at it. So...

Pamela: So, it was more... kind of a... hobby...?

David: Passion... a hobby, a passion.

Pamela: But it was not... you never—in the beginning—thought it would be so central to your life...

David: Correct. I never thought [of] it as a career; I never thought there was money in it to actually build a life around it. Although, I guess I knew that people did it, but uh, in my circle you didn’t think about those things. [. . .] You had your career and then you danced on the side.

In the United States, the inclusion of dance in school curriculum came about under somewhat different circumstances, but whether intentional or unintentional, the choices that were made harbored specific social values. Nonetheless, the conditions and motives that encouraged dance within educational arenas in the two nations were not similar. Going back to the nineteenth century in the U.S., physical
education was not required for men at leading universities such as Harvard and Yale; nevertheless, there were gymnasiums and men engaged in various sports. During the middle decades of the nineteenth century, discussion of issues related to health and physical education for women ensued, but programs that promoted them were difficult to establish, and instead, an emphasis on book learning increased (Ross, 2000, pp. 60-61). The development of appropriate physical activities for girls and women in academia was stimulated by reformers who were, “concerned about women’s ill health and the need to make women stronger” (p. 60). Margaret H’Doubler, was a proponent of the move toward new ideals in which dance had its place during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, also “reflected an unchanged Victorian sensibility [with] regard to race” (Ross, p. 12). The values associated with dance for H’Doubler as well as another preeminent dance pioneer, Isadora Duncan, early on held, “an implicit vision of America as white, Europeanized, and without significant social, racial, or economic diversity” (p. 13). Perhaps, as Janice Ross notes, H’Doubler was unknowingly emulating Duncan since “[i]mplicitly, the dancing female American body was being constituted as counter to the Africanist presence. H’Doubler’s notion of dance as a glorious means of heralding democracy and egalitarianism avoided the topic of class conflict and racial stereotyping” (p. 13).

Later on, while studying as a graduate student at Columbia University, H’Doubler met John Dewey whose work greatly influenced her. Using his insights, she examined how dance could be reconceptualized for education (Ross, p. 130). Dewey’s dislike of dualisms and his absorption with the arts as educational process
also helped in “shap[ing] her methodology of dance education into a Deweyan process of experience” (Ross, p. 127). This was the initial thread that wove its way through much of what is now known as creative movement inside and outside of schools around North America. As Ross points out, “The arts, particularly the performing arts, defy dualisms, especially the splits between the ‘mind’ and the ‘body’ and between experience and thought” (p. 130).

So while the creative movement was gaining ground and still has a lingering influence on the present, Mexican dance was becoming lost to Chicanos born and growing up in the United States. Mexicans living in North America had “little access to any source of cultural pride within education institutions” (Nájera-Ramírez, 1989, p. 27). The Civil Rights movement, most likely, helped to bring about some efforts to include something of Mexican culture in some public schools. In fact, earlier on, Gertrude Mooney wrote Mexican Folk Dances For American Schools, published in 1957. In the book’s preface, Mooney states that the book was compiled to make “authentic, detailed, written directions for eleven popular Mexican folk dances” available to students and dance teachers. Nájera-Ramírez, however, describes Mooney’s effort and those of others, as “the most watered-down and decontextualized forms of Mexican dance possible.” They were taught as a survey of international folk traditions (1989, p. 27). This unravels a part of the story allowing us to gain insight into how it came about that the two teachers, Carlotta and Maria, knew so much of creative movement and so little regarding dance of their ancestral culture. The weaving of these converging threads has now become a part of the fabric of the children’s as well as their teachers’ lives.
Watching the children in the classroom, I was often amazed at how persevering and undaunted they were even though they had gone back and forth across the floor endlessly and practiced the same movements repeatedly. Over time this process of learning through experience, observation and enactment, can lead to a high level of mastery and attainment of the art or craft.

Living and Learning: Enactment of Musical Culture as Social Practice

Antithetical to what we may believe, Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi (2008) has noted, “the best moments of our lives, are not the passive, receptive, relaxing times [...] The best moments usually occur when a person’s body or mind is stretched to its limits in a voluntary effort to accomplish something difficult and worthwhile” (p. 3). Consider the scene in class one day when with so many children present in the studio, two lines had to be formed across the center of the room:

There are twenty children in total making up the older group, with two of them boys, forming lines of ten children on each line. The teachers show and speak the footwork patterns out loud—“Back, forward...” Now adding a count of two—“1, 2, back, forward...” Today the teachers give individual attention to the children who are learning new footwork, each having a turn to go one by one across the floor. As each child goes across the floor, one of the teachers models the movement right alongside for support. As Maria moves side by side next to one child, I can hear her rhythmically say: “Right, left, back and for-ward” and while Carlotta is next to another child, her rhythmic speech is a little different: “1, 2 and back front.” Most of the children are waiting quietly and patiently for their turn; a few talk to each other. A couple
of girls who are near the dance barres by the windows lift their bodies off the floor as they press them forward onto the barres while awaiting their turns.

Maria explains the term ‘ball change,’ a dance move transferring weight. Pointing to the bottom part of the foot where the toes join the rest of the foot, she explains this is called the ball of the foot, integrating this information into the term ball change. The movement shifts to balancing on one leg and I watch as they all make attempts to hold the position in balance. I ask the girl closest to me: “Is it hard? ¿Es dificil?” She answers me by nodding her head “yes.” The right leg is bent and the left leg opens winging to the side and then the same motion is practiced on the opposite side with the left leg bent and the right leg opening. They continue practicing the movement alternating sides. Carlotta emphasizes that “down is just as important as the up” so as to be in rhythm. They all practice this; as they begin to achieve the right hop, a left hop is added. I hear one girl in the second line announce “my legs hurt,” but no one else complains. All are persevering and seem very determined.

In learning a craft or skill, a form of apprenticeship may be relied upon as is often seen with many facets of arts learning. In the process of passing on the “form,” inherent values are also transmitted. Mauss explains technique, as “an action which is effective and traditional,” maintaining that “[t]here is no technique and no transmission in the absence of tradition” (1973, p. 75). He further claims that it may in fact be that technique and its oral transmission above all set man apart from other animals (p. 75). We communicated with each other through motion, gesture, and sounds, including music and language, far before symbols for their
representation came about. Walter Ong (2002) stated, “Not only communication, but thought itself relates in an altogether special way to sound” (p. 7).

Broadly speaking, the Nochtla Dance community presents a case in which learning is acquired in the process of a social practice, in association with experts in this practice and thus resembling a loosely styled apprenticeship. Jean Lave and Etienne Wenger (1991) discuss the concept of ‘situated activity’ and suggest a theory of legitimate peripheral participation (LPP). Proposed by Lave and Wenger as a “social practice theory of learning” (p. 35), legitimate peripheral participation describes learning “not merely situated in practice” (p. 35) but learning that “is an integral part of generative social practice in the lived-in world” and “a social practice that entails learning as an integral constituent” (p. 35).

After the initial week, I gleaned that there was a consistent overall structure to the classes. A typical warm-up usually consisted of an eclectic combination of activities that seemed to emanate from creative movement; they even included some simple yoga stances. Basic ballet exercises were often included in warming up, too. Certain of these activities can help to bring about relaxation and there is increasing evidence that relaxation is a prerequisite to success in learning (Rider & Eagle, 1986, p. 233). Although the warm-up sequence is essentially captured from what I witnessed in a few classes in both groups, it is characteristic of the general range of activities included for warming up during the majority of classes. The following provides a slice of what I observed.
Framing a Typical Warm-Up

The class begins in a circle formation in the center of the room. The warm-up sequence entails a series of various movements such as stretching upward to the ceiling using the imagery of “reaching to the sky,” followed by bending to touch toes and rolling back up the spine, and then going from a crouched position to straightening the legs several times in succession. A balancing game was frequently included. It was a favorite with many of the children and one that was requested: “Are we going to play the game where we stand on one foot?” As Carlotta counted to three out loud in preparation, each child held one foot with the hand on the same side of the body and the leg bent at the knee behind them, while an arm extended upward to the ceiling opposite the held foot. They held this position for a few minutes. It was one of the few games utilized that had a competitive element, since whoever remained balanced on one leg the longest “won.” Some of the exercises were done while standing and others required being seated on the floor or lying in a prone or supine position. Elementary pushups for the upper torso were coordinated with imitating a snake and drawing on imaginative representation that was alluring to the children. They all became actively involved in these exercises. The next passage provides a characterization of the general tone and atmosphere of the class environment:
The children had been following the teachers closely. From what I observed, they listened accurately, appropriately interpreted what they’d seen and heard, and closely carried out what was modeled. The classroom practice was teacher-directed, primarily relying on command style verbal cues along with modeling, but a wider range of signals, including kinesthetic and visual cues and the socio-emotional ambiance, a sense of cariño, also conveyed their intentions. It was easy to see the appeal of the movement activities, which was readily revealed through the children’s engagement; their enthusiasm showed itself in giggles, laughter, and smiles, as they were absorbed in the moment.

Up to this point, other than the sounds of enjoyment coming from the children, no one other than the teachers had spoken; no comments or questions had come from the children whose attention was sustained throughout the period of activity. The studio atmosphere was marked overall by cooperation and ready participation.

**Polycultural Notions of Play**

The concept of play also comes under scrutiny here and with it the assumption that imagination is a shared phenomenon with implications of uniformity across cultures. For some non-western communities, imagining may be more akin to a social imaginary (Crapanzano, 2004), an image of what the collective can be. This raises a question regarding the concept of play and how it may differ in various ethnic cultures and socioeconomic groups. An ideal childhood from a Western perspective, particularly in upper classes, can be considered "as a carefree time of
life characterized by play, a stable home situation, the consumption of expensive
toys and travel, and an education” (Kuznesof, 2005, p. 869). According to Johan
Huizinga (1950), “Play cannot be denied” (p. 3); he posits, “in acknowledging play
you acknowledge mind, for whatever else play is, it is not matter” (p. 3).
Unequivocally, this position originates from a Western viewpoint. Many forms of
play can certainly stem from social behaviors and values. Children learn
sociocultural traits by doing and through day-to-day immersion in their
surroundings. Play is a process of learning—a way of organizing, processing, and
making sense of the stimuli and signals of the cultural milieu in which one is
immersed.

Gaskins (2011) has recognized contrasts between Mayan children’s play and
that of European American children in her research. Suzanne Gaskins, Wendy
Haight, and David Lancy (2006) have found differences in the value and means of
play across cultures. Their findings indicate that, “children in some cultures need to
learn less through play because they are being socialized to enter into worlds that
are less complex and less open-ended” (p. 198). There is ample research on
children’s play, but the research on this subject typically presents “the study of play
objects in a developmental progression” (Pellegrini & Smith, 1998, p. 577). Yet
Gaskins (2011) notes that object play is far less emphasized in Yucatec Maya culture
[and others]. Whereas, “[r]eality-based pretend play does occur among children in
many if not all cultures” (Gaskins et al., 2006, p. 196), fantasy play does not appear
universally. Through [reality-based] pretend play, children are allowed “a chance to
enact [...] adult roles together” (Gaskins et al., p. 197). In the social domain,
undisputedly play is “one kind of activity that teaches children about how to interact with one another in every culture, [though] it is not offering universal social experiences” (Gaskins et al., p. 196). In the absence of research on immigrant children’s learning in body movement, dance, and the musical arts, I have turned to research on physical activity play (also referred to as locomotor play or exercise play). Here too there is a paucity of research. (Pellegrini & Smith, 1998). In their review of existing literature, Pellegrini and Smith have commented on the function of play “as having immediate benefits during childhood” (p. 581), and have suggested as well that physical activity play serves some developmental function(s) such that “a lack of opportunity to engage in physical activity play leads to compensation later” (p. 581). Findings also show a correlation between rhythmic movements and voluntary neuromuscular control. It has been determined that infants’ “rhythmic stereotypes are primarily functional for the immediate benefits of improving control of specific motor patterns” (p. 582). Musical culture—that is music, dance and movement—could be considered forms of play that are integrally connected with patterned social behaviors.

Introduction to Elementary Ballet

Basic ballet positions were generally introduced early in the warm-up. The younger group was introduced to simple pliés and demi-plies (see Appendix C), while the older group was challenged with slightly more advanced positions integrating relevé and fifth position (see p.156 figure top left and Appendix C). For example, in one of the classes of the older children, they were asked to extend their arms out in front of their bodies. Maria gave these directions as she demonstrated the
movement sequence: “Right foot, leg extends, balance on left, circle right foot...” Although the term is not introduced in the class, I recognize this as a ballet movement referred to as *rond de jambe* (literally “round of the leg” but more commonly it would be phrased as “circling the leg”; when the pointed foot maintains contact with the floor it is called *rond de jambe à terre*.) (See figure bottom left and Appendix C). When they are standing with the weight of the body on the left leg, the right leg, and by extension the pointed foot, is free to move, tracing a circular movement pattern. This movement is carried out on one side before changing to the other leg. The teachers give directions to “turn out in first position” and “to make a circle with the arms in first position” (see Appendix C). Next they go into relevé with the arms in fifth position overhead (See skirted figure above). Following this, another movement is modeled and verbal directions again in English are simultaneously given; this time they are balancing on the left leg with the left arm extended upward towards the ceiling while the right knee bends and the right hand holds the right foot behind the body. (See figure on p. 152)

*Movement Games and Creative Movement*

Often, a movement that required intensive concentration was followed with one that would break up the tension of a demanding exercise. A favorite was a movement game that I
recognized as *Crazy Eights*, although I never heard either of the teachers give it a name. It starts off counting to eight out loud and shaking the whole arm and hand on each side of the body while counting, followed by shaking each leg alternately—right then left—first to a count of eight, then four, two and one. (This exhilarating game was used frequently and the children were often very enthusiastic when it was introduced. It has an energizing effect and helps if there is a lull as it helps to “shake out” muscular tension.)

Following a full cycle of *Crazy Eights*, the children are asked to sit in a circle with legs extended. As they lift up and out from the hips, they reach forward bending over toward the toes. Now it is time for the Butterfly Game. Carlotta asks, “What color butterfly are you going to be?” as the children are seated in the circle with the soles of their feet together flapping their thighs up and down like butterfly wings. As they go around in the circle, each has a turn to verbally share the name of a favorite color with the whole group. In the next part of the warm-up, they are lying face down on the floor in position for the Snake Exercise for the upper body and then they transition to become Superman. After they’ve done both of the exercises several times, they go onto all fours in a bridge-like position, rounding their spines upward in an arched shape toward the ceiling. A well thought out exercise to do here since it returns the spine to its natural curve after having done Superman, which arches the spine backwards. From this position they come to standing, and then hinging forward at the hips, they bring the head downward with the hands stretched out in front of them on the floor. The children are asked to
“walk” forward on their hands and as they come back towards their feet, they roll the spine up to a standing position; following this sequence, they go right into several pliés. The first sequence of movement resembles the yoga asana, *downward dog*. (Keeping the heels on the floor while bending over from the hips, which are at the highest point in the air, the hands are outstretched aligning with the feet to form a triangle shape.) All these exercises have been carried out in a circle formation in the center of the room.

The section above summarizes quite a few activities that were a regular part of the class warm-up. There was no set or absolute sequence from week to week, but certain elements were consistently repeated.

**Language and Imagery in the Class Context**

The frequent use of words that conjure images it should be noted that was an important aspect of communication between the teachers and the children. As I have previously mentioned, most of the verbal instruction given by both teachers in the younger and older groups was in English. Often the phrases they selected and the images they evoked were quite effective. One instance where this was the case developed in the younger group in the following manner:

All the children and the teachers are seated on the floor in a circle with their legs stretched straight out in front of them. Maria and Carlotta concurrently demonstrate the movement sequence of sitting up tall followed by curving their spines and ask the children to follow. Their instructive language
includes descriptive imagery such as “tall spaghetti”, corresponding to sitting up tall, and “cooked spaghetti”, for curving the spine. These images seem to appeal to the children; encouraged by the teachers’ demonstration and enthusiasm, they respond by moving their small spines accordingly. As they all continue to sit on the floor, the teachers change position, bringing the soles of the feet together; the children follow their example. This time they incorporate the idea of “making a sandwich”, and they ask the children to use their feet to close the imaginary two pieces of bread for the sandwich. When the ‘sandwich’ is made, their heads are brought toward their feet to eat the imaginary sandwich—thus stretching the spine forward and over toward the feet. During this activity Maria gives verbal directions while both teachers model the movement along with the children.

Immediately following this activity, the children are asked to go onto their stomachs; supported on their small arms, they push the upper body (from the waist up through the neck and head) off the floor together with the teachers, who carry out these same actions wriggling and hissing like snakes. Soon “ssssss” sounds fill the room accompanying their movements! The use of the hissing “s” sound also helps with exhaling fully and this in turn encourages fuller, deeper breathing. Using verbal cues in English, Maria segues from the snake-like position asking them to change to flying, this time using the words “[like] Superman” which choice seems to motivate the children to disengage their arms and legs all at once from the floor in a position commonly known as “bowed.”
The focus of both teachers was consistently on the children; each was positioned on opposite sides of the circle so the children could clearly see at least one of them from any place in the circle. I sensed a keen awareness and an acute sensitivity on the teachers’ parts of sightlines especially with regard to the children’s perspective. One clear intention of the flying Superman exercise while on the floor was to increase the children’s use of their torsos, this time without using the limbs for support. Did Superman suggest an image for them to motivate their movements or were the children more inclined to closely observe the teachers’ actions, enabling them to reproduce the coordination necessary to carry out the exercise? Interpretation, meaning, and understanding, even those of iconic figures, can vary greatly across different cultures. The seminal work on kinesics by Ray Birdwhistell (1970) contends that communication is “multichannel[ed] and that communicational shapes are not to be found in microuniverses of paralanguage or gesture any more than they are to be discovered in words alone” (xiii).

The children’s close observing of adult behavior aligns with Suzanne Gaskins’ (2011) findings with regard to manners of learning in the Yucatec Maya community in Mexico of children three to eight years of age; her research shows that they “are expected to watch in order to learn” (p. 43). Their learning transpires through keen observation “a kind of attention […] called open attention” (p. 43). Gaskins clarifies this concept, further defining it as “both wide angled and abiding” (2010, p. 99). Open attention can be distinguished by “the scope of attention [which] is distributed across a wide field” (2010, p. 99). Her findings offer a relevant perspective on everyday lives in another culture and specifically one that is Mexican. This research
contrasts with “models of attention that presume a narrow focus applied sequentially to a number of objects or events” (2010, p. 99). She has also noted “this way of ‘openly’ attending to what is happening in the immediate environment is not commonly valued in Euro-American culture” (2010, p. 99). The exceptionally close following by the children of all the movements demonstrated in the dance class suggests that a different cultivation of observance and attention from a very early age may apply to the majority of these children, too.

A similar situation occurred in the context of one of the classes of the older group of children in September:

While the older children were still on their stomachs in pushup position hissing like snakes, they were directed by the teachers to “change to Superman,” these words suggesting an image that may have encouraged their transition. The teachers’ were again positioned so that the children could see them easily. The students readily adopted the action of hands and arms outstretched frontwards and legs lifted above the floor, imitating Superman’s well-known flying pose. Here too it was not clear whether the image of Superman was familiar to them or was it that they were carefully imitating the teachers’ movements.

Gaskins’ findings on the primacy of adult work in the Yucatec Mayan community and its relevance to these children who so closely follow the adults’ movements in the context of the dance class may be important to consider here. Gaskins identifies two core characteristics of learning through observation: “the learner observes while participating in meaningful social activities, and the learner
is actively engaged” (2010, p. 92). Observational learning extends beyond the visual aspect and also relates to “learning that also uses all of the senses” (2010, p. 90). It is difficult to discern without a closer analysis of the speech stream and the movement stream if these are dependent on or interdependent of one another in their impact on cognition (Birdwhistell, 1970, p. 244). In the middle of the twentieth century, Mooney observed that Mexican children and adults seem to “dance more through a rhythmic sense than through intellectual and mathematical analysis [and that] they learn readily by imitation” (1957, p. 7).

Shortly after changing from snakes to Superman, the children were asked to imagine going somewhere, and the subject of going on vacation was brought up. One of the children mentioned having visited Chihuahua, Mexico. This was the first time I heard a non-English word on that initial day; it was followed by Maria asking, “Can everyone say Teotihuacan?” referring to the archaeological site of the ancient city northeast of Mexico City. Though the children did repeat the word, no discussion followed in order to determine who actually knew of that distinctive site or what, if anything, it actually might have meant to them.

It was only much later when I was reviewing notes I had recorded on the class that the images of Superman and Teotihuacan gave me something more to ponder. Referring to Superman was one of many images that could have been used by the teachers for what the children were asked to do. The teachers’ chose to use “Superman,” an iconic superhero whose genesis is from the U.S., not Mexico. Notwithstanding the popularity and visibility of Superman in various parts of Latin
America, did this selection reflect the teachers’ own Mexican-American cultural origins and experiences living in the U.S.? Even so, there is something remarkable in that this space allowed for such juxtaposition. Within minutes, an American icon—the superhero Superman—swirls right alongside Mexico’s great iconic ancient city. In the process of contrasting similarities and differences, thousands of years and miles were bridged and the blending of cultures transpired in a moment of the dance class. In that spell of frozen time, borders and boundaries creating distinctive ideologies and social constructs of dissimilar worlds were renegotiated. Sometimes new forms are produced by radical changes; reformation, however, often happens through accretion. Regardless of how separate and incongruent these ideas appeared to be, in the moment they were bridged; antithetical forces again converge and contribute to a micro-shifting in the course of the Americas.

Many times signals that are transmitted and taken for granted as the norm in one cultural context are vastly different and may even be mismatched in another. This negotiation of cultures is critical to the understanding and establishment of one’s identity. As Richard Rodriguez (2010) writes, “caught between two cultures” the child does not belong to either the United States or Mexico (p. 197). “Adiós was [not] part of the Mexican-American […] vocabulary. We didn’t turn our backs on the past. We kept going back and forth, between past and future” (p. 201).

*Spanish in the Class Context*

Following my first week of observing them co-teach, Maria began using some Spanish as part of teaching the class. I already knew from Carlotta that she was learning Spanish but wasn’t fluent, so I had never heard her speak to the children in
Spanish. I first noticed Maria introducing Spanish during the second class when they were in circle formation. As they took turns, she would ask each child to name a favorite color in Spanish or sometimes she asked a question in Spanish to elicit the children’s response. Generally, it was an activity with which they were already familiar. I never heard her introduce a new concept using Spanish first; the majority of time she would use English.

For instance, after coming together and “shaking out” in the circle, everyone maintains the circle formation sitting with their legs stretched out in front of them. Maria asks, “What kind of sandwich do you guys want to make?” referring to the imaginary sandwich each one would have a turn to make using their feet to ‘close the bread’ as in previous weeks. She follows it by asking them in Spanish, “¿Qué más les gusta?” (What else do you like?) One boy responds to the question in English, “ham sandwich”. They use this idea and all take imaginary ham and bread and put the sandwiches together with their feet. They then lean forward as they “hold” the sandwich with their feet; Maria encourages them to “take a big bite” of the imagined sandwiches and the teachers do this along with the children. In another activity Maria asks, “¿Qué color quieres hacer?” (What color do you want to be?) Approximately eight or nine of them, in a group of 13 children, respond in Spanish. One girl answers, “yellow” and seems not to recognize the word amarillo when the Spanish word is used by another child.

When I was able to talk with Maria about the use of Spanish she said, “I don’t know if it would be right to speak Spanish in both classes because I know there’s a couple of kids who aren’t Mexican that come to the classes, and I don’t know if they
speak Spanish—so...” The number of children who actually spoke Spanish never was clarified because it appeared that the teachers weren’t quite sure either. Maria, who had told me that her first language was Spanish, shared that at times she used Spanish with a child thinking that he or she didn’t fully understand English, “but, a lot of times I’ll speak Spanish to a kid and they’ll answer me in English...”

On the other hand, Carlotta did not speak Spanish in the class context. In fact, on one occasion when I was assisting in a class while Maria was away, a child went up to her saying something in Spanish, and she referred the girl to me. I found out much later that Carlotta did understand Spanish to large extent, but at that point she was not confident in her ability to speak it readily.

Now that I have provided a limited scope and tenor of the class context, in the next chapter, I begin to zero in on the dimension of Mexican folklórico, the means and process of introduction, and how the dance begins to emerge and take shape. The dedicated work and consistent efforts of the Nochtla company members eventually lead to the children’s recital at the end of the fall series of classes and the culminating performance at Alvin Ailey Studios in Manhattan.
CHAPTER 6

The Making of a Mexican Dancer

_Ante todo, es necesario tener sed_

(Above all, it is necessary to have a thirst)

_Santa Catalina de Siena_ (Bruno Ruiz 1956)

On Saturday mornings for about eight months, I made the trek each week, taking the downtown subway from my neighborhood to Times Square and transferring to a Queens-bound train line to the studio in Long Island City just over the Queensborough Bridge—without any hitches, a 35 to 40 minute trip. While on my way there, I often wondered with great curiosity what I would see in the class that day. In these pages, I return to the first dance class I attended. Despite stormy weather, we all made our way to the studio. I was actively in pursuit of something that could be called Mexican:

It was nearing the end of the class. I was reviewing all the ground that had been covered, but at the same time, I was still puzzling over what I had seen that could be considered Mexican. We are now into the last ten minutes of the class; the children, with their shoes on, begin to practice a movement demonstrated by the teachers. Keeping the foot flat as it makes contact with the floor, a distinct rhythm emerges from the stomping pattern—on the count of two—first the right foot then the left foot [RL/RL then LR/LR] then changing to an alternating pattern of three [RLR/RLR then LRL/LRL] The two patterns are combined [2+3/RL RLR~LR LRL] and with this
the class concludes. According to the clock above the door, about 35 minutes have gone by and the time is 12:01 PM.

Since I had previously seen Mexican dances performed, I associated the final sequence of movement patterns and footwork in the class with Mexican dance. This was the first occasion within the class time that I connected a specific movement to *folklórico* dance although neither teacher verbally identified these movements as such. This was the emergence of *zapateado*, the footwork patterns that are fundamental to a certain genre of Mexican dance. There was no distinction made as to what these movement patterns were or that they were Mexican or differed from other class content. All the class activities were essentially woven together. Moving through illusory time and its imprints on history, a perpetual synthesis of cultural processes lives as a unified pulse in the silent and not so silent musical flow of the dance.

**The Structure and Sequence of the Classes**

The weeks that followed in September revealed a well-considered order to the class content. The teachers are good at managing the group. A sense of order presides in the studio, and the children are at ease in the class environment. The warming up period generally included a series of exercises and activities, previously described in the section on the typical warm-up. The first day of classes had in fact set a trend for the way most classes would generally be structured. The sequence, however, was
not absolutely fixed and could vary somewhat from week to week.

During a very few times, I observed the children being taught using the dance barres. The introductory ballet vocabulary was generally part of warming up while in the circle formation. The class was structured in several distinct divisions that followed the warm-up which included activities center floor and traveling across the floor. These were interchangeable depending on the content of the specific class. The structure suited the mutable content of the class and was applied as needed. In one class right after they completed downward dog while in circle formation, the teachers asked the children to go across the floor. Often during these activities pop music would be playing. (I discuss this further in the section on Musicality in the Class Context, p. 240) On the other hand, there were times that the children went from the warm-up directly to center floor activities.

**Time and Space: Its Implications**

The notion of time and space is often taken for granted to have a widely agreed upon meaning. The concept of time and space, however, remains quite controversial at a theoretical level. Within the arena of the Western dance world, traveling in space is a learned skill in terms of how we use our energy in relationship to the space in which we are moving. Carlotta and Maria often gave a directive to the children to “use all the space in the room,” encouraging the exploration of the moving body in space. This suggestion I have frequently heard in my own dance training or employed when teaching movement classes to children and adults. How we direct our energies is a concept learned by engendering awareness of a multitude of available choices in the ways we can use humanly embodied energy
while moving in space. The word ‘projection’ is often associated with this way of manifesting embodied energy outward into the surrounding space. It is also a way of thinking, and this entrainment of thought can produce such a result. This again applies more so to movement in Western forms of dance.

It appeared to me not quite the same relative to learning Mexican dances, where the footwork did not travel widely. In fact, some Mexican dance is performed on a tarima de baile, or raised boxlike platform for dance. The tarima’s surface usually ranges in size from between three to four feet. The emphasis of the traditional dance is the footwork and musicality, the dancer’s carriage and posture, and it is not focused on the dancer traveling through space. These differences were evident in the way the class was structured and the use of the studio space according to the movement that was introduced.

Going Across the Floor

At times the girls and boys might practice movements going across the floor after the circle warm-up and before center floor activities. For instance, in one class for the older group, right after completing downward dog while in a circle structure, the teachers asked the children to line up to go across the floor. With pop music playing in the background, the teachers demonstrate hand positions to them—for the girls, fisted hands on the hips and for the boys the hands are placed behind the lower
back with the top of one hand touching inside the palm side of the other (see figures on p. 169) as previously learned. The children gallop across the floor as the teachers count out loud, “1, 2, 3, 4…” After all have crossed the floor once, the teachers ask that they audibly count along with them, and although they all begin counting, the children only continue with prompting from the teachers. Here the teachers have combined the Mexican traditional hand positions with gallops, which were not specifically part of the folklórico choreography.

The next activity is jumping over an obstacle. The object referred to as “Mr. Alligator” is really just a cloth sack. The children are all in a line waiting for a turn to run up to the prop and jump over it. The teachers prompt them to use the right leg first to jump over Mr. Alligator, and the majority of the group easily achieves this. Finally, after much work, it is time for a break! They drink some water, change into their dance shoes, use the bathroom if needed, and very shortly reassemble, forming a line on the tape in the center of the room. The teachers often ask the children, “Was it fun?” Research carried out on dance in New Zealand shows that teachers, “identified fun and enjoyment as benefiting the learners because it was aligned with increasing their motivation to learn” (Ashley, 2012, p. 61).

*Center Floor Movements*

The classes did not follow a rigid format as mentioned earlier. The types of movement, as well as their organization and sequence, varied as to whether they were carried out center floor or traveling across the floor. Nonetheless, there was generally a strong presiding sense of order in the studio room and a palpable aim. The structure, although flexible, allowed the children to have a sense of something
sequential even if they did not know ahead of time specifically which movements would ensue. Here I would venture to say that the sense of expectancy and adventure was captivating for the children, and in surroundings resonant with a safe and warm emotional climate, they willingly went along with what was presented.

Practicing zapateado was often carried out center floor in order to work on specific rhythmic patterns or isolated movements before incorporating them into the larger context of the dance. The footwork begins in place, and as it progresses, the movement travels side-to-side; it often alternates first from right to left then left to right. The circle, of course, was structuring, too. Some of the movements carried out in the circular formation led to breaking out of it and moving about the room:

They are all standing together in a circle formation as the teachers call out movement commands, “swimming,” “walk,” “running.” (While running, a boy “falls” playfully to the floor then rises.) They break out of the circle while doing these movements but then form it again. The circle acts as a home base, and back in it again, they do little jumps and forward kicks. The teachers direct, “And reach,” as Maria demonstrates reaching to the ceiling with the arms; followed by “And freeze.” (Here again, along with verbal cues, her body shows the knees bending when stopping). Next is ‘free form’ slow movement. Maria directs the next movement using a question, “Now can we skip?” The children and teachers skip together. This is followed by, “Now can we jump?” and they all jump together.
There is often a collective emphasis rather than a focus on a particular child’s achievement, and this is supported through language choices as well as the way the group is coached. After this, they come back to the circle before transitioning to the center floor. During the transition they have a break, drink a little water, and change into their shoes (zapatos) for Mexican dance before coming to the center of the room. The folklórico dance shoes, worn by the girls and made in Mexico, were a simple basic pump-style design, typically black leather with a strap and buckle across the ankle and a small raised heel. The price range for a pair of shoes is about $45 to $50 dollars. The boys wore leather pointed toe charro-styled short black boots. (Charro is a word used for a traditional Mexican horseman and also for its style in folklórico.)

The elegant and dynamic swirling of the large flounced skirts the girls wore, and their manipulation to achieve these effects, is learned early on though modified according to their ages (see photos Appendix D). Since these children were so young, the girls were introduced to very basic aspects such as how to hold the skirt and fluttering the skirt in the dance. I commented, while talking with Maria and Carlotta, that when I’ve seen the children put the skirts on, of course, it was very exciting for them. Carlotta responded, “They love it!” The outfits worn by the boys were traditional charro that included black pants, a white tailored shirt, a kerchief tied loosely about the neck, and completed with charro boots. The boys’ shirts might also be embroidered depending upon the region of the dance and the corresponding style of dress.
Tape was used to indicate the position of center and delineated a horizontal marker across the entire room. The children were asked to find a spot on the tape and were able to organize themselves to do so. Center floor was for movements that moved on the horizon and did not travel widely in space around the room. The types of movement presented during the center floor portion of the class frequently were exercise patterns connected to the Mexican dances. At times the transitions between the structured class divisions could trigger aberrant behavior, but it was usually of a playful nature and did not pose a prolonged interruption in the flow of the class. The following describes such a transition right after a jumping activity in the circle:

Two boys break off from the group. Alex, who is taller and seems slightly older than a smaller boy, Teo, is provoking him to play a tag game apart from the other children. This is happening during a transition while all the others are putting on their shoes for the next part of the class. The teachers have been busy with those children who need help putting on and buckling their shoes. When no longer attending to the other children, Maria asks the two boys, “Are you putting your shoes on?” Then she says assertively, “You need to put them on.” With that, the boys’ frolicsome behavior that deviated from the rest of the students ceased, and the entire group continued with the activities of the class.

Moving to front and center of the room, Maria asks in Spanish, “¿Están listos?” (Are you ready?) The children are asked to form a line across the center of the room; the tape acts as a spatial marker indicating where they should be. They all quickly and efficiently find a place to stand. Continuing in
Spanish, Maria now clarifies the movements for the children. First the girls: “Niñas, sus manos aquí,” as she demonstrates fists on hips, and for the boys: “Niños, sus manos aquí” as she demonstrates placing both hands (back side of one hand inside of the other palm) behind their backs. She begins to show the footwork first in place—1, 2... 1, 2, 3. The movement travels to the side on an even beat— “1, 2” (moving to the right) and continuing “1, 2,” and then moving left, “1, 2...1, 2.” They practice sets of two and patterns of three before combining them (1, 2... 1, 2, 3).

**Learning Gendered Roles in Mexican Dance**

There was a marked difference regarding gendered roles and their construction related to various forms of movement within the class context. Judith Lynne Hanna (2008) states, “dance has long had a significant role in the education, religion, ethnic identity, gender marking, and social and political organization of many cultures” (p. 491). In terms of activities that could be considered creative movement, there were no specific gender roles indicated; everyone entered into and performed the movements without any special regard to different roles for girls and boys. These movements could even be considered gender neutral.

It was quite another story with regard to Mexican *folklórico*, less with the basic footwork patterns (*zapateado*) but more with the positions of the hands and arms, with how the torso is held, and of course the costumes and how their usage signifies gendered roles. In a couple dance, originating from Jalisco, taught briefly in one of the classes, there was also a very clear depiction of gender in the boy’s role kneeling while the girl places her foot on top of boy’s knee. The inclusion of these
contrasting gender models in the class context reflected the progressive values associated with creative movement and those inherent in Mexican traditions.

The elegant and dynamic swirling of the large flounced skirts the girls wore, and their manipulation to achieve these effects, is learned early on though modified according to their ages. Since these children were so young, the girls were introduced to very basic aspects, such as how to hold the skirt and how to flutter it in the dance. I commented, while talking with Maria and Carlotta, that whenever I've seen the children put the skirts on it was, of course, very exciting for them. Carlotta responded, “They love it! The boys did not don any special costumes during practice sessions, as they did not need to learn to manipulate the clothing as part of the dance.

**Imparting Folklórico**

*I think the philosophy is to teach Mexican culture, to really make these kids stronger human beings within the United States context and let them know what the alternative ideals of art are* (Interview with David, 2010).

Way before I started to realize that there was far more of a story and much more to a history of Mexican dance than I ever imagined, Alfredo, urged by my prompting, began to explain the differences between traditional dance and *folklórico*. He had been telling me about local customs of celebrating *la vendimia* and the time of harvest with a party for the family and the dancing that was part of the festivities. This type of dancing was in traditional style and in his percussive manner of speaking he told me:

*I think it’s two completely dif-fer-ent things. Because the traditional dance you can see in the families and you can see in one’s own family but the*
*folklorico* is not... it’s not like a hundred percent traditional. *Folklorico* is like traditional but with... something... we include something... for example—in traditional dance, you cannot have tippy-toes or like a lot of details from the dance.

I begin to grasp the distinction, and I encourage him to continue talking.

*Alfredo*: So... that’s why *folklorico* is a little bit different... another level of the dance.

*Pamela*: So, if I understand correctly, is it fair to say that the dance that might happen in a household is a more common form and then the *folklorico*, when it’s performed, has other details?

*Alfredo*: Yeah.

*Pamela*: ... on a different artistic level.

*Alfredo*: That’s true. That’s the difference.

*Pamela*: I see...

*Alfredo*: That’s it. A hundred percent different.

Alfredo has a very rhythmic musicality to his accented English speech, which is enjoyable to listen to. For a moment, however, as we’re talking I mistakenly think he has said a word that is unfamiliar to me. What I heard was ‘*ti-PEE-tos,*’ and thought it was a word in Spanish. Alfredo quickly goes onto his toes to show me, and I realize he is demonstrating tippy-toes, balancing on the tips of the toes. It is a comic moment and we laugh. I ask how he would say it in Spanish and he tells me, “*puntitas... you could say.*” The element of tippy-toes and pointing the foot essentially corresponds to balletic form, but I did not realize this at the time of our talk.
Because dance history is both enacted and lost at the moment of performance, we are continually documenting the past even as we create the present; dance perpetually exists, [...] at the vanishing point. For the dance historian, this evanescent state is both a challenge to our persistence and accuracy in research, and a gift to our ingenuity and imagination in documentation (Berg, 1999, p. 225).

Pamela: Is there a children’s dance repertory? A Mexican dance repertory?

Alfredo: Yeah.

Pamela: And, it’s distinctly different than the adult dances?

Alfredo: Yes. Completely different.

Pamela: Like, for instance, is La Raspa an adult dance or is it just...

Alfredo: It’s more for the children.

Pamela: Tell me.

Alfredo: The... idea that I have for the children specific[ally] is you need to start like slowly for the children... You need to... tell the children okay, let’s do [these] two, three songs [that can be learned more] easily because in the future it’s coming more difficult.

Alfredo’s manner of teaching children folklórico starts with simpler material and progresses to the more difficult. His teaching approach embodies a natural sense of scaffolding relative to learning.

Alfredo: So, basically you start to...like... simple dances...simple traditional, but simple; and then, [as] the children [...] grow up, you could start going a little more difficult, difficult, difficult...

Alfredo's inclination is to go with what his experience supports. He along with many others, “belong [...] to a nonacademic world where textual knowledge does not directly influence their everyday life” (Abarca, 2006, p. 4). I recall David
describing Alfredo as a “doer.” For people who live apart from and are not so influenced by written texts, their theories of life are tested and proven in day-to-day trials and errors. Meredith Abarca notes, “Theories, like philosophies, come out of culturally specific realities; they come out from people’s way of knowing the world” (p. 6). Knowledge-making is not limited to inside the confines of institutions and academic networks. Many useful strategies are context-dependent and discovered in everyday lessons. This expanded view of knowledge and knowledge systems contributes to a perspective that lends itself to a more comprehensive understanding of world views that aid us in “peel[ing] off the thick skin that keeps theory-making within the realm of academia so that we can find theories in nontraditional places” (p. 6). Our collective histories are shaped by a wide spectrum of stories, not only one; innumerable factors contribute to our knowledge and ways of seeing as well as being in the world. “There is far more about knowledge and its production and certification than we can presently imagine” (Kincheloe, 2008, viii). Dance is a culturally constructed, learned experience, a form of agency that enables interaction at the micro-level within our societies as well as allowing us to synthesize the “semiotic landscape” of the society at large that informs and constitutes our worlds. Dance offers a safe haven for exploring and dealing with the realm of emotional feelings as well as those that are sensual; and “dances [are] kinetic analogies of peoples’ everyday lives” (Ashley, 2012, p. 220).
In September: Learning *El Alcaraván*

Maria explains to the children in Spanish that the dance they will do at the recital in December is from Chiapas (in Mexico). “La canción es de un pájaro” (She follows it in English: “The song is about a bird.”) She introduces the first movement of the dance and instructs, “Vamos a hacer ocho veces” (“We will do it eight times.”) The left leg is the “standing leg” and the right leg extends forward with the foot pointed; then the same leg (right) is raised up off the floor, and as the right knee bends the foot comes in touching the inside of the left knee. (This movement would be called a parallel passé in ballet terminology.)

After Maria’s instruction, Carlotta follows immediately with a quick review of what she just presented and asks the children, “Okay, what’s the first thing you do?” One girl shows the first movement. “How many times do you do that?” Most children seem to comprehend it is eight times. Carlotta requests, “Show me,” and they do what she has asked. There is a corresponding head movement that imitates that of a bird stretching its neck forward. When shown this, the children move their heads forward like a bird’s pecking movement. A recording of “traditional” Mexican music is playing to accompany this dance. Weeks later, I actually found out the name of the music, together with the dance. When I finally did ask, I was told it is called *El Alcaraván.* I had not heard them announce this name to the children, however.
(Alcaraván is a wader bird with a genus name of Double-Striped Thick-Knee Burhinus that resides and breeds in Central and South America.)

El Alcaraván

Maria announces: “Everyone say, ‘this is my right foot’ (as she points to the right foot). The children follow her directions. “Now... this is my left foot” (as she points to the left foot). The children and teachers practice these movements simultaneously. The time has gone by quickly, and at 11:44, they take a very short water break; they quickly come back to the center resuming the line formation. As they face the mirror, Maria is standing in front of them with her back to it.

Maria: Where is this dance from?
(No response from the children.)

Maria: I said this earlier. (Her tone is matter of fact.) “Chiapas.” Everyone say: “Chiapas.”

(The children repeat the word.)

Not much else was offered on the word Chiapas here. It remained a word that they were told little about within the class context. This type of rote learning appeared so stark contrasted with so much active learning in the room. The type of careful observation that Gaskins has described seems to agree with close observation and following in order to learn dance movements. The isolated instance within the movement stream of repeating the unknown word Chiapas and its introduction to the children as a separate language stream was disconnected from the movement context. This ties in again with what Gaskins has observed with Mayan children’s learning style of active engagement and participation in meaningful social activities (2010). The approach taken, wherein the teacher models and directs the student to repeat the word after her does not differ substantially in manner from asking them to follow a movement sequence. It is distinctly possible that kinesthetic activities are critical to engagement in learning for these children as well as a host of others. With regard to teaching styles, what was demonstrated seemed to fluctuate between conformity and constructivism, perhaps again influenced by the teachers’ own contrasting cultural influences.

Linda Ashley (2012), who has written on dance and difference, has found, “[...] if learning is structured to include the contingent cultural meanings and values,
it is likely to succeed in teaching about the contextual embodied significance of a
dance meaningfully, as an identifiable cultural entity” (p. 220).

The teaching of *El Alcaraván* concludes for the day as the class nears its end.
All the children who need to change back into their street shoes do so, and the
teachers assist anyone needing help. The wall clock shows 11:54 AM as the children
sit in a circle formation again, this time to play the game *Duck, Duck, Goose*. A few
children don’t know the game, so Maria explains the game’s action and rules to them
in Spanish. After a few minutes of playing it, the class ends.

The children seem to enjoy this game and over the weeks several ask to play
*Duck, Duck, Goose* or choose it if given a choice. I could see that the game was used as
a cool down exercise but wondered how it came to be regularly offered toward the
end of a class. I could see connections, even the benefit, of technical support of ballet
and creative movement, but playing *Duck, Duck, Goose* was an oddity in the class
context, something I couldn’t make sense of that seemed incongruous in relation to
Mexican *folklórico*. I spoke about class content with David, the company’s artistic
director, during the time of the study, and asked him if there was an overarching
philosophy, to which he responded:

I think the philosophy is to teach Mexican culture, to really make these kids
stronger human beings within the United States context and let them know
what the alternative... ideals of art are. I mean, we don’t want to— an
example... Alba [the associate artistic director also from Mexico] and I hate
that ‘Duck, Duck, Goose’ game. We hate it! [Stated emphatically:] I said where
the hell did that come from? Why are these kids playing it? [...] Okay, they
run around, and they play and they have fun and run, and they get exhausted. I think it serves a purpose for what it does, but I think we should do it with our tradition. We have like... tons of games; we should have tons of other things that we should incorporate, but none of them [the Mexican American teachers] grew up there [in Mexico].

How to go about infusing a Mexican aesthetic into the dance classes became a concern of the greatest importance for company members and the faculty of the children’s program. Nevertheless, not all dance company members were in agreement as to what means should be employed to introduce the content and the forms of music and dance.

Born and raised in California, Claudia had an early introduction to Mexican dancing when her Mexican mother initially found a church in the community that offered a Mexican dance class. She told me, “I was like four years old...we had a local church group that had a folklórico company so I was dancing [since then].” She had no specific memories of learning folklórico children’s games. What she recalled of her early experiences in California was learning simple songs and the music accompanying the dances such as La Raspa and Las Chiapanecas both of which are partnered dances. She commented on the two teachers saying, “Maria and Carlotta decide what they want to do.” She was frank in admitting that this can be problematic since they don’t have the background that others have. The material presented on Mexican musical culture in the class content, therefore, had its limitations since as Claudia put it, “they only know what we've taught them.”
The different approaches in how to teach the children appeared to stem from the teachers’ own cultural experiences of dance. A certain technique of dance was highly emphasized in a Western approach. We talked about this during interviews with Carlotta and Maria. I also asked them, was there a guiding principle or philosophy that determined what was taught to the children or how to go about teaching it? Carlotta spoke first:

*Carlotta:* Well, for me I really think that they’re just so young, They need the basic technique...to learn the formation of their bodies but still like—like her [Maria’s] class doesn’t know right from left, my class, they’re still kind of awkward, so just really like trying to get them more body aware at the same time of teaching them more about the culture, the dance and all that kind of stuff...the musicality, and just—the beginning steps of learning.

*Pamela:* I see Maria nodding. So you agree that, at this point, part of it is definitely focused on an awareness of physicality?

*Maria:* Yes.

*Pamela:* ...an awareness of spatial relationships...

*Maria:* Mm-hmm, yes. Because when you’re working with someone as young as four years old, it’s gonna be hard to teach them the footwork, or it’s gonna be hard to make, you know, a little girl who’s five understand that, you know, how to dance with her skirt. So, one of the main things we try to do—also something that’s very important in Mexican dance—is posture. That’s a very important thing that took me I think the longest—that was what I had to work on the most.

*Pamela:* Don’t you think that’s true of any dance?

*Maria:* Yes, but there’s—it’s, it’s different.

*Pamela:* How so?
Maria: It’s a much more stylized, very specific, different kind of posture and, um... musicality because of all the footwork we’re doing. Like a tap dancer, you have to be with the music or it sounds a mess...

Pamela: Right. I understand.

Maria: So, we try really to teach them those basic things which they can, I think, understand more at a young age than, y’ know, like the footwork or the intricacy of footwork [...] So just to become body aware to understand this is my right, this is my left; this is how I move this part of my body.

Late in September while the children in the younger group were learning to flutter their wings in *El Alcaraván*, the older ones became newly acquainted with a dance from I am told is from Guerrero, *La Viborita* (The Viper). After hurdling Mr. Alligator and then reviewing the *zapateado* patterns, they once again form a line to come across the floor, this time to practice *zapateado* that is a heel-toe stepping pattern.

The counting starts, “1, 2, 1, 2... heel, toe, heel, toe;” the mantra begins and continues. One at a time each child goes across the floor stepping heel, toe, heel, toe... After practicing this about eight to ten minutes, about two sets back and forth across the floor, the exercise is changed to “step, touch.” The new movement is demonstrated standing on the right leg, with the left leg in demi-pointes coming to meet the right foot. (If the ball of the right foot is flat on the floor, the left toes are on the floor with the heel raised up. The movement alternates to both sides.) Next, the children form two lines. An action added onto the pattern is a small hop, so that the motion now springs
out of a jump. These are the introductory movements forming *La Viburita*, a
dance that is said to be from Guerrero.

**October Brings Temporary Changes**

October brought a significant change when Maria left for the month. I only learned
about it the week before and to my knowledge there was no discussion or
preparation telling the children she would be away. I wondered how this would play
out since many of them who were so young and new to the class experience were
just beginning to get the hang of things after the first month. In Maria’s absence,
Carlotta assumed the lead teacher position with the younger group of children.
When I came into the studio, the children were already sitting on the studio floor in
a circle with their legs extended straight in front of them wearing socks but no
shoes.

The warm-up activities were consistent with past weeks and the group was
proceeding in the usual manner. I counted eleven children in attendance in the
younger group at 11:11 AM. Within the next ten minutes, a total of 13 children made
up the class: five boys and eight girls. Carlotta asked me if I might help out especially
when the children go across the floor. The children had been aware of me as a presence in the studio room the past weeks, however, that was the first occasion I assumed a more active participant role with which the children seemed comfortable. I stood diagonally opposite them, taking Carlotta’s usual place on the other side of the room as I watched them come across the floor practicing their skips and gallops. I saw their eager faces and the light in their eyes. I felt myself smiling at them and felt their smiles, too. Their faces beamed ‘smiles’ from their hearts.

I remember at one point the children were coming across the floor and they were beginning to get the hang of a movement. I heard myself let out, ¡Eessssooh! (that’s it!) an expression I’d heard from somebody that I’d spent time with who was Mexican—Eessssooh! They looked at me with surprise—Wow! Where did that come from? It just came out of me. I surprised myself!

**Mid-October**

Carlotta continued as the lead teacher for both groups the second week of October. With Maria missing again, I lent a hand where I could and shifted between my roles as assistant and observer. Maintaining the routine of what had been established during the initial weeks allowed for consistency in the class structure. Considering Maria’s absence, this worked well since it helped maintain group cohesion. Carlotta led the warm-ups in a circle formation including the butterfly game, the snake activity, and rhythmic patterns. Moving across the floor, they practiced skips, gallops, and running and jumping over an obstacle. The class went smoothly. Outwardly, there were no signs of disturbance that Maria was not there. I did not
hear any of the children ask about her. The next week Carlotta would also be away so I anticipated that would be telling.

*Missing the Mark: The Routine Is Displaced*

Maria and Carlotta are both away this week. They told me on short notice they had prior travel arrangements, which were put in place before it was determined that they would be teaching the children’s program. Another company member, Alba, has come to teach the class today. The class begins at 11:30 AM instead of 11:00 AM, and it will end at 1:00 PM, a very long stretch for ones so young. Both groups have been combined. Near noon, I count twenty-two children and several more children arrive slightly afterward perhaps unaware of this week’s time change. Alba introduces herself to the children in Spanish, and explains to them that Maria and Carlotta are away, however, it is unclear if all of the children understand Spanish. A young woman, who is also a company member and is not introduced, is her assistant. The children had not been told, to my knowledge, at any prior time that Maria and Carlotta would be gone for weeks. Not only are the regular teachers absent, but also the structure of the class is changed. The circle, which has been such a central configuration, is not used today.

Alba, in command-style, has the children doing marches and other movements around the room, while counting aloud percussively in Spanish, “uno-dos, uno-dos.” She asks them to line up on the tape across the center of the room. She stands with her back to the mirror facing them with her arms extended, “uno-dos...” As Alba moves her head in different directions she speaks the directions: “atrás, arriba, uno-dos...” ([to the] back, up, one two).
The class proceeds at a very different pace than past weeks and the playful spirit is missing. The tone of the class setting feels more “down to business.” Isolated movements are strung together; the cohesion and the feeling of flow of past weeks is lacking. Many of the children do their best to follow along, but I am also finding it increasingly difficult to follow what is offered in the class. Too many changes combined with a greater number of children is tipping the group toward chaos. The feeling of something getting ready to burst is building. The children are in an energetic overload without a clear pathway to conduct their energies; it feels like an eruption is imminent.

Right about then, Teo begins running around the room with one of the girls and two boys start to wrestle. This is the first time I have seen this type of behavior emerge from these children. Alba does not address the behaviors, instead she continues. Children are scattered around the studio space, and now Alex is throwing sneakers across the room.

I have much experience in the management of classrooms and my teacher instincts are kicking in. A part of me wants to intervene, although I feel it is not my place here. It is hard for me not to take any action, but I sit tight.

Finally, Alba goes over to Alex to talk to him about throwing the sneakers. She is clapping her hands to regain order as she walks around the room attempting to regain the children’s attention. Within approximately five minutes, Alba manages to get them to line up on the tape again. She continues at this time with the dance from Chiapas. After the frenzy in the room, it is hard for the children to be very focused. Alba tells the children
they are going to do bird movements—stepping side to side with their arms “flapping” as wings.

The way it is introduced is somewhat different than Maria and Carlotta showed it in past weeks. I had anticipated that the changes might bring about a behavioral change in the group. It is surprising overall that the class held together to the extent that it did with so many changes occurring all at once. It is possible that Alba’s leadership style may work well with adults, but it seemed to miss the mark with these children.

*La Raspa and Rondas*

I am not sure what to expect the next week. The following Saturday, I arrive to the studio to find Alfredo, the lead teacher of the children’s program, in command of both groups and the two separate groups, younger and older, have been resumed.

Upon entering the studio, I notice Alfredo is in the middle of marking positional “spots” around the room for the children. I’ve observed him teach the children older than eight years of age but never the younger ones. He begins teaching them *La Raspa*, a well-known Mexican dance (a variation of a contra dance) popularly taught to children in numerous regions of Mexico. The same young woman who assisted Alba last week is again in attendance this week helping Alfredo.

The music for the dance is playing, and since it is a partnered dance, Alfredo has helped the children to find partners. Face to face with a partner, he calls out the movements so the students can practice the motion of switching their feet. They initially run through the motions in place. They do little hops also
in place; the feet with heels flexed and the legs straight in front, extend on the hop in front of the body, an alternating pattern of right, left, right, (hop/heel--RLR) followed by swinging their partners arm in arm to the right, and then in the opposite direction, to the left. After repeating the sequenced movement pattern of the feet three times, the coupled dancers swing their partner around, ending up in their original positions. The children, smiling and engaged, are clearly enjoying this dance!

While interviewing Alfredo at a later time, the fact that I had seen him teach La Raspa to the children was mentioned, and it led me to ask him what his first experiences learning dance were. He recalled one experience in particular:

_Pamela:_ Do you remember some of the first dances?

_Alfredo:_ Yeah, yeah. I remember my first in Mexico called _Ronda_ [round/circle dance]. Because uh... it’s basically [...] very fun! What I remember—that one because it’s like three persons, three little persons, and we watch the donkey, ’cause this donkey enters to the _ronda_. _Rondas_ [...] means...

_Pamela:_ Circle...

_Alfredo:_ ...circle [of] donkeys.

_Pamela:_ I see.

_Alfredo:_ They enter to the circle, but they stop; and then everybody goes around the donkey, so I’m the last person... I’m the last person, and the donkey is [made up of] three or four persons... one person is [the] head of the horse.

_Pamela:_ Got it.

_Alfredo:_ Another person is like, uh, two...

_Pamela:_ The body...the body...the torso.
**Alfredo:** [That’s it.] Another person is the stomach, and the last person is the...is the like—How you say?

**Pamela:** The hind...like the hindquarters?

**Alfredo:** Yeah. So I... was the last person, and I remember because I don’t see anything... when everybody fell... *[He makes a short percussive sound here by clap of hands] Crash...* with another two persons in front of me, and, I fell. *[Sound of fistéed hand punching his other palm.] And, you see... the donkey fell... half of the donkey on top of [me]...*

**Pamela:** *(I laugh at his story here...)* You were last... so you remembered that.

**Alfredo:** So, it’s so fun...I remember that in my first dance.

**Pamela:** So, how did you feel?

**Alfredo:** Oh, I start to cry...

**Pamela:** Oh?

**Alfredo:** ...because we practice a lot, a lot, a lot...so I’m...We...we fell at the last moment...

**Pamela:** That was in the performance?

**Alfredo:** That was in the performance.

**Pamela:** It never happened when you were practicing?

**Alfredo:** Never happened...*never* happened! And then it happened in the performance...so that was...start to *cryyy*...I feel horrible but...This was my first experience with the dance.

**Pamela:** But, you continued...

**Alfredo:** Yeah!! We love... I love that one. And, in Mexico, you have a choice to do *folklórico*... in dance
Alfredo did not actually teach the donkey circle dance in any of the classes, but he did tell me he might introduce it to the younger children sometime. During the period, however, he does cover the dance, *El Alcaraván*, that Carlotta and Maria identified as being from *Chiapas*. No music is used to begin with as they go over the sequence of movements.

Alfredo shows the head movements that imitate pecking, and the arms imitating the flapping of wings as shown in previous weeks. He calls out the directions in Spanish followed by English, “*derecha*—to the right” and “*izquierda*—to the left.” Alfredo uses vocal sound effects, which grab the children’s attention. I count eleven children in the younger group; they all face toward the mirror, having formed two lines on the tape across the center of the classroom floor, and Alfredo is in front of the room facing them. Together they step sideways across the room, using the tape as a marker, practicing the basic steps of *El Alcaraván*. After all review the steps several times, Alfredo stops to put on the music for the dance. One of the boys decides to sit this one out, but all the other children remain ready. After reviewing the rest of the movements, the dance starts to come together. Alfredo encourages them and calls out, “Almost perfect!” He clearly has an achievement level he’s working toward, but stops at that point for the day. He asks them to sit in a circle on the floor and they play *Duck, Duck, Goose* for a few minutes until the class is over. Finally, the younger group lines up at the door to leave.
As the younger children exit at 12:04 PM, the older group enters the studio and removes their shoes. Alfredo directs the children to find a ‘spot’ indicated by pieces of tape newly placed on the floor. He leads them in a warm-up that includes making circles with the feet (ankle isolations help ankle flexibility), arm extensions and head rolls.

After the children warm up, they pair off facing a partner. It is about ten minutes into the class and thirteen children are in the group so far. As Alfredo walks to the side of the room to turn on the music, his assistant reviews the dance movements with the children keeping their attention primed. (I have found out her name is Lisa.) He tells the group when returning to the center of the room, “There are two rules: rule number one is we’re dancing, we’re not like... crazy,” and the next, “Beautiful, beautiful! Make it beautiful!” Alfredo moves around the room giving each child a double high five. The older ones are very close to having mastered La Raspa. As in the younger group, they do little hops in place with alternating feet and then swinging their partners arm in arm on the right side and then the left. The movements are repeated in this sequence several times.

At the conclusion of the dance, Alfredo says “shoes” and all the children go to the side of the room to put their dancing shoes or street shoes on (if they don’t have any dance shoes). When all of the older group have shoes on and are standing center floor, Alfredo demonstrates the foot action and the count: “1, 2 (ta ta) [followed by quick] 1-2 (1 and/ OR ti-ti)
then 1, 2... 1, 2, 3 [rhythm/ ta ta /ti-ti ta (count= 1, 2... 1 & 2)].

Alfredo: “Can we do four?” then “1, 2... 1, 2, 3, 4” [rhythm/ ta ta ti-ti ti-ti (count= 1... 2... 3 & 4 &)]

After practicing these patterns, the sequence for *El Alcaraván* is introduced. Once again Alfredo selects the music, and as it begins, the punctuated sound from the horns of the group *Mariachi Oro de Mexico* can be heard throughout the studio.

The right foot extends on the count of four followed by the pecking movement of the head, and then they turn with arms extended in second position (see Appendix C). In order to enhance their imaginative sensibilities, Alfredo instructs, “You know the difference between butterflies and fish. Show me.” He adds, “After this, we can play a game.”

His words convey imagery, and I notice an immediate and striking difference; the quality of the children’s movements has transformed. It is as if they have indeed
become butterflies and fish! Our capacity to explore other forms of life (in this case the butterflies and fish) by imagining and acting out the nature of other beings using our primordial sensibilities is a unique aspect of our innate human potential. It kindles and cultivates a sense of compassion for other modes of life. Language can help to stimulate and inform the process, in this instance Alfredo’s choice of words, but even before “we enter into the life of language, before we thematize and know, we have already begun to organize our lived experiences perceptively and imaginatively” (Greene, 1995, p. 73).

Alfredo succeeds in keeping them focused on the current activity, and they are very determined to learn the dance. The prospect of playing a game, however, seems to have great overall appeal. The promise is kept; and at 12:45 PM, they too begin playing Duck, Duck, Goose. Over the past weeks the children have learned to play this game fairly and appear to clearly know the rules.

*Carlotta Returns on Halloween*

It is Halloween, which denotes a time that has particular significance, and in our society, costumes, candy, or some type of goody has become a traditional practice. In Mexico, the same day is known as *El Día de los Muertos* and is one of its most important holidays. I have brought some chocolate candies for the occasion as a treat for all the children and asked Justo if they can be distributed to them. He agrees to give them out after class.

Alberto begins teaching the younger group today, but Carlotta has also returned. They begin practicing *El Alcaraván*. There were only nine children today and three were boys. After the first fifteen or twenty minutes of the class, Carlotta
resumes the lead, and Alfredo leaves the studio. I assist later in the class, as I had in
prior weeks, especially when the children go across the floor. She did not present
any of the creative movement warm-ups as had been regularly introduced by both
Maria and Carlotta previously. She asked them instead to line up to go across the
floor beginning with skips.

They did simple skips first, one person at a time, and then Carlotta added a
turn with flapping wings, another part in the movement sequence of El
Alcaraván. Directly after this, they practice each pattern of heel-toe and toe-
heel twice across the floor and back again. The last movement they practice
across the floor is gallop. Now it is time for a short break. The children are
readjusting once more to the familiar class structure. When they have
changed their shoes and sipped some water, they are ready to begin again.
Again they line up; this time the object is to jump over an obstacle. Each child
has a couple of turns. They have put a lot of effort into today’s class activities.
With ten minutes to go, they play a short game of Duck, Duck, Goose until the
class ends.

The Older Group Continues with La Viborita

A few minutes after noontime the older group enters to begin their class. This is the
group that Carlotta consistently led before her travels. Although none of the children
have remarked on her return, they do seem glad that she is back. They are eager to
come to the circle to do the series of warm-ups that comprise the routine: long
stretching of the spine up and over the legs, Crazy Eights, followed by pliés and
relevés.
There are twenty-three children in the group at nearly fifteen minutes into the class and two of them are boys. They are standing in the circle doing the game that calls for balancing on one leg, and another girl joins the circle. Carlotta uses animal imagery in warming up today. A cat is her example, and the children take turns naming an animal. She follows this by asking them, “What will you be for Halloween?”

I glean from their responses that most children seem to be familiar with how this holiday is celebrated in the U.S. Their answers include princess, witch, and vampire. Of course, the children in this group are old enough to participate in school and even if their families were not familiar with the U.S. version of the holiday before coming here, they more than likely would be acquainted with it from the school environment. Out of all the children in the group, one girl says she does not know what she will be. As they line up to go across the floor, I step in once again to assist. This group too does skipping and jumping over an obstacle. It is time for a break. They change shoes, drink water, and are ready for the next part of the class in a few minutes. In the next part of the class Carlotta demonstrates ball-change, and they practice these across the floor as I take my place standing in as the marker at the side of the room. Carlotta requests that they come to the center of the room after a few minutes of practice. She demonstrates the sequence of movements for *La Viborita* from Guerrero, building on the ball-change step they just practiced going across the floor. This is a very clear example of scaffolding; a concept frequently referred to in education and which I have noticed is very often present in how Carlotta and Maria teach movement. When they are ready to practice with the
music, Carlotta puts on the CD. They practice the sequence several times, until the class ends. All the children line up just before leaving for a Halloween holiday treat of candy bags and hand-made cutout masks.

*Maria Returns in Early November*

A month has gone by and Maria has finally returned today. Now both Maria and Carlotta are present to teach the classes again; nonetheless, Alfredo has returned today, too. He clearly enjoys the young children, and they seem to be amused by him as most of them are smiling. Alfredo has a way about him that commands one's attention in an absorbing manner. The children, overall, have shown a marked ability to concentrate and sustain attention as Gaskins has noted in her research on Mayan children. They practice skipping once more as Alfredo counts out loud: 1, 2, 3 (skip, skip, skip). A jump is added so the pattern is now skip, skip, skip and jump (Count: 1, 2, 3, and 4) with the arms and hands behind the back fluttering as birds’ wings. (A longer phrase is on the count of eight.) When this practice ends, the children fall to the floor to take a rest. They have worked very hard on what he has shown them. As Alfredo leaves the room, the children are still lying on the floor resting, which I’ve never seen them do before. After a few minutes rest, as they change their shoes, two girls come to me asking for help with their shoe buckles. I help them and also show them how to buckle their own shoes in the process.

*Reinforcing Directionality*

Maria asks them, “What are we [in the dance]?” The children indicate they know by answering her question directly, “birds.” Maria commands, “Everyone point to the right.” Most of the children point to the right in
response, however, one of the girls, Nina, points to the left. Maria brings this to her awareness, and she quickly changes to the right. I noted no grave sense of being wrong, the switch was a matter of course, and she falls in with the rest of the group. They are listening to and following her. Maria occasionally uses Spanish if a child seems to need such clarification. After having been away she reviews with the children and asks, “Does anyone remember where our dance is from?” One of the girls answers, “From Mexico.” Maria: “It is from Mexico. Which part? Does anyone know which part?” Both the teachers name Chiapas when none of the children respond. They move on to the next part of the class. Maria: “Can everyone put their right foot forward?” All of the group do as asked and extend the right foot forward. She asks them to say aloud, “This is my right foot,” when the right foot is forward, and “this is my left foot,” when they change to the left foot.

I notice that as one girl, Nina, puts her right foot forward, she turns her head checking to verify the foot that is forward conforms to what the others are doing around her. There is a clear theme today of reinforcing directionality, so that everyone knows right from left (or left from right). Maria directs, “Everyone put their right hand up. Now, everyone put their left hand up.” They repeat this several times with the children speaking the words that correspond to the actions. At 11:45 they stop to faithfully play Duck, Duck, Goose. Maria makes sure to set clear boundaries as she reviews the rules of the game, and they play until the end of class.

**Back to the Routine**

It is a large group today in early November with 20 children, two boys and 18 girls,
already present by noontime. They enter the studio, take off their shoes, and come to the center in a circle. Warming up has begun with pliés, relevés, and balances. They run through the ballet movements, more of a cursory introduction rather than specifically focusing on its technique. The warm-up continues in seated position in the circle. During this time, the imagery of a beach ball is introduced in relation to shaping the arms in first position, a rounded form. It crosses my mind that perhaps not all of these children have actually ever held a beach ball. Nonetheless, they do achieve rounding the arms as they hold them out in first position and do not seem to need much prompting to do this.

Another boy and a couple of girls join the group near the end of the warm-up making a total of 23 children. Soon it is time for a break and to change shoes. As one of the girls comes near me, I notice she is wearing a white T-shirt with a large image of the face of Jesus wearing the crown of thorns. I ask her who is on her shirt, and she unhesitatingly answers, “Jesus.” They are now ready to come across the floor, taking turns one at a time. The children are very upbeat as they wait patiently for their turn. Today again they are practicing ball-change in preparation for *Viborita*. They each go back and forth across the floor twice, and because there are so many, it takes about ten minutes until everyone has had a turn. As they go on to the next toe-heel exercise, four of the girls begin playing a complex hand-clapping game while waiting on line for their turn to come around. They all complete their turns, take a break, and when they return, they once again line up on the tape across the center of the room. They practice a pattern *zapateado*, stamping 1, 2... 1, 2, 3
(R|L ~ R|L|R) with the feet. Carlotta asks, “Do you know which foot starts?” The children respond, “left foot,” and she clarifies that they begin with the right foot, “so you’ve got to be ready.” She hands out bandanas to the children but doesn’t have enough for all the children. The scarves are not just to accessorize the costume but are an integral part of the dance; they are learning how to twirl the bandanas, held in the right hand, in the air. This twirling of the bandana is combined with a shimmy movement of the shoulders. The shimmy involves a rotation of the shoulders alternating forward and back as the torso comes forward and back, too. I check with Carlotta to confirm the name of the music accompanying the dance is also entitled *Viborita*. This question seems to prompt her to ask the children from which region the dance originates, but no one seemed to recall. She tells them it is Guerrero, however, it is unclear to me what meaning, if any, this has to them. The group is large today and they are a bit squished together in the space. It is very close to the end of the class hour as they all wait on line to come across the floor for the last time for the day.

**The Use of Costumes in Folklórico: A Learning Process**

It is late November and the warm-up sitting in the circle centers around activities on the counts of six and eight. They practice pliés on a count of eight upon standing. By 11:15 AM, there are twelve children (nine girls and three boys) and after their break, they are ready to line up to go across the floor. Today something is added: they prepare movements in coordination with donning their costumes. The girls need to know how to handle their large skirts while moving. The girls actually put
on the full-fabric traditional skirts after reviewing all of the movements. Some are
green with flowers and others are teal blue with a purple sash, but these are only for
practice and not the actual costumes for the dance. The children are so very excited
to wear these skirts! The teachers explain the choreography of the dance and show
how the skirt becomes part of the movement.

*Learning to Twirl Bandanas for La Viborita*

The routine warm-up for the older children begins promptly at 12:00 noon today. In
anticipation of Thanksgiving a few days away, Carlotta asks the group what their
favorite holiday foods are. Most say turkey as they go around taking turns in the
circle. One girl shares that she wants mashed potatoes with her turkey and another
girl says she likes fish. The Thanksgiving holiday and its tradition in the U.S. do not
appear unfamiliar, and the symbolic turkey is apparent to most.

After changing their shoes and lining up, they practice ball-change today.

They will also practice twirling the bandanas for *La Viborita*, but less than
half the group has brought a scarf with which to practice. The bandana is
twirled with the right hand, and is raised above head level. The children are
very interested in the dance and engrossed in the learning process. They
work on the sequence consistently for about 35 minutes, practicing it back
and forth across the floor with the scarves twirling in the air. Many of the
children in this group seem to have a sense of what an actual performance is
knowing one day soon the day to perform this dance will come.

*Gaining Proficiency: Knowledge in Action*

It is the last week in November and as is usual Maria is leading the young ones as
they begin in the circle. As she asks the group what kind of sandwich each child would like to make, one boy wants cheese, and one of the girls suggests a *quesadilla* with cheese and apples. Everyone favors this idea, so each person makes his or her own *quesadilla*—with cheese and apples. Their feet were the imaginary *tortillas*, which they brought together to close the “sandwich.” When the *tortillas* were all made, they again took turns in the circle, this time choosing a color for the imaginary butterfly each would be.

Maria requests that they speak the name of the color today in both English and Spanish. Out of a dozen children, only three did not readily supply a word in Spanish, and Maria prompted those children who weren’t sure of the Spanish word for their chosen color. Some spoke the color in Spanish before giving the English version, which could indicate the dominant language used at home, but this would need further verification. Each one had a turn to choose a color for his or her butterfly. Following this activity, they all changed to practicing rhythmic patterns. After going through the pattern a few times, those children who wanted to perform it independently of the group were given an opportunity to do so. These activities were followed by a usual break for water and to change shoes. It was time to practice the traditional Mexican dance they have been working on, *El Alcaraván*. In a couple of weeks, they would be presenting this dance to an audience of mostly family members. Some of the girls need help with putting on the skirts for practice. One girl comes directly to me for help; I tie the long sash above her waist so that the skirt is secure, and she will not trip over it. What a feeling to be in the center of so much fabric!
Maria asks if anyone remembered the first step of the dance sequence as she orients the children to review it. One girl volunteers to show the step but what she demonstrates is not the first part. The skirts are interwoven into the dance movement. The arms are open to the sides holding the skirts broadly in imitation of birds’ wings. One segment of the dance is the action of the wings fluttering behind the back with the skirts accentuating the fluttering movement. Teo shows one part of the dance, and demonstrates it with very close accuracy. The sequence is three skips in place, then a jump with the hands behind the back fluttering while doing small runs in place. Initially, they practice with a partner, and then together as a larger group. Finally, the music is added to the practice session.

**Sustaining Attention and Building Endurance**

The Saturday after Thanksgiving, Carlotta asks the older group of nineteen children during the warm-up what they ate for the holiday. They describe what they had which included: turkey, ribs, pumpkin pie, tacos, sweet potato and turkey, corn, mashed potatoes, chicken and rice, apple pie and turkey and rice. Another girl enters later, too late for the warm-up, but is still able to join in for the remainder of the class. This rounds the group up to 20 children.

At 12:20 PM, it is time to change shoes. Once the dance shoes are on, they form two lines standing in the center ready to begin. First off, they practice the part where the scarves will be needed although they are again short of scarves for practice. Thinking of a substitute, I run to the nearby bathroom to get paper towels they can use during practice instead of the scarves. At least they will have the sense of holding something in their hands above their
heads. It is nearly 12:30 PM; the *Viborita* music is added to their practice. After running through the dance about ten minutes, the 19 girls in this group put on the long skirts for practice, a first for this group. They make two lines parallel to each other to come across the floor in straight lines. The one boy in the group lines up with all the girls.

The dance from Guerrero is very rhythmic and has a variety of movements to remember. Guerrero is known to have a very strong African influence due to the large number of slaves brought into port in the region that settled there. There is no background offered on this area during the class. The forward and back shimmy of the shoulders and movement of the hips could be associated with African movements. The hands are held at waist level in the dance until the hands move overhead twirling the bandanas. It has been suggested that the bandanas became a part of the dance due to the intense heat in that location, and that these kerchiefs were used in patting one’s sweaty brow or tot create a breeze by waving them.

The children were all engaged during a long sustained period of practice and did such a good job, with several of the girls remembering much of the very challenging sequence quite well. I made a note to bring scarves from home so that all the children can practice with one next week.

**Last Practice Sessions Before the Recital**

Once again the warm-up includes exercises for a flexible spine, this time contracting the spine “like a ball” and then straightening. Sitting in a circle formation, the young ones are absorbed in the sandwich game, sitting with soles of the feet together and taking turns around the circle. Maria leads a rhythmic pattern, which is new. It is a
pattern of four beats, but it is being counted as five to match the actions. Initially, she introduces the following pattern on a count of four. She assesses they are confident in the four beat pattern and extends it to a musical phrase of eight counts.

(First pattern: Hands pat the floor/ pat, pat, pat, [then] clap, clap. Longer phrase: Hands pat the floor/pat, pat, pat, [then] clap, clap, [touch] shoulders, head, hands up [extending to the ceiling].)

| Pat, Pat, Pat (Spoken count: 1, 2, 3) |
| Clap, Clap (4, 5) |
| Shoulders, head, hands up (6, 7, 8) |
| Pat, Pat, Pat (Actual rhythm: 1 & 2) |
| Clap Clap (3, 4) |
| Shoulders, head (5, 6) |
| Hands up (7, hold 8) |

The group follows Maria’s lead, first carrying out the shorter version on four (counted as five) and then extended to eight counts as shown above. After they practice as a group with Maria and Carlotta, each takes a turn performing the full phrase of eight counts. All but one boy wants to show the rhythmic pattern. With few exceptions, the majority of the children perform the pattern successfully and independently the first time. Not only were the actions correct, but also the rhythm. Three children needed to repeat the pattern and corrected their inaccuracies with
support from Maria and Carlotta. This requires a focused concentration and sustained attention, especially since it takes time to wait for each child to have a turn. No one exhibits restlessness or is disruptive to carrying out the activity which is quite demanding. They take a break, change shoes, and prepare to come to center.

It is 11:30 AM and children line up on the tape in the center of the room. Maria asks for someone to show the first movement of *El Alcaraván*. Again Teo remembers the second step, but no one demonstrates nor verbally describes the correct first movement. Maria shows them and tells them it is three skips. In the next sequence, although they are not wearing the skirts today, they pretend to have one on and the hands move the imaginary skirt behind the back; there is a jump and the hands flutter the pretend skirt imitating the birds’ wings flapping. Sideways movements then follow this and with the foot extending in front and then up to the knee. (see: *El Alcaraván* photo) At this point they face their partners, and peck at each other. One of the girls, Viveca, whose movement is strong, leads off in the circle.

When they have worked out the sequence correctly, they do it together with the music. With about ten minutes of the class remaining, Maria asks the children if their parents should come in to watch them run through the dance. The children think it’s a good idea, and the parents enter from the hallway to watch them until the class ends.

**Excitement Grows in the Older Group**

Eighteen children from the older group promptly file into the studio at 12:01 PM. Carlotta asks the children to begin the warm-up today with ballet positions. They
bring their arms to first position port de bras (carriage of the arms) (Grant, 1982) and the feet are in turned-out first position. They proceed to some of the other well-known warm-up activities, *Crazy Eights*, balancing on one leg, and others. Taking turns, they name a favorite holiday—the most popular seems to be Christmas but other answers include, Halloween, birthdays, and Thanksgiving. None of the children respond in Spanish. The warm-up concludes and they take a break for water as well as to change shoes.

Coming back to center floor, they form two parallel lines as requested by the teachers. I have brought the scarves for their practice, but we are still short one scarf. I therefore take off my long scarf and lend it so that everyone has a scarf to use. They start with a right-left ball-change, ten repetitions back and forth across the room. Returning to the center, the students face front toward the mirror as they go through the sequence. Carlotta allows the children to run through the entire dance, allowing her to assess in which sections they are strong and which sections need reinforcement.

There are many complex movements in this dance that would present challenges at any age. Considering these children are mostly six to eight years old, it is extraordinary to see them put the dance together. They are highly motivated and persevere even though there are understandably a few rough patches. Transitions in the movement sequence can be particularly difficult, for if one is uncertain of the next movement, I notice the children glance around the room wondering whom to follow.
After class, I have an opportunity to ask Carlotta about this aspect, and she mentions musical cues. I wonder how they will pick up the musical cues unless they are pointed out and mention this to her. She tells me she will make a point of telling them next time. Without a doubt the movement sequence was getting stronger, but matters of timing of the movements and transitions would be insecure unless there was an understanding of synchronizing them with the music. There would be one more week to practice this before the recital in less than two weeks. A tall order! But, the children are so enthusiastic...

The Day Before the Recital Performance

It is Saturday, the day before the recital. The class for the young ones carries out the routine warm-up and begins sitting in a circle. The butterfly game is included today and the children are asked how to say butterfly in Spanish. One girl responds: 
*naranja* (orange) instead of *mariposa* (butterfly), perhaps thinking of the color she will choose. Soon they are standing and Maria makes them aware of the feet and legs being in parallel position. From this position they do jumping jacks as they count to 20. Afterward, it is time for the usual break for water and to change shoes. This will be the last opportunity to practice the dance before the recital and the children will also find out how to enter onto the stage in the theater the next day. It is likely there will be a brief run-through in the actual theater space shortly before the performance on Sunday.

All the children return to center and line up. Remaining consistent with the past weeks, Maria asks what the first part of the dance is. Viveca shows it fairly accurately: three skips and a jump, hands flutter in back. Maria says, “I
want everybody to do the steps we are doing so we all look the same...” Two girls enter late at 11:30 AM and the group stops for them to join the others. During this pause, Maria decides to use the time for the girls to put on the skirts. Two mothers enter about this time, with a bag of bird beaks they have made as part of the costume. Hand-crafted of bright yellow-orange colored felt fabric, they are little works of art made by the mothers. Each child gets one to wear over the noses, and they fasten around the head with a thin elastic cord. There is a lot of excitement! Carlotta says, “Put your hands up if you’re listening to me” in order to get their attention. Children indeed raise their hands up in response. Carlotta: “Everyone should have their hand up.” They reorganize to run through the dance for the third time today, this time wearing skirts and bird beaks. They are more secure than they have been in previous weeks, and although it is not perfect, the children are remembering the movements more readily.

*Dress Rehearsal for the Older Group*

The warm-up for the older ones begins a few minutes past noontime today; the circle and the usual routine are present again. They begin standing and go through *Crazy Eights*, pliés, etc. before sitting. Once seated, foot flexes with legs extended begin and a few of the girls comment, “this one hurts.” This is after all, part of a dancer’s life—going beyond, extending, reaching...

In my travels in the dance world, I noticed a statement on a studio bulletin board that taking a dance class is like brushing one’s teeth. For the professional, a dance class or a warm-up is an everyday practice, an important part of learning the
discipline. I too, for many years of my life, was engaged in this everyday practice; I know the drill.

Carlotta asks the children about their feelings of excitement toward the upcoming performance. What are they excited about? Some of the answers include: the performance itself, the costumes, lots of family will be there, watching, and dancing.

They take a short break, change shoes, drink some water and by 11:30 AM, sixteen of them are involved in the last run-through before the next day’s performance. This would be considered a dress rehearsal. They are in two parallel lines and practice ball-change ten times back and forth across the floor. The shoulders shimmying, a flick- flick of the bandanas in their hands, ending with a jump. Now they are ready for the run-through with music at 12:45.

The music begins; they are ready. Step, step, ball-change across the floor, bandanas twirl in the air. JUMP! Standing in place, the rhythm of the feet can be heard 1, 2—1, 2, 3 [R|L/ R|L|R]. In closing, they form a circle and promenade around. Soon enough tomorrow will come. The performance day they’ve worked toward for so long with great effort and willingness will be here.

The Recital Day Arrives on Sunday, December 13, 2009

The recital takes place in the theatre at the Alvin Ailey School on Ninth Avenue and West 55th Street on the Westside of Manhattan. It is a fully equipped professional theatre, so the children have an experience of being in a state-of-the-art performance space. It seats up to 275 people and when the performance began the
house was full.

I arrived at the theater at 10:30 AM and about ten people were there, mostly family members. Justo, who was there helping to run the show, was guiding the tech people. Seeing that he was quite busy, I made my way backstage to the compact dressing room, which was already bustling with 15 or more children and adults. One image, now etched in my memory from that day, is the face of a young girl with sparkling brown skin and lustrous long black hair, reflected in the dressing room mirror surrounded by theatrical lights, her image framed by the numerous light bulbs of the theatrical mirror. As her hair is being braided, she sees her own reflection as it transforms into that of a Mexican dancer. I look around and notice how organized things are. Nearly 100 children will perform, and everything is very organized: the costumes, crisp and pressed, are all labeled with names of those who will wear them and hung on clothing racks. Children shuttle in and out of the dressing room as they arrive, find their costumes, and with some help from adults, prepare for the performance, now drawing very near. An hour later, the oldest group, aged 8-14, are on stage in a run-through to organize stage positioning (blocking), and most of the younger children are all dressed and ready, save for about four or five children who are still putting on their costumes. Carlotta is in the dressing room, and upon seeing one of the boys with a crisply pressed shirt and colorful bandana tied around his neck, exclaims, “Those outfits are so cute! You look like a man.” Maria chimes in, “You look handsome!”

The youngest group lines up to go out to the stage for a practice run-through so they will know where to stand in the performance. They do quite well even
though a couple of the children are not synchronized turning in the same direction as the others, but overall they hold together as a group.

The performance begins and all the children have their moment on stage. The dancing goes well and the older children especially are looking quite professional. There is one child in the group of 5-8 year olds who is perhaps a little overcome by it all and starts crying during the dance. Her family quickly comes to her aid, and she goes to sit with them in the audience. All this happens with hardly missing a beat!

While I am in the stage wings I spy Alfredo watching the children in performance. I can’t help thinking about what is going on in his thoughts as he watches all of them. Pride? Excitement? Anxiety? Relief? I venture to ask him. He is filled with emotion and responds, “So many things...” a rush of feelings too difficult to sort out in a single moment. They have all done so well!

After all the age groups have danced, they have a party complete with piñatas. The children take turns striking the piñata. Many of the older children are blindfolded, particularly the boys who relying on their other senses, need to accurately locate the position of the piñata in order to strike it. The adults who are holding the piñata suspended by ropes do not make it easy and move the position of it lower or higher increasing the difficulty of hitting it. Finally, after numerous hits, it breaks, and all the candy comes bursting out. The children rush forward to grab as much as they can.
The Christmas and New Year holiday are fast approaching and classes have ended for the season. Many will travel to visit with families and friends over the holiday break. Some will spend time in Mexico.

The focus of the next chapter is on the changes that come about in the program's new season, and the children's progress and development.
CHAPTER 7

New Considerations in the New Year

The new season of classes begins after the winter holiday break on the ninth of January. It’s a small group today, with only three children present at 11:00 AM after being away weeks from the studio. A few more arrive bit-by-bit, but only a total of six. They start out establishing the familiar circle, with usual exercises warming up, in standing position and then sitting. They ‘make sandwiches’ and Maria incorporates Spanish asking the children to say the word for cheese. One girl responds, “queso,” and Maria follows this word with lettuce (lechuga), peanut butter (crema de cacahuata), and jelly (jalea). The children and the teachers seem happy to be back.

Building on Ballet Basics and Mixing Genres

While still sitting, they practice rhythmic patterns. After about 15 minutes of warming up with activities in the circle, they move on to practice some ballet positions. There is a portable ballet barre center of the studio floor, and with Maria demonstrating, the children stand at the newly added barre to practice pliés in first position.

They continue to the next activity, which is galloping across the floor with fisted hands on hips. Maria instructs: “No bending at wrists.” She does her best to model the position and encourages them to “look strong.” Maria exemplifies what she wants them to learn, thus providing incentive and a clear objective for the
children to achieve. Reinforcement of social skills and dance class etiquette are
covered as she explains to them in Spanish that they need to wait their turn.

Maria wants to be sure the young students are able to distinguish right from
left, and as they review, she asks them to perform the motions while saying the
words aloud simultaneously. They practice zapateado patterns together while
speaking, “RLRL [then] LRLR.” They practice heel-toe and toe-heel stepping once
again and the children quickly recall what they’ve previously learned. The drilling
has paid off and the students have mastered these steps, now a part of them. Much
emphasis has been on the footwork, and Maria reminds them that the upper body
needs “to look nice” so as to become self-aware, a mindfulness of the whole body
moving, not only the feet. Following very rigorous work, as in previous classes, they
change to more playful game-like movement activities. Creative movement is
combined with the music, Viborita, in this class, a departure from the pop music that
was prevalently used in previous sessions. Maria’s directive is to “do a high
movement” and when the music stops, they stop much like “Freeze Dance.” This is
followed by low movements and dancing like birds with their arms mimicking
wings.

The shapes of their bodies transform when Maria suggests “like tigers” and
so does the quality of their movement. When she says, “like elephants,” they change
again to heavy large motions imitating elephants; I notice the corresponding
changes of their facial expressions. Finally, she asks them to dance anyway they
want, which seems to stimulate jumpy, upbeat movements. Two girls dance together
as they hold hands jumping as synchronous partners.
Near the end of class, while the children get ready to leave, Maria asks them: What was your favorite part of [December’s] recital? They answered, “in a circle,” and three of them say “everything,” while several others answer, “the bird.” Maria questions, “Whose favorite part was wearing the costumes?” All the children raise their hands in response.

Making Progress

Right before the older group’s session begins, the children are talking about the holidays and the New Year. One says “I got a Wii for Christmas” (presumably, Wii television access.) The class gets underway a few minutes after noontime; they form a circle and carry out exercises common to warm up (Crazy Eights, practicing the standard ballet movements, the balance game, and while flapping their thighs, each has a turn to name favorite foods).

The use of the ballet barre is reviewed and some new ballet terms are introduced. The teachers go through the ballet positions: first, second, third, and fourth, showing the physical placement of these and how to transition between them by extending the leg and pointing the foot.

After the break, with dance shoes on, they come across the floor practicing heel-toe stepping to the music, “Samba.” Carlotta coaches them saying, “Don’t look at the floor; wait four counts and then come in.” One student, Adi is perfectly synchronized in rhythm with the music and has mastered heel-toe stepping across the floor. Quite an accomplishment at any age, but all the more remarkable for someone so young! The next movement they will learn proves difficult as it combines stepping on one foot while the other foot is
“scuffing” along the floor. It alternates stepping on the left foot and scuffing with the right one, and then stepping on the right foot and scuffing with the left. Since it is one girl’s birthday, at the end of class, everyone sings the “Happy Birthday” song to her in Spanish (“Feliz Cumpleaños”), followed by the standard version in English.

Change is Afoot

While in the hallway after class, Maria and Carlotta talk with Justo about how to go about including more Mexican-related activities into the class, possibly in addition to dance. This signals the beginning of some changes that will be introduced into the content of future classes.

Is There Value in Diverse Approaches?

The children are getting stronger and more confident in their dance, which is evident in their performance, but apparently something has developed alerting the teachers to include a variety of activities to support and heighten awareness of Mexican culture within the class sessions. There is continuity in the class material presented in the upcoming weeks, along with a few new additions as well. The children have adjusted well to the overall framework of multiple styles and diverse cultural backgrounds in the class. I have come to see that ballet is not out of place here; it is helpful to hone body and mind synergistically. Linda Ashley suggests, “Widening the cultural range of dances beyond folk dancing and creative dance, in a call for a pluralist profile of [teaching dances], can be seen as a response to the growth of a postcolonial worldview and increased global migration” (2012, p. 53). New York City is known in the world of dance and music to be a center of cultural
exchange, and the resultant mixture has been pivotal to reshaping various genres of
dance, as well as music, and catalytic in the emergence of new forms in both music
and dance. Due to its unique and greatly diverse population flow, New York City has
been, and remains, a mecca for art and artists around the world.

Whereas, at an earlier stage, I thought the mixture of genres in the class was
incongruent to Mexican dance, I now see its relevance and value linked to the
training and development of performance skills. I’ve observed how the teachers
have skillfully arranged dance elements to build connections, instinctively
scaffolding fundamental components specifically related to the dancer’s technique
of physical skills. There are, after all, certain pragmatic aspects of learning to dance
and a “band of teaching styles is more focused on improving physical skills for
performance” (Ashley, p. 217). Carlotta and Maria’s teaching style “[embodies their]
practices and thoughts” (Ashley, p. 25). Nevertheless, Alfredo’s more folk-generated
captivating manner of teaching the children also worked effectively. Diverse
teaching styles can contribute to learning flexibility, and broader exposure can
contribute to greater understanding. It is a child’s nature to probe and explore, and
if an environment is inviting, supportive, and open to investigation and seeking new
challenges, learning happens. Maxine Greene writes:

We need only go back to children. We know that their perceiving is our initial
mode of configuring the experience of external events, of orienting the self to
the surround. Like imagination, which organizes the imaginary [. . .] their
perception is the primordial operation that underlies the relation between
the knowing subject and the object that is known (1995, pp. 53-54).

Children are naturally inclined to a state of flow if uninterrupted and free
from suffering any disturbance. Dancing is attunement of thought as motion, the
actualization of body and mind in unified flow. Movement in dance is visceral, liberating, and exhilarating—a way of knowing and exploring life. The flow of life energy as expressed in the musical arts has no cultural limitation. It is we who perceive and impose limits and difference. Yet, diversity can surely be seen as having positive attributes, and we gain by understanding the “importance of affirming the validity of many kinds of experience” (Greene, p. 54). Boundaries can pose containment or limitation, but as opposed to an impasse, they could be viewed as critical stimuli to our development, offering opportunities for innovation and growth in our challenges to transcend them or by finding novel ways to work within them.

The dancing was going very well, however, the search for Mexican identity and how to address *mexicanidad* in the class context, so important to their mission, had come to a point of being reexamined.

*New Considerations and Reconfiguration: Sorting It Out*

I still did not have all the pieces of exactly how what I was observing during classes had come about. Claudia had mentioned that essentially it was up to Carlotta and Maria. In any organization, of course, it is unusual for everyone involved to consistently be on the same page about matters. The night I interviewed Claudia in my hotel room in Branson, Missouri, she helped to put company matters in perspective when she said that issues flared up and subsided, similar to a family. Over time, I was able to gather information during interviews and informal conversations and put some of the pieces together. I wanted to know more about how the classes were structured, and Maria and Carlotta provided some of the
information I was missing:

_Pamela:_ How do you go about deciding what you’re going to teach?

_Maria:_ Well, we pretty much just take what we know from [Nochtula] and then try to simplify it as easily as we can for the children to pick up. So, you break it down as part of the basic basics in order to build up for the real stuff, for the real dance...

_Pamela:_ What about the warm-up?

_Maria:_ That’s taken from our dance training... knowing that you need to warm up your body.

_Pamela:_ So, how was it decided that you would put all of that together? Did you talk about it? Or... How did you come to this?

_Maria:_ I think it’s just our knowledge of dance growing up with it. We know that, you can’t just, I don’t know, play a game and be warm. We also try to teach our kids that if you want to use your bodies to move, you need to warm them up because you don’t want to hurt yourself. And... even sometimes going to [our own] regular dance classes where the warm-up isn’t good, you can’t dance to your potential because you know that you’re not ready. So that’s how we decided to say, okay, we need a structure to warm up, for the kids to understand we need this in order to do our ‘full-out’ movement when it comes to dance.

_Pamela:_ You are mindful of including a technique, of making them aware that dance is not only what you might see, the so-called finished product on stage, or just the joy of movement, but that there’s something else that is needed... They look like they’re enjoying the warm-up part, even though some would consider it ‘work.’ In other words—you make it playful...

_Carlotta:_ Yeah...

_Pamela:_ ...so, there is that element to it...
Maria: Yeah.

Pamela: How would you describe it?

Maria: We have to be aware that they’re young children, very young. I mean, [some are] four years old... their attention isn’t gonna... if you walk in the room and say, okay, first position and plié and it’s not... we don’t use animals to mimic. They’re not gonna be there, they’re not gonna be engaged. So we have to be aware that they are young children, and they need a little bit more motivation and more visual—more imagination...

I asked if they had made choices based on their experiences. Did they, in their early development, study with teachers who taught that way? Did they talk to each other about how to approach it? They had indeed talked with each other, and Alfredo and Justo had some input, too. Justo discovered and introduced them to the New York City Blueprint for Dance. Maria told me, “We read it through... We saw what key factors they put in there, and we talked about it together and that’s how we got some of the [things] also.”

Blueprints for Teaching and Learning in the Arts in New York City

The Blueprint for Teaching and Learning in the Arts was developed collaboratively between educators and representatives of the arts and culture in the New York City community. It presents a standards-based developmental approach, applicable to grades pre-Kindergarten through high school, in four areas of the arts: music, dance, theater, and the visual arts.

Discussion on the Blueprint also came up while interviewing Alfredo. His expertise in teaching traditional Mexican dances extends to both children and
adults, which he experienced as “completely” different. He shared his views with me:

Because you need to do [...] specific instructions to the children. You cannot do it [searching for the right word] Like...tratar [treat]...like the same nivel... level... to the children and the adults, because adults they understand more... faster like... the ideas you have, and the children you need to explain like... oh, this is one, this is two, this is three, this is four. So we searched... how can we start to... to talk with the children? So Justo, he discover[ed] this um—I think it’s [in] New York schools—called... Blueprint?

I am familiar with the New York City Department of Education’s Blueprint for Teaching and Learning in the Arts and attended meetings in its embryonic stage. I have also had conversation with the woman who was instrumental in its development. I was curious as to how it had contributed and wanted to know more about it.

Pamela: Yes, the NYC Blueprint.

Alfredo: Yeah. So that helped [us] a lot.

Pamela: How did it help you?

Alfredo: Because we start to see how can we use it clearly for children—the instructions, the directions, the...many, many—I think this Blueprint is [...] like...great, great idea. It helped a lot... And it’s great; it’s great. Because we... the first year, we read [it] all—the Blueprint and we [took] out, things that can help us, so... and then we [began to] include [these].

Pamela: So you read it all and you start finding things...
Alfredo: Yeah, and I see sometimes [inaudible] oh, this can help us, and this map too much but we can keep there...so we write something like uh...What say? [Short pause] Like a...line or...

Pamela: Like an outline or something like that?

Alfredo: Yeah.

Pamela: So can you give me an example of something that you thought was helpful?

Alfredo: Yeah. It's very interesting because... it's very simple how you can tell the children go ‘upstage,’ ‘downstage,’ or like... if you don't use the Blueprint you say, okay, just go down and up, down and up. If you use the Blueprint you can say, ‘downstage, upstage’ or left side or right side. So, you can use that one. That is an example of the Blueprint [of how] you can use it.

The Blueprints' standards provided a useful framework for Nochtlaca company members to think about and shape an approach to teaching movement and music, as well as theatrical concepts and related vocabulary, in the children's program. For those involved with the young people's learning it was a helpful tool for targeting development of skills and understanding in physical, social/affective, cognitive, aesthetic, and metacognitive areas (Blueprint for the Arts).


The inclusion of suggestions from the Blueprint helped to unravel some of their choices. Additional factors, however, were moving them toward making other choices. I spoke with them about Mexican children's music. One day in February, I brought in Gabriela Montoya-Stier's (2008), El Patio de mi Casa, a collection of Mexican folk songs for children and made photocopies of two folk songs I knew,
Zapatito Blanco and Asserin Asseran, that were sung in various parts of Latin America, to share with Maria and Carlotta. I also talked with them about Cri-Cri, a well-known Mexican musician and composer who specialized in children’s music, and loaned a copy of his CD to them. Those who were Mexican born recognized his name, but those who were Mexican Americans were not familiar with him. They knew I was there to better understand how mexicanidad was learned. Soon, more changes became visible.

The bigger picture was ultimately revealed in the interviews. Both Carlotta and Maria told me that there were multiple factors involved in the decisions causing the changes in class content. It hadn’t entirely been up to them, although it seemed they did control the specific content taught. When I asked them: Do you think that there have been changes in the way you teach over the past year? It prompted them to open up about the changes and what was triggering them. They informed me that at regular Nochtlaca meetings the staff members (including faculty and founding members) had come to a conclusion about bringing more Mexican culture into the classes. As they explained it:

The staff talked about, the classes in general, having a little bit more, uh... more activity, not just dancing, straight up dancing. But, then we [Maria and Carlotta] decided on several things we could do, like just singing the songs and [...] drawings, trying to think more Mexican culture but not just about straight up dance. So, I think that’s a big change that we did.

Other Nochtlaca members had made known to them the intention of introducing other activities such as telling stories about Mexican culture and
drawing pictures related to them. It seemed Nochtlaca members were thinking and focusing more intently on their mission of promoting Mexican culture in the classes. This stimulated a conversation on the possible means of bringing this about. They were searching for what Ashley refers to as "a cultural ethos of a learning community" (p. 180). If the majority of class time was devoted to techniques of dance, the children were going to get a limited exposure to Mexican attributes. They wanted the children to "learn more about Mexico, about the culture."

When I questioned Claudia about a guiding philosophy for the children's classes, she concurred that these matters were raised at staff meetings, and told me that a point had been raised on Maria and Carlotta speaking more Spanish in the classes, especially in activities such as counting along with other segments of the class. Claudia also agreed with warming up well, body awareness and the importance of a specialized posture in folk dance. She knew too that good technique meant the difference between an amateur and a professional dancer, which was important to the company's prospects of longevity.

It was determined that something more than zapateado should be incorporated, but exactly how to go about it was not so clear. According to Maria and Carlotta, which approach to go with was not so forthcoming, however. This was at times a point of frustration, since they were relying on curricular aids to be provided to them. They were, after all, being asked to go beyond their skill-bases of teaching dance (Ashley, 2012). They confided that although they had expected that resources would be provided to them, none were. I asked if any suggestions were given to them.
Maria: Well, first they just told us...kind of...the idea. And then we kept asking, okay, so give us examples, or they were supposed to give us a workbook on things that we could do. It was never given to us. We set up meetings that were never... never...

Carlotta: ...never happened.

Maria: ...that never happened. So then we just started saying, well, I guess if they want something different, we’ll have to come up with it by ourselves. [...] Even though we kept asking for it. It was a little bit frustrating sometimes because we were thinking, well, how are we supposed to know what they want and what kind of structure of a class they want or what they’re asking of us, if we don’t even... we don’t know.

There seemed to be a gap in communication regarding how to implement the changes now thought necessary. This could have come about due to the fact that no one in the company was hired full time; everyone had jobs, duties, and responsibilities outside of Nochtłaca company matters. Lacking the resources and tools they had requested to help with the transition, Carlotta and Maria began to experiment with a variety of additional material. They had also been talking with Tlamatkeh, Nochtłaca’s music director, the most recent member to come to New York City from Mexico. He also had given some suggestions.

Gritos del Corazón de Los Niños (Cries from the Heart of the Children)

At the end of January something occurred that I had not seen before during the course of the dance classes:

It is a very cold day. The temperature is 16 degrees outside, and unfortunately, it is not very warm inside the studio either. Surprisingly, despite the cold, six of the children who regularly attend are present in the
class; all are in the circle and a much-needed warm-up is in progress. There is no heater available, but the children are wearing sweatshirts and long-sleeved shirts and seem unfazed by the temperature. No one is complaining. Unlike the previous week where no music was played, this week when Mexican music is heard very softly in the background as the usual activities of the warm-up take place. The class continues with the heel-toe footwork, across the floor, followed by toe-heel zapateado. Girls, hands on hips, cross the floor practicing the foot patterns; many of them have now developed perfect timing in their stepping to the recorded music. This time the music for La Bamba, a one hundred year old folk-dance from Veracruz, often a part of wedding celebrations, accompanies them. They continue to work on mastering the rhythm and the footwork. ¡Échale ganas! (Give it your best!) After practicing several cycles of the foot patterns, they switch to a new activity. The children are asked to make vocal sounds. The teachers demonstrate a 'signature' yelp, a sound often heard in traditional Mexican music referred to as gritos.

Maria described the sounds as an expression of liveliness to bring up the energy in the dance or the music. It is an exhilarating and liberating sound! A triumphant expression! The children seem surprised and delighted to shout these sounds, and as they form a circle at the end of class, small cries are coming from the children as they experiment with producing the cry of the gritos.

*The Sound of Triumph!* *The Older Children Learn Gritos, Too.*

Due to the cold weather, the older children are also dressed in leggings,
sweatpants and sweatshirts or long sleeved shirts. After the typical warm-up, they practice rhythmic patterns and the step-scuff foot pattern moving across the floor. The students learn a triplet pattern across the floor today, which is a version of plié and relevé with the action of the movement corresponding to down—up—up. (A triplet is made up of one plié and two relevés. It is not really meant to be so much a downward movement, however. The “down” motion is a preparation to travel in space and gather momentum to go outward across the floor. The relevés pull energy upward and travel less distance than the plié action.) This group also experiences the gritos through example as Carlotta and Maria initially introduce them by means of recorded music. The obvious delight of vocalizing gritos is evident on the children’s smiling faces. After much dedicated work, at the close of the class, this group chooses to play Freeze Dance. (Apropos of the room’s temperature!!)

Over the next weeks it is increasingly evident that the children have become familiar with the dance vocabulary of several genres—the motions as well as some of the associated words. The teachers include more questions so that the students identify the actions they are doing. In the older group, for instance, Carlotta asks, “What are those called? And, the children respond, “Triplets.” They are beginning to connect movements to the words naming them. One day as the younger group finishes practicing heel-toe, Maria says, “Now we’re going to do the opposite of heel-toe. Does anybody know what that is?” Teo quickly responds that it is “toe-heel.”

Learning has occurred in the class through oral and auditory means without being inundated by written texts and endless testing. Ong (1982) has noted, “Oral cultures indeed produce powerful and beautiful verbal performances of high artistic
and human worth, which are no longer even possible once writing has taken possession of the psyche. Nevertheless, without writing, human consciousness cannot achieve its fuller potentials, cannot produce other beautiful and powerful creations” (p. 14).

The children are showing more confidence as well as more independence. The sound produced by zapateado gains importance in the learning process and provides feedback on attainment of the correct rhythmic pattern. There are segments in the class during which the children follow the movement from hearing the sound patterns produced, as well as the body language of the movement.

All the children are standing on the line of tape across the center of the room. Maria has the children follow her sequence of claps; “one-two three”—her feet follow matching the sound pattern of the clapping. (The count of the claps and feet is 1 and 2, but spoken as one-two three.) She performs a more complex pattern that switches clapping from one, two, and follows with the feet alternating on one-two three (counting 1 and 2) then back to one, two. As they grow to know these patterns, they carry them out wordlessly; the transmission is through the musical sounds of the feet, eye contact, and the body moving. These form the foundation of communication in the dance. The gritos are sandwiched between the footwork in the class, and the children are not timid in making these sounds any longer.

Mexican music has consistently been playing during portions of the class these past weeks in contrast to the early classes where little was used. Over time, pop music no longer dominated.
Musicality in the Class Context

Music as a discipline per se was not a part of the classes. Nevertheless, musicality was a very strong presence in the learning process. Only one song, identified as Mayan, was introduced in the class and used for two consecutive weeks (see Appendix E). They had learned it from Tlamatkeh. It was not referred to by any title, but in the course of my academic research, I stumbled upon several versions of it under different titles. There was, of course, a good deal of attention given to learning rhythm.

After moving about in the space, the children are asked to come to the center of the room. During this portion of the class, they stand facing toward the mirror and can see their own reflections. The teachers’ backs are to the mirror as they face towards the children. In contrast to the first part of the class, rhythm is the focus now. Maria asks the children to count to four out loud in a steady rhythm (...1, 2, 3, 4 etc.), and the children skip on the beat across the floor. They perform the skips quite naturally, though a couple of children execute them a little awkwardly until they get the hang of it.

There was rhythmic learning, as indicated in Chapter 6, where the children tapped out rhythm patterns using the floor and body percussion. As they made progress, the students created their own patterns, which became more sophisticated over time, and took turns leading the rest of the group members in performing them.

Generally, there was a keen awareness and attention to learning rhythms. During segments of the class, nonetheless, rhythm as it occurred in recorded music
was not given attention and seemed to be taken for granted. At times, I was a little baffled by it. Earlier in the fall, pop music was relied on and was sometimes used as accompaniment or background music even though its rhythm was not synchronized with the movement’s rhythm. The next segment provides an example:

Recorded pop music is in use again; this time the selection has a very strong count of four beats. The sound of a piano plunks a repetitive chord, a meter of four—1, 2, 3, 4. I would later identify the pop-rock tune as Sara Bareilles’ Love Song. The instrumental introduction establishes the beat: 1, 2, 3, 4... 1—“Head under water, and they tell me to breathe easy for a while...” the song dominates the sound in the room. The teachers ask the children to simultaneously count aloud a beat of four with the recorded song, and Carlotta and Maria start to count off: “1, 2, 3, 4...” as the children join in. The children begin skipping to the beat of four across the floor and the teachers are very supportive as they urge them forward.

The next movement is gallop; all the children begin galloping. One boy has a little trouble with this movement since the music is on a ‘square beat of 4’ which does not support the rhythm of gallop (gallop is a dotted rhythm of short long, short long...). Nonetheless, he perseveres.

The purpose of playing that song was not very clear to me, and perhaps in this instance, not so well considered. The importance of sound, and the effects of its mismatch in the given movement could be seen in the boy’s difficulty in achieving it.

Our relationship to sound is often undermined by a visually laden and textually driven society. “Sound cannot be sounding without power” and is
“dynamic” (Ong, 1982, p. 32). Sound and music span distances, creating intimacy and harmony or discord; sonorities can communicate restlessness or tenderness, a sea of feelings of many shades and hues. “The sound identity is constituted at that moment of intimacy, where temporal alignment (re)collects our desires, ourselves, in the formation of the collective ‘We.’ And the ‘We’ lasts ‘til the music ends” (Hudak, 1999, p. 464). The sense of ‘We’ in the studio classroom fluctuated between the U.S. American dominant culture and that of Mexico’s heritage. The ways in which music and movement were combined by Maria and Carlotta in the Mexican dance classes, transgressed sociocultural boundaries, a journey reflecting their own search for identity. The children came along on the ride. In their young lives, they had already traveled roads unseen by their ancestors. They are the future and will blaze new paths from ancient footprints.

**Wordless Communication Through Rhythmic Movement**

One of the most extraordinary moments during the months I carried out the study in the studio was the children’s ability to ‘tune in’ and their heightened responsiveness to the teachers leading movement without verbal directions. For instance, one day I noted:

There is a usual break to drink some water and change into dance shoes. All the children—girls and boys—have their dance shoes today. The girls have on the typical black Mexican dance shoes with straps and small heels; the boys wear *charro*-style boots. Maria asks the children to stand next to each other on the tape center floor; the girls, hands on their hips, the boys, their
hands behind their backs. She reintroduces the image of “tall spaghetti” so they will be aware of lengthening their spines.

The children are learning new foot patterns. Maria once again reviews the distinction between left from right for accuracy and checks them according to which foot is moving. She revisits the toe-heel movement once to the right and then to the left side. They all put their right foot forward, as Maria asks them, at which point she bends the same leg at the knee and raises the foot high. She asks them to watch and follow her. Beginning with a simple pattern, as she demonstrates, it builds in complexity. At first, Maria stamps with the right followed by the left foot and then it reverses (changing from the left foot to the right one).

It is the children’s turn and they repeat what they've been shown. Maria does not utter a word; instead she begins and her feet produce sounds of a compound movement, combining R/L and then L/R, which continues into a movement pattern of L/R. (L/R four times while turning to the left, and then R/L four times while turning to the right.) The children accurately imitate the movement patterns all together. I notice some of the children smiling as they perform the stepping, a clear sign of their enjoyment of the captivating and total sensory experience. Perhaps, too, they enjoy the challenge of keeping up with Maria. I can still feel the “wordless” communication that developed between them in those moments through eye contact, visual cues, timing, pace, and rhythmic sounds, the musicality of the feet crisply stomping out the pattern. Quite a memorable and extraordinary moment! Surely all these
stimuli engendered a deep sensory fulfillment and a satisfaction inexpressible with words alone.

**Further Development of Mexicanidad: Drawing the Mexican Flag and Guadalupe**

Late in February, the class for the younger children begins in the usual manner with the warm-up, but after the break there is something new.

Maria has taped the Mexican flag made of cloth (with the words “Made in China” on the lower right hand corner!) to the mirror in the front of the room. A short distance from the flag, she has also taped a scarf about the same size (both about 20” X 22”) next to it. Maria tells the story of the Mexican flag to the children. The Mexican flag is divided into three different colors: deep green on the left side, white in the middle, and red on the right side. No mention is made as to the significance of these colors. In the white middle section is an image of an eagle sitting on a cactus, and in its beak a serpent. The way she told the story was very simple: The gods commanded the Aztecs to look for an eagle with a serpent in its mouth sitting on a cactus, and when they found it, to build their homes there. This spot is now what we know as Mexico City.

The scarf, taped next to the flag, has the image of the Virgin of Guadalupe dressed in a green flowing mantle. There is also a cactus—a nopal—and the figure of Juan Diego. Maria tells the story of Guadalupe, saying Juan Diego saw an apparition of *La Virgen de Guadalupe* and no one believes his story. *La Virgen* appears again to Juan Diego and instructs him to tell everyone, and when he does, they continue in their disbelief. She appears to him again, but this time when he tells her that they don’t
believe him, she makes roses grow in the desert. He fills his cloak with the flowers and brings them to show to the villagers. When he opens the garment with the roses, the image of *La Virgen* is visible. This garment is on exhibit at a shrine in Mexico City (visited by multitudes of people yearly). After hearing these stories, the children get to choose which tale and image they would like to draw. Below is a description of what they drew:

Patricia has drawn the Virgin of Guadalupe along with a green smiling cactus and a brown eagle in the right lower corner near the cactus. Viveca uses crayons on her paper to create wide stripes of green, white, and red, the colors of the Mexican flag. She has drawn a large house in the middle white section of the “flag. Viveca explains that she drew the flag with the cactus, and a house is nearby where they were told to build it in the story. Rosita has also drawn a Mexican flag, however, the green is a much brighter shade, like a lime-green, than the actual color on the flag. Half of Mariana’s drawing is influenced by the graphics of *La Virgen* as she appears on the scarf’s design. The other half is a small image of the Mexican flag. Teo’s drawing is of Sonic the Hedgehog, a video game character. (Who, according to Wikipedia, has the ability to run faster than the speed of sound.) Maria reminds him to draw something of the flag or Guadalupe, so he includes images from the flag. An eagle on the cactus and the serpent in its mouth is how Lisa has drawn the Mexican flag. Her drawing is detailed and closely resembles the flag taped to the mirror that the children are viewing in the studio. Celia also chose the Mexican flag, but her work includes palm trees along with a cactus, the eagle,
and a snake. Victoria has indeed drawn a Mexican flag and included her parents in the picture, since, as she explains, her parents were born there.

Maria takes pictures of the group as each child holds his or her drawing up to show. The children looking very satisfied with their artwork seemed to enjoy the activity of drawing. All the children except Marta are wearing their Nochtlaca T-shirts today. Maria and Carlotta have previously reminded the children to wear their logo T-shirts and dance leggings as regular gear, a dress code of sorts, for class. Both teachers were looking at the book of Mexican songs I brought for them, but they were also attentive to any questions the children might have while they were busy drawing.

The uniformity of dress contributed to a group identity and stood as a symbol of belonging to the community. In the remaining weeks, T-shirts sporting the Nochtla logo were worn more consistently. Logos like icons can be powerful signifiers. The figure of La Virgen de Guadalupe is a cultural icon in Mexico, “constitut[ing] one of the two major female archetypes in Mexico” (Cypress, 1991, p. 6). The other archetypal woman is La Malinche. “The Virgin of Guadalupe embodies the most virtuous feminine attributes: forgiveness, succor, piety, virginity, saintly submissiveness [while] La Malinche is the Mexican Eve [...]” (p. 6). The representation of goodness associated with the icon of the Virgin of Guadalupe is not discussed in more depth, but the image is indeed important in signifying Mexican culture right alongside Mexico’s flag.

A week later, the older group is also shown the Mexican flag, and the Virgin of Guadalupe scarf; both remain taped to the mirror. After about a half hour of
movement, at 12:30 PM, Carlotta recounts the stories of the flag and Guadalupe to this group of children. She asks who knows the story of the flag’s symbols and a few of them raise their hands. All seem to recognize the flag even if they don’t exactly know the story connected to it; a couple of girls know some part of the story. She also tells them what the colors of the flag symbolize: green is for hope; white represents unity; and red is the blood (sangre) of heroes.

As with the younger group, they each get a sheet of white sketchpad paper and an assortment of colored crayons. The teachers ask the children to share their colors if they need one different from those they have in front of them. Children in this group are mostly drawing Mexican flags, although the shade of green varies and doesn’t necessarily match the shade on the flag displayed on the mirror. As might be expected, the older ones copy the image they see represented on the flag more closely: the wide stripes in green, white, and red, the eagle, and the snake (serpent). Three girls have included Guadalupe in their drawings. The rest this group's class time is taken up drawing, with no time to show their work as in the younger class. The children were asked to stop drawing and their crayons are collected at 12:55 PM. One girl drew a flag on the front side of the paper and Guadalupe on the other side. Carlotta said a few others also drew on both sides, and some drew two different flags.

**Moving Toward the Semester’s End in March**

As the weeks go by in March, the children continue to be noticeably eager to learn and master the movements. There is a natural willingness to comply with what they are asked to do, an upbeat attitude and a curiosity in learning. An intense effort is
made by both the teachers and the children to forge ahead. There is a pervasive feeling of cooperation between the teachers and children and a presence of cariño.

In March, again drawing is added as an activity. When the last class comes at the end of March, the children have become familiar with an array of stepping styles and are confident in performing most of them. They can identify some by name and even think intellectually about the process. An example of this knowledge-making process emerges when Carlotta is about to pick up the tempo of the movement, telling the children that the movement will get faster. She then asks, “What happens when it gets faster?” One boy responds that the “scuff” action gets shorter. This shows evidence of a developed sensibility and an increased awareness in a number of ways. It demonstrates an ability to think within the discipline, not only physically but also with musical as well as mathematical awareness.

**Moving On**

In March when the classes came to an end, I knew I would not see some of the children perhaps ever again. They will always be a part of my memories. In May of 2010, however, I flew to Branson, Missouri to complete the interview process while the company was there performing in an international dance festival at Silver Dollar City, a well-known theme park. In the concluding sections, I include some of what transpired while there. In addition, I continued to attend special events such as recitals and performances, both of the children’s program and of the professional Nochtla Dance Company, which allowed me to maintain contact and get updates on their progress. I share these in the concluding segments.
CHAPTER 8

Mingling with the Nochtlaca Community

The Nochtlaca company members were at an international dance festival held in conjunction with the annual “WorldFest” held in the spring at Silver Dollar City in Branson, Missouri. I arranged to fly to the Ozarks to complete the rest of the interviews since many interruptions arose in the course of everyone’s busy lives in New York City, and it had become increasingly difficult to complete them. I had begun an interview with Alfredo in his retail women’s clothing store in Queens, but customers, of course, were coming in and out, and so we only got so far along. I had been able to complete interviews with Justo and David by February 2010, but still needed to interview five more members. Branson, a city of a little more than 20 square miles, seemed an ideal situation to complete them, as the dancers would be performing several shows a day and have time in between and after the shows.

I arrived there on May 7, 2010 and found my way to the “low budget B” motel they were staying in that had been provided by the festival producers. I would stay for several days and booked a room at the same place they were in, right next to Charlie’s Steak, Ribs, and Ale pub and directly across from the “Hollywood Wax Museum” on the main highway (see photo Appendix D). Not only was the Nochtlaca Dance Company making its debut there, but also a gargantuan 40-foot King Kong newly constructed atop a pseudo-skyscraper building, a part of the museum (see photo Appendix D). It was one of the city’s featured attractions. Branson had more recently become an “affordable” entertainment hub in the Midwest, and a long strip
mall went through it with dozens of theatre attractions and other show events. Many seniors flocked there and the one-year old airport in Branson had long lines of people in wheelchairs waiting in it.

The trip to Branson was pivotal for me to collect information that I needed to flesh out the research study. The trip allowed me to complete that part of the data collection and also provided an opportunity to bond with some of the members through a different experience apart from the studio and New York City. Some of the highlights were managing to get slipped onto the chartered bus for festival performers and riding with them to the festival site, and being able to see them perform in a theater at Silver Dollar City several times in one day. I interviewed a few of them on the site of the theme park and others back at the motel. An awkward moment came about with Alfredo in the middle of the interview in my motel room. He was sitting in a wooden-framed chair, and as he leaned back, it fell apart. I quickly gave him my chair as I switched to sit on the bed, continuing the interview without losing a beat.

The following sections provide my experiences at performances over several years within the Nochtica community.

**The Children Bring a Traditional Mexican Dance Performance to Brooklyn**

It is an exceptionally hot day for early June in 2011 with temperatures rising over ninety-five degrees. The children were scheduled for an outdoor performance on the plaza of the Brooklyn Public Library. A friend of mine was visiting the city from the southern part of China; I thought she would enjoy the performance and asked her to come along. We both boarded the subway to Brooklyn and immediately felt
the intense heat when we came onto the street again. My Chinese friend, Yanling, had a special umbrella with her, commonly used in south China to deflect the sun’s rays, which helped a little. I asked her to bring her camera for some picture taking since it was a public event, and she brought it along, too.

When we arrive at the library, the performance was relocated indoors. As we make our way to the area where the children will perform, one hundred or more people fill the room waiting for the event to begin. I walk around to find the dressing room—where the action is, and as I enter amidst a large number of children, a great calm is noticeable. Everyone has his or her traditional costume on (see photo Appendix D).

As they prepare to perform in the next room, I overhear a mother say to her petite young daughter, “Don’t be shy. Have fun!” Alfredo asks everyone to form a circle. I put down my notepad and take hands with everyone as does Yanling. We are all in the circle and Alfredo asks everyone to hold hands and raise their arms in the air, as he shouts out, “¡Viva México!” It is 1:35 PM, and the performance room is packed! As the littlest ones enter first, filing up the center aisle, people are seated on folding chairs as well as on the floor. I had been to the rehearsal the week before to help out, so I knew the dance they would present, a traditional dance coming from Chiapas. The youngest children do well in the dance and the next age group has their turn. I spy Graciela, who is nine years old now, and realize she has grown to be a confident and lovely performer, and is really into the dance. Her lips silently mouth each word of the song as it plays, accompanying her and the others in the dance. She knows it by heart! And, so it continues until all the age groups have each had their
day in the sun, and the performance comes to its end. After the children present, Alfredo invites the audience to learn La Raspa and everyone enjoys learning the dance.

**Xochitl (Flower/Water Lily)**

It had been six months since I had attended the children’s public performance at the Brooklyn Public Library. I planned to go to the recital scheduled in December 2011. I was eager to see the children, the Noctlaca faculty, and the extended community. I was curious about the students’ development as well as that of the company. I entered the lobby of Alvin Ailey Studios, a large building constructed less than a decade ago in 2004. I went to the main desk and asked where the Noctlaca children’s performance would take place in the multiple-storied building on West 55th Street and Ninth Avenue on the west side of Manhattan. I was already acquainted with the building having been there the year before, and took the elevator to the lower level to find the theatre and dressing rooms. I had emailed Justo to find out if help was needed. He told me they did, so I arrived early.

The site was chosen so that all the children could have the experience of performing in a professional theatre. The Ailey Citigroup Theatre, as it is named, can seat 275 people. As I approach the stage area, some of the children are involved in a pre-concert run-through of one of the dances with Alfredo. Most of the children were already dressed, but I find nine-year old Graciela, in the dressing room, and she seems a bit anxious. I learn she is unable to find her costume. With concern in her voice she tells me, “I don’t know where it is.” It was not unreasonable for her to be anxious since it was getting close to performance time. I did my best to reassure
her, “That’s why I’m here Graciela, to help you. Wait one moment; I’ll be right back.” She waits quietly while I go to find Greta, a company member who also acts as costume mistress, involved with the general organization of the costumes. I locate her, and she immediately knows where to look, putting her hands on it almost instantly. I take the traditional skirt and blouse off the clothing rack and hand it to Graciela who is quite relieved. Her hair was already arranged into a well-made bun, another marker of a good Mexican female dancer. I help to guide the white blusa (blouse) elaborately embroidered with large colorful flowers over her head as she pops her arms through the armholes. Graciela is nearly ready, only needing the skirt, shoes, and las flores (flowers—not real ones but well-crafted so they look real), to adorn her hair.

When I first met Graciela, she was six years old. Over the past years, she has grown in many ways, blossoming as a confident and competent young folklórico dancer. As she continues dressing, she takes off the black leggings she is wearing, takes out white tights from her tote bag, and begins to put them on underneath her skirt. She is bending over, carefully attending to putting on her tights, and I motion to her to sit on a nearby stool. I say to her, “Es más fácil si estás sentado.” (It’s easier if you are sitting.) I know both Spanish and English are spoken in her family. She sits but stands again to adjust the tights. She rolls them up above her knees, pulls them up to her waist, and folds them over. She is almost all ‘put together.’ I notice a few other girls need help retying their skirts, so that the ties are pulled properly through the loopholes at the waist. The loopholes are sewn into the garment for support and a better fit. Without threading the ties through the loopholes, the skirts are not
secure and could shift or fall down while dancing. I consulted with company
members regarding any details, letting them attend to those, and watching them as
they did in order to apprehend from an insider perspective how it is done. While
helping I am learning, too.

I assisted one of the older girls to place the flowers in her hair and then ran
around until I found enough hairpins to fasten them, making sure they were
securely placed so that they would not fall off her head during any vigorous
movement. “They look beautiful!” I exclaim, once the flowers are set. Graciela is all
ready now and proceeds into the theatre to join the others, where many are already
sitting as they wait in a very orderly manner in front of the perimeter of the stage
area. I am always taken by the great presiding sense of order that is present at these
events with large numbers of children. The mother of another girl, known to
Graciela, is applying lipstick to her daughter’s lips, and upon seeing Graciela, turns
to her to put lipstick on her lips, too, in a reflexive manner, as if it is her second
daughter. Graciela is receptive, even eager, as she parts her lips slightly so the
lipstick will go on smoothly. Her friend’s mom tells her, “You have beautiful lips!”

Much later I find myself thinking if she were in a domain of the dominant
culture, would her beauty be noticed and validated, or would her appearance be
measured and judged against Caucasian standards? Would she be stereotyped as a
little Mexican girl or perhaps labeled unknowingly or pejoratively as Chicana? Here
in this community of paises (fellow countrymen) she is appreciated, considered
very capable, and very much loved. With her smooth brown skin, full lips, and dark
hair—she is beautiful! Perhaps for these reasons alone, though others exist, the
importance of learning identity within the cultural domain of *paisanos* has profound value.

**Dancing Through Generations**

*You know… a lot of people make the dances, but a lot of people don’t know why. They make [the dances] because the grandfather [made them] and their grandfather...  
(Tlamatkeh Interview, 2010)*

Finally, the time approaches for the performance to begin! Every seat is taken and an extra row of folding chairs has been added to the stationary theatre seats to accommodate additional audience members. The children are ready for the performance to start; I find an available seat. Many mothers and fathers are busy taking photos of their daughters and sons dressed in traditional Mexican attire. I notice how many more parents actually have a camera or a cell phone within a period of a couple of years. Only a short time ago, not so many Mexican parents in New York City’s diaspora had them; almost no one is without one now.

This is the first time that slide images are projected as background to the dances. They show pictures of landscapes of the various regions where the dances originated. Justo comes out first, smartly dressed in a dark blue suit and tie; he greets the audience both in Spanish and in English. He says most of the speaking today, however, will be in Spanish. The company is blooming; the *Noctlaca Dance* children’s program has grown and now includes a Staten Island location. Its new teachers come onto the stage to greet everyone. The welcome speeches are bilingual and short. A new addition is an introduction giving some background on the dances before the children begin each dance. To start with, a newly introduced dance from Chiapas is presented featuring marimba, a characteristic of the region’s music. The
event continues with an assortment of other dances that are also introduced
highlighting the associated region’s distinctive features. Another attraction at this
culminating event of the year is the traditional piñata, as in other December
performance recitals.

**How Do You Know It’s Mexican?**

I have stayed in touch throughout the years, and always greatly look forward to
seeing all of them and hearing their news. Their mission has genuinely touched me,
and my life has been enriched by my experiences with the whole community. As I
transcribed interviews, coded material, and read to make further sense of all I had
gathered, at times, I still wondered what “Mexican” really meant to the children.
With all of the richness of Mexico’s history and culture, which had moved me deeply,
how did they come to know what is Mexican?

**Noctlaca’s Tenth Anniversary Gala, June 2013**

I attended part of the tenth anniversary celebration in June 2013, held at the East
92nd Street YMCA in Manhattan; a gala affair that went on for hours. I took the
elevator up to the level where the event was held. Upon seeing the children, I
walked into the large room that was a combined dressing and waiting area right
next to the room where they performed. I approached the littlest ones, who told me
their ages were between five and eight, all of them sitting in a circle on the floor
dressed in bright pink traditional-styled skirts with white blouses. I no longer knew
the youngest children, who sat quietly waiting, since I hadn’t visited classes in
several years. Some talked to each other and many children of various ages were all
around the room. The same sense of order and calm I’d felt before was present. The
little ones had just finished dancing, which I hadn’t seen, so I asked them, “What kind of dance did you do?” Many small brown eyes were riveted on me, but no one replied directly. When I asked another five-year old girl standing nearby if the dance had a name, she told me, “good dance.”

While the performance was going on in the adjacent room, I went about the waiting area talking with several of the children and recognized a few of them. Graciela was there and looked radiant. She was now in her pre-teen years and had become a very competent and beautiful dancer! I did what I could to engage some of the children in conversation while they were standing in line waiting for a group photo shot. “Do you like to dance?” I heard myself ask one eight-year old boy. He told me, “yes.” I noticed some reservation, however, and questioned him, “Are there some times when you like it more than others?” A nod of his head and the intensity of his eyes signaled “yes” to me. I ventured, “When don’t you like it so much?” and he answered, “When I’m the only boy [...]” His older sister standing by his side hugged him, as he added, “I’d be scared to dance by myself.” I continued talking with children. I posed the question to one girl, “Is it exciting to go to class?” “Yes!” she replied. “Why?” I ask. She said, “I get to see my friends and dance.” I inquired of other children about the dance they were participating in—what was it called? What kind of dance? I was enjoying my time with them, but persisted in my search to see if there was some Mexican connection for them. Was there an association for them of something intangible to something tangible? I was certainly learning about its meanings and social value amongst them. In the end, two girls, who were not standing anywhere near each other told me while I was questioning them on exactly
what kind of dance they were doing. One said “from Mexico,” the other replied, “Mexican.” I followed this up and asked them how they knew it was Mexican, and they each separately told me it was [written] on their T-shirts. (These shirts had the company’s logo and the words danza Mexicana on them.) I spoke to them a bit more and learned further that their parents had also told them they would take Mexican dance.

As other groups of children are dancing in performance in the nearby room filled with an attentive audience, one lone shout comes from a woman standing in the back of the room, “¡Viva México!”

*Quauhtli (Eagle)*

The very young children I had spoken with told me they had never been to Mexico, and one small girl told me her cousins lived there. I asked if she’d like to visit there some day and she shook her head clearly, ‘yes.’ Many families have been separated as a result of U.S. border policies. I ponder the representation of the eagle for both countries, Mexico and the United States. Longing for freedom, to move about freely, to soar like an eagle: music and dance has enabled people to soar and transcend the feeling of limitation of imposed and constructed boundaries. I recall what Tlamatkeh said back in Branson at Silver Dollar City:

*Vienen de un pueblo... little town in Mexico, in Puebla [a region in Mexico].

*Pueblos que están muriendo allá porque todo están moviendo para acá. Y llegan aquí, and everybody speaks English—it’s... New York! It’s from the little town to New York.*
(They come from a small village... a little town in Mexico. Small villages that are dying there because everyone is moving here [to U.S.]. And, they arrive here and everyone speaks English. It’s... New York! It’s from the little town to New York.)

Such an important and long history of Mexico’s people surely should not be disregarded and forgotten. The ongoing practices of the past still ripple through our lives and are embedded in our daily practices. Our modern lives might obscure the past, but its echoes are not silenced. Once again, Tlamatkeh’s words resound:

Know your roots... [it’s] good. You are good like you are. You are beautiful like you are! You have really good parents. A really fun and beautiful future... is Mexico. You are part of that, you know? And, you are American, too. You have... all the American children [who] will grow here. It doesn’t matter.

Don’t worry about it. But, [if] you don’t have this part [Mexican], we will give [it to] you... like [Nochtlaca], because this is nuestra misión (our mission).

And here as I close, I can still hear the fervent cry: ¡Echa pa’lante! (Forever forward!)
Appendix A

Pre-Conquest – Additional Background

**Mexicas** [pronounced Meh-shee-kahs] eventually split from the Aztec group and formed Mexico. Aztec in Náhuatl means people who came from Aztlan.

(https://www.mexica.net/mexica.php Retrieved 1/10/2014)

**Pre-Conquest Instruments**

An enormous collection of pre-Conquest instruments still exists. The ornate carvings on instruments have shown an array of things such as “gods, houses, ceremonial objects, and dates” (Stevenson, 1952, p. 14). The information provided by “the carvings are like pages from the pre-Cortesian codices” (p. 14) giving insights and important details on “the exact time and place the instrument was to have been used; the exact part it was to have played in the ceremonial functions at which it was heard; the length of time it was to have been sounded; the exact persons who were designated to play upon it” (p. 14). It has been determined that “All pre-Conquest instruments were either idiophones, aerophones, or membranophones. (See Appendix A/Glossary) were entirely unknown in pre-Cortesian Mexico” (Stevenson, p. 9). There is reasonable evidence leading us to determine that the tonal system that Aztec instruments were capable of sounding included the intervals of the octave, fifth, fourth, and third (Schoen, 1982, p. 25).

One of the pioneers in musical archaeology, F. J. Fétis, made conclusions about Egyptian music based on his study of Egyptian flutes. (Stevenson, p. 8) Others who followed produced “exhaustive studies in the music of the ancient Sumerians and Babylonians, and in the music of the ancient Greeks. In the case of Mexico,
Daniel Castañeda and Vicente T. Mendoza used Fétis’s archaeological methods to investigate early indigenous instruments. Castañeda and Mendoza concluded, “An essential sameness prevailed everywhere in the type of instruments used” (Stevenson, p. 8); the names applied to the same instruments had different names in the various languages of the pre-Conquest period. (p. 8) In the period after the Revolution of 1910, Carlos Chávez would resurrect the use of many of these instruments incorporating them into his musical compositions. In November 2012, the celebrated Venezuelan conductor, Gustavo Dudamel, conducted a performance of one of Chávez’s compositions, Sinfonia India, at Carnegie Hall in New York City. According to Slonimsky (1972), the instruments used by the ancients in Mexico were principally of six types (the English word is followed by the indigenous equivalent in italics): 1) Flutes, Chililihti; and ocarinas and panpipes, Tlapitzalli; 2) Marine snail shell, Atecocoli; 3) Vertical drum, Huehuetsl; 4) Horizontal drum, Teponaxtle; 5) Calabash rasps, Tzicahuaztli; and bone rasps, Omithitzicahuaztli; 6) Gourd filled with pebbles (like a rattle), Ayacaztli (p. 215).

A vertical flute made of baked clay was called the Chililihti. These were frequently “molded into the shapes of flowers and animals” while the totolapitzalli often resembled a bird (Schoen, 1982, p. 23). The tlapitzalli “a type of ‘globular flute’ or ocarina of the Teotihuacán culture consisted of several pipes tied together in panpipe fashion. It was capable of producing untempered triads and 6-3 chords, which suggests that their music incorporated a concept of harmony” (Schoen, p. 24).
The marine snail shells, which included *Ateocoli*, could produce the pitches A
(below middle-C), D1, F#1, A1, D2 (a ninth
above mid-C) (Schoen, p. 25).

“These Indian ‘trumpets’ were blown by buzzing the lips into an aperture or
mouthpiece” in a similar manner as the playing of modern brass instruments
(Schoen, p. 25).

*Huehuetls* were single-skin vertical drums of which there were three sizes:
the *Huehuetl* proper was the smallest, followed by the medium-sized *panhuehuetl*,
and the largest drum was *tlalpanhuehuetl*. (Slonimsky, 1972) The equivalent Mayan
name for *Huehuetl* is *Zacatán*, and as Slonimsky describes, “the sound of this word
suggests the rhythm of the anapest, expressed in music as two short notes and a
long note” (1972, p. 216). In rhythmic notation this would be two sixteenth-notes
and an eighth-note; an example of this pattern can be found in *Los Xtoles*, song of the
Maya Warriors. (Slonimsky, 1972, p. 216) The *panhuehuetl* and the *tlalpanhuehuetl*
were both associated with war. As per Slonimsky, *Huehuetl* means drum, *Pan* means
upon, and *Tla*, instrument (1972, p. 216). They are described as being played with
the fingers or hands like the more modern Bongo drum. “El huehuetl imitaba a la
danza, y el panhuehuetl y el tlalpanhuehuetl anidaba el grito largo de Guerra, el
llamado de batalla” (Ruiz 1956, p. 29). (The *huehuetl* mimicked the dance, and the
long war cry, the call of battle dwelled inside of the *panhuehuetl* and the
*tlalpanhuehuetl*. ) Another example which gives us a picture of the formation of the
dance as well as the hierarchical social structure follows:
The teponaztli and huehuetl were usually placed on a grass mat at the centre of the dancing area, the dancers—often hundreds—moving round them in concentric circles. The nobility danced in the inner circles, and, to synchronize with the dancers in the outer circles, abbreviated their steps, while those in the outermost circles danced at twice the speed; thus all the circles completed a revolution in the dance at the same time. Choreography, melodic shape and drum rhythms were so coordinated that the rise and fall of the dancer’s arms and feet matched the rise and fall of the melody in the song and the pitches of the drums. A drum terminology based on four syllables and a suffix (ti, to, ki, ko, and -n) must therefore, besides indicating drum rhythms, have related to choreography and song pitch. A noteworthy feature of this system is its duality of consonant and vowel (t versus k, i versus o), which possibly relate to the high or low drum pitch, positions of arms and feet in the dance, the two pitch levels of the Náhuatl language, or to the left as opposed to the right hand (Béhague, Stanford, & Chamorro, 1980).

In an account given by one of the most well known early conquistadores, Bernal Díaz del Castillo, one of these drums is said to have been seen atop the main pyramid of Tenochtitlan, the Aztec capital, and could be “heard throughout the valley” (Martí, 1971, p. 9). The sound it produced was unmistakable, and “its tones inspired terror among the Spaniards as they heralded the suicidal charges of the Aztec warriors” (Martí, 1971, p. 9). Mendieta’s description from 1570 tells us:

the drums were two, one high and thicker than a man, five hands high, of very fine wood, hollow inside and well carved on the outside and painted, on its mouth they put a tanned deer skin, well tightened from the edge to the
middle. It sounds an [interval] of a fifth and they play it on its points and tones, which rise and fall, concerting and intoning the drums with the singers (as quoted by Martí, 1971, p. 7).

In the following excerpt, the sixteenth-century missionary, Juan de Torquemada, describes the uses of both the Huehuete and Teponaxtli, and their relationship to Indian dance of the distant past in Mexico:

When the dancers arrive at the place, they take their places to play the instruments. The two best singers then begin the song. A large drum, played with the hands, is called a Huehuete. The other, played with sticks like the instruments of Spain, is called the Teponaxtle... Wishing to begin the dance, three or four Indians raise very shrill whistles. The instruments sound in a low tone, and little by little increase in volume. When the dancers hear the instruments they begin to sing and dance. The first songs go slowly and in a deep tone. When one song is finished (and it seems long because it goes very slowly, though none lasts over an hour), the instrument changes tone, and the leaders begin another chant, a little higher and more lively. In this way, the songs keep rising, as though someone changed from a bass to a tenor voice (Slominsky, 1972, p. 217).

The Teponaxtli as described by Slonimsky is the most important of ancient Mexican instruments as it “was regarded as a sacred instrument, and was not played except on solemn occasions” (1972, p. 216). Martí adds that when both the Huehuete and Teponaxtli were sounded they could be heard at a great distance (1971, p. 13). Stevenson (1952) includes Mendieta’s account of their divine origin offering this version of the legend of how they were formed:
*Teponaxtl* and *Huehueltl* were originally divine beings dwelling at the court of the Sun. A priestly messenger from earth invaded the heavenly precincts and poured forth in song the story of man’s grief. The Sun, however, forbade his servitors to listen to the earthly messenger. *Teponaxtl* and *Huehueltl* disobeyed the Sun, and for their disobedience were expelled from the heavens. They fell to earth and assumed the form of musical instruments. Ever since their expulsion from the skies they have assuaged man’s grief with the sound of their music (p. 30).

Calabash rasps, *Tzicahuaztli* and bone rasps, *Omichitzicahuaztli* make up another group of percussion instruments. “These long, notched (serrated) sticks or human bones were scraped (rasped) with a smaller stick or piece of bone to produce a grating noise, and were used in conjunction with pitched drums to accompany singing and dancing” (Schoen, 1982, p. 28).

The last group appearing in Slonimsky’s six categories is *Ayacaztli*, described as a gourd filled with pebbles, which essentially made a rattling sound. There were some variants molded from clay and filled with beads or shells. (Schoen, 28)

Other instruments not included by Slonimsky but mentioned by Schoen are *cascabeles* and *tenabaris*, which were both jingles worn by dancers around their ankles. *Cascabeles* were made of metal and *tenabaris* were constructed from butterfly cocoons; they were used during special religious ceremonies. *Jícara de agua* as described by Schoen was a half of a fruit shell as an inverted basin filled with water and struck with sticks. These may still be used in street bands and mariachi groups. (Schoen, 29) David, one of the participants in my study, informed me of another percussion instrument known as *hueso de fraile* (friar's bones) made from the seeds of an Atoyotl tree used to make a string rattle.
Appendix B

Glossary of Music Terms

Instrument Definitions

**Aerophone:** An instrument in which a column of air is the primary vibrating system. Instruments sounded by air (wind instruments) (Randel, 1986, p. 14)

**Chordophone:** Any instrument in which sound is produced by the vibration of a string (p.161).

**Idiophone:** Percussion instruments are a type of idiophone. Something that is shaken, struck, or hit against another object or itself (Rademacher, 1997, p. 39). Rattles, chimes or other simple devices that jangle or click are classified as idiophones. (Randel 1986)

**Membranophone:** An instrument in which sound is produced by the vibration of a membrane, traditionally a stretched animal skin, although now often made of synthetic material (i.e. drums) (Randel, p. 485).
Appendix C

Glossary of Dance Terminology

Marley is a performance surface made of a very durable slip resistant sheet vinyl. It usually covers sprung wooden dance flooring.

Demi-plié Half-bend of the knees. All steps of elevation begin and end with the demi-plié (Grant, 1982, p. 39).

Fifth position [of the feet]: The feet are crossed [...] so that the heel of the front foot touches the toe of the back foot and vice versa (p. 82).

First-position arms [port de bras] Carriage of the arms (p. 89). (In first position, both arms are held curved and outstretched in front of the body with hands and fingers extending toward each other.)

First position [of the feet]: In this position the feet form one line, heels touching one another (p. 82).

Plié A bending of the knee or knees (p. 88).

Relevé A raising of the body on the point or demi-pointe [of the foot]. (p. 94).

Rond de jambe Round of the leg, that is, a circular movement of the leg (p. 99).

Rond de jambe à terre Rond de jambe on the ground (p. 99).

Turn-out The ability of the dancer to turn his or her feet and legs out from the hip joints to a 90-degree position (p. 122).

Second position [of the feet]: The feet are on the same line but with a distance of about one foot between the heels (p. 82).

Spanish Dance Terms

Fandango A lively dance in triple meter derived from Spain.
Seguidillas  A courtship dance in quick triple time usually accompanied by Spanish-derived strophic folk songs.

Tarima (plataforma)  A wooden box-like platform for Mexican dancing that amplifies the sound of the footwork (zapateado) while elevating the dancer off the ground.
BLAZING NEW PATHS FROM ANCIENT FOOTPRINTS:
ENACTMENT OF MEXICAN TRADITIONAL DANCE AND MUSIC (FOLKLÓRICO) IN A NEW YORK URBAN COMMUNITY OF EARLY CHILDHOOD LEARNERS
WAITING IN THE WINGS
TIME TO DANCE!
AFTER THE PERFORMANCE IN BROOKLYN PUBLIC LIBRARY
A DAY TO BE PROUD
TRADITIONAL BLouse (WITH SMILE!)
GRACIELA
HOLDING THE SKIRT
LOST IN A SWIRL
MUY LINDA!
EL ALCARAVAN
Backstage-Traditional Boys Outfits
Appendix E

Conex (Mayan song words)

CONEX, CONEX
PALESTEN
CHICUBIN, CHICUBIN
YO CON KIN

VAMOS, VAMOS
MUCHACHOS
QUE YA SE VA
OCULTANDO EL SOL
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