

CALIFORNIA STATE UNIVERSITY, NORTHRIDGE

DANCING AMOXTLI:  
DANZA AZTECA AND INDIGENOUS BODY ART AS FORMS OF RESISTANCE

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements  
for the degree of Master of Arts in  
Chicana and Chicano Studies

By

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May 2012

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## DEDICATION

I dedicate this labor of love to Ometeotl, the sacred elements, the four winds, and to all those who came before me. I humbly offer this work as way to pay homage to the indigenous populations of the Anahuac, and also to the brave *guerreros* and *guerreras* who have so valiantly fought to protect our traditions, especially Tlahtoani Cuauhtemoc and Emiliano Zapata.

*Para mi linda madre a quien adoro con toda mi alma, le dedico este tesis como ofrenda y agradecimiento por ser una madre buena, fuerte, amable y única. Sé que su vida no fue facil y admiro como ha sobrevivido tanto para asegurar que sus hijos salgan adelante. Le ofresco este pequeño trabajo como agradecimiento y reconocimiento de sus enseñanzas y sacrificios.* I also dedicate this to my brothers and sisters who helped make me who I am today.

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## ABSTRACT

### DANCING AMOXTLI: RESISTANCE THROUGH DANZA AZTECA AND INDIGENOUS BODY ART

By

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Master of Arts in Chicana and Chicano Studies

This body of work explores present-day manifestations of *Danza Azteca* and Mesoamerican body art, and their connection to the development of Chicana/o indigenous identities and resistance against marginalization and erasure of their indigenous heritage. Contemporary *Danza Azteca* and indigenous body art have their roots in pre-Cuauhtemoc ceremonial dance traditions and rites of passage ceremonies that were at the heart of the religious, political, and artistic foundation of the Aztec civilization. After the Spanish conquest, native forms of knowledge and religious expression, including dance and body adornment, were banned and punishable by death. Those who survived the conquest found ways in which to preserve their cultural traditions in secrecy that have made possible the revival of these traditions today. During the 1960s and 70s, *Danza Azteca* sprouted throughout the Southwest among politicized Chicana/o communities. For many Chicanas and Chicanos, this was a positive form of resistance against assimilation and marginalization that took the form of cultural pride and the reclamation of repressed histories.

Today, *Danza Azteca* continues to grow and develop in fascinating ways as the struggle for equal rights continues. *Danza Azteca* provides its participants access to embodied recuperations of indigenous epistemologies. Contemporary *danzantes* (Aztec



dancers) express their indigeneity through an aesthetic that includes traditional forms of dress and body adornment through the use of Aztec dance regalia and even tattoos and piercings. By wearing and tattooing Mesoamerican images, glyphs, and symbols, *danzantes* are reviving and preserving Mesoamerican art, including symbolic representations and expressions of religious philosophies. The practicing of *Danza Azteca* and taking on an indigenous aesthetic through dress and body adornment are a testament to the empowering role that spiritual traditions and artistic expressions have on the formation of the Chicano's political consciousness and indigenous identity. Through this study, we can better understand how Chicanas/os are able to resist oppressive ideologies by embracing, celebrating, reviving, and expressing their *indigenismo* (indigenous identity).

## INTRODUCTION

My path towards consciousness began when I enrolled in a course entitled “Ancient Mesoamerican Art” at the community college in my hometown of Santa Maria, California. Being exposed to Aztec and Mayan art fascinated me and had a profound impact on how I began to view the world. Although I was excited about what I was learning, I wondered why I had not been previously exposed to my people’s history throughout my educational experience. It was hard for me to understand how such a magnificent cultural heritage could have been stricken from our history books. I felt that I had been cheated as I realized that I knew very little about my ancestral roots.

The curiosity I had about Mesoamerican art and history led to my search for ways in which I could learn more about my heritage. As fate would have it, an Aztec dance group performed at the college I was attending. I had never seen anything like it before. The smell of copal, the sound of the drum, and the visual enticement of the dancers’ regalia, feathers, and acrobatic movements awakened all of my senses, including my “genetic memory.” I felt as if I was witnessing my ancestors come back to life, and an awakening of consciousness deep within my spirit began to emerge. From that moment forward, I continued to pursue ways that would expose me to Mesoamerican art and history.

In my pursuit for knowledge, I transferred to UC Santa Barbara where I majored in Chicano Studies. While attending UCSB, I came across another Aztec dance group at a multicultural event on campus. This time, I asked one of the participating *danzantes* if I could possibly join the group, and that is when my journey towards becoming a *danzante* was set in motion. *Danza*, and my commitment to learning about my cultural heritage,

fueled my motivation to do well in school and to be involved in social justice issues. I also began to develop and hone my skills as a visual artist, which gave me yet another outlet to express my identity, cultural pride, and social concerns affecting our community. By the time I graduated from UCSB, I had become a dedicated and very involved *danzante*, participated in several grassroots struggles, and created socially conscience art that came to be published in Chicano Studies books and other publications.

Understanding the necessity of having a well-rounded and culturally balanced educational experience, especially for those who come from marginalized and underserved populations, I developed a passion for teaching. I became a bilingual education schoolteacher in Ventura, California where I have been teaching for the past eleven years. My goal as a teacher has been to create and teach a multicultural curriculum to ensure that my students' cultural backgrounds are not only recognized and validated, but also celebrated and embraced. Becoming a *cabeza* (teacher) within the tradition of *Danza Azteca* supplemented my role as an educator for *el pueblo*. Today, I continue to work with families in reviving and learning pre-Cuauhtemoc dances, art, calendar systems, the Nahuatl language, and Nahua philosophies. Whether in a classroom setting, a traditional *danza* circle, or in the community, my philosophy of teaching and learning is anchored by indigenous systems of knowledge and guided by the belief that education is one of the most important aspects of growth and development, providing students with the fundamental tools necessary to move forward in society as confident and knowledgeable human beings.

Eventually, my hunger for knowledge led me to return to school as a graduate student at California State University, Northridge where I continue to pursue my

educational endeavors within the field of Chicana/o Studies. Because the Department of Chicana/o Studies at CSUN highly values and supports the validation, research, and writing of our own histories and experiences, I was able to make the focus of my thesis what I am most passionate about; *Danza Azteca* and art. These two mediums have allowed me to express myself, build inner strength and endurance, grow as a spiritual person, and most importantly, resist marginalization, oppression, and cultural genocide. Through first hand experiences and observations, I came to understand the profound feeling of empowerment one can acquire by regaining one's indigenous history. I felt that this shared reality among many Chicanas/os and *danzantes* needed be researched, analyzed and documented in order to illustrate the many manifestations of *indigenismo* and resistance that are inherent within the tradition of *Danza Azteca*.

Throughout the years, I have witnessed a growing number of Chicanas/os become *danzantes* for many of the same reasons I did. Many of them have also acquired some sort of indigenous body art such as tattoos, piercings, or gauged ears in an effort to express and acknowledge their existence as indigenous people. As an artist, I find this embodied expression of *indigenismo* visually striking. As an educated Chicana, I also interpret these visual expressions of identity as a form of resistance against the erasure of our true identity as indigenous people. As a member of a politically active dance group, I recognize that practicing *Danza Azteca*, a tradition that was outlawed and forbidden during colonization, is a political act in itself and a powerful form of resistance.

The production of this thesis is two-fold, composed of a written thesis as well as a creative component. I chose to make the focus of my research *Danza Azteca* and Mesoamerican body art, not only because I admire these expressions of identity and

resistance, but also because there is a lack of literature and research that analyzes these subject areas. My hope is to lessen the gap by contributing an in-depth study of how contemporary Chicanas/os are able to develop and express an indigenous identity and political consciousness through *Danza Azteca* and Mesoamerican body art. The creative component of this project pays homage to the spiritual and political aspects of *danza*, and to expressions of *danzantes'* *indigenismo* as forms of resistance.

The first chapter touches on the history of colonization Chicanos and their ancestors have experienced. The goal is to give the reader an understanding of how traditional Aztec dance, along with other aspects of the Azteca-Mexica civilization, are still with us today despite the fact that Spanish missionaries made every effort to eradicate every last remnant of indigenous cultures. One of the most effective manners in which indigenous cultures have been “erased” is by omitting their histories in mainstream literature and history books. Because history is about power, Europeans established and have maintained power by writing history through a European perspective (Smith 43).

As we know, “oral tradition” and other forms of indigenous knowledges and epistemologies have been minimized and discredited by the powers that be. So one must ask, who gets to decide what is a valid and credible form of knowledge? Who will these decisions benefit? Who will these decisions push to the margins? Most importantly, what can we do about it? I will not pretend to have the answers to these long-standing questions, but through this examination of *Danza Azteca* and *indigenismo*, I offer an analysis that sheds light on an extraordinary phenomenon that has survived more than five hundred years of violence, colonization, and oppression.

Laura E. Gómez reminds us that the Chicana/o has experienced colonization twice, first by the Spaniards and then by the United States (89). With the oppression brought on by the colonization of the Mexican and Chicana/o community, a systematic attempt to strip away their ability to see themselves as indigenous people was established. Linda T. Smith argues that we are not living in a post-colonial or post-conquest society, as most would think. As indigenous people, we are still very much colonized and oppressed, since our epistemologies, languages, histories, and traditions are still marginalized, invalidated, and in many cases, lost or fractured. We are still treated like foreigners in our own lands, and treaties between the United States government and Native peoples are still being violated on a regular basis.

Today we are seeing the dismantling of ethnic studies programs in Arizona. Both Tucson Unified School District and the state of Arizona are seemingly unaware that in passing and complying with legislations such as HB 2281, they are in clear violation of at least nine international treaties and conventions. According to Dr. Roberto Cintli Rodríguez, the violations include the 1948 Declaration of Human Rights and the 2007 United Nations Declaration of the Rights of Indigenous Peoples, all of which protect the right to culture, history, identity, language and education ([progressive.org](http://progressive.org)).

The undermining and dismantling of Ethnic Studies programs in Arizona is evidence that strategic maneuvers to maintain power through continued efforts of ridding the Americas of indigenous peoples or neglecting their human rights, are still with us today. Dr. Rodríguez explains:

Mexican American Studies, also known as Chicano/a Studies or Raza Studies, in effect, is the study of peoples who trace their lineage to this very continent, many

thousands of years before the arrival of Columbus. Their roots are indigenous and part of daily, living maiz-based cultures. A primary objective of MAS has always been the recovery of those cultural roots that in the past have been denied. In Tucson, the teaching of these studies, of these roots, has not just been outlawed, but, in effect, criminalized. (progressive.org)

Although this topic deserves a thorough examination, my hope is to unveil just how critical it is for Chicanas/os to be aware of and protect their true histories and indigenous roots. It is because of this continual attack and marginalization of our histories and cultural traditions that I decided to continue my education in the field of Chicana/o Studies, and why I chose to write a thesis that highlights our existence as indigenous people. I refuse to allow the stories and contributions of our parents, grandparents, ancestors, and indigenous peoples of Anahuac to be erased, forgotten, or devalued.

*Danza Azteca* offers a way to discover and revive the traditions of our ancestors. It gives us an alternative way to learn about ourselves and the natural world around us. It encourages us to think critically and to develop an oppositional consciousness. It helps us tap into our senses as we embody indigenous epistemologies. *Danza* offers the Chicana/o a way to articulate and express notions of indigeneity. It provides us with opportunities to rebuild our relationship to the land, and to build communities based on pre-Cuauhtemoc traditions. It allows us to develop our *in ixtli in yollotl* (face and heart: the attunement of the inner and outer self) so that we may live in a more dignified manner.

Another important focus of this thesis has to do with Mesoamerican forms of body adornment or body modification. Often, visual representations of pre-Cuauhtemoc indigenous peoples of Mesoamerica do not reflect the expansive use of body art used by

natives before the arrival of Europeans. This is due, in part, to the eradication of such practices immediately following the European invasion of the Americas. All aspects of indigenous culture, knowledge, art, and religious expression were outlawed and punishable by death. There is, however, some evidence of the vast array of body ornamentation employed by Mesoamericans. For example, many stone artifacts exist of individuals with tattoos on their arms, torsos, and legs (Gilbert 98, 100). Numerous codices, like the Codex Nuttall, also depict natives with gauged ears, nose piercings, body ornamentation, and painted or tattooed faces.

As I conducted my research, I discovered that there is a lack of resources that take an in-depth look at Mesoamerican body art traditions. The few sources I found indicate that body art was used extensively across the Americas before being wiped out during colonization (Camphausen, Gilbert, and Dinter). I also came across several sources that illustrate examples of body ornamentation employed by Mesoamericans. For example, a number of stone artifacts exist of indigenous peoples with tattoos engraved on their arms, torsos, and legs (Gilbert 98, 100). Numerous Mesoamerican codices depict natives with gauged ears, nose piercings, body ornamentation, and painted or tattooed faces.

Unfortunately, what I did find was an abundance of information on prison or gang affiliated “Chicano tattoos.” This narrow view of “Chicano tattoos” and the lack of information on Mesoamerican indigenous body art, reinforces the negative stereotypes of the Chicana/o and demonizes the tattooed brown body. Thus, it is my goal to lessen the gap in this area of research and debunk the negative stereotype of the tattooed and modified Chicana/o body.



In practicing *Danza Azteca*, participants not only learn choreography, but also gain knowledge of Nahua philosophy, history, math, art, Nahuatl, cosmology, religion and calendar systems. These learning experiences expose *danzantes* to indigenous forms of knowledge and epistemologies inherent within the tradition of *danza*. Another aspect to consider is the knowledge of ancient symbols Chicanas/os are exposed to as *danzantes*. Images representing Nahua philosophical metaphors are utilized to design and adorn *danza* regalia, while some *danzantes* take it a step further by tattooing Mesoamerican symbols onto their bodies.

Because *danzantes* are exposed to indigenous knowledge through the tradition of *danza*, they are able to articulate the metaphorical significances of numerous Mesoamerican images and concepts. In cases such as these, *danzantes* become modern day *tlamatinimeh* (those who know) who are able to decipher the visual language and metaphors of the Mexica people. *Danzantes* recognize that to the Nahuas, poetry and art, or metaphor and symbolism, was sacred in that it represented truth. This profound understanding plays a vital role in a *danzante*'s decision to permanently inscribe such images onto his or her body. *Danzantes* also become *temachtianimeh* (teachers) as they share their knowledge with those around them who ask what their tattoos represent. Furthermore, as *danzantes* reflect their identities and inner self to the public, they become dancing *amoxtli* (codices) as they carry on their very skins the stories of their own lives, as well as the lives of their ancestors. In this way, *danzantes* are able to reclaim their brown bodies and recuperate their indigenous identities.

I chose to undertake the “creative thesis” option so that, in addition to my written analysis, I could also articulate my research in a visual and metaphorical manner, as my

ancestors did. My art is influenced by the tradition of *Danza Azteca* and the sacred images found in Mesoamerican *amoxtli*, murals, and artifacts. My goal is to portray the passion and commitment *danzantes* exhibit through their embodied recuperations of traditional dances and indigenous forms of body art as expressions of resistance, cultural pride and *indigenismo*. As an artist, I believe that visual representations of our realities can be empowering, both for the artist as well as the community the artist represents. Following the footsteps of their ancestors, contemporary *danzantes* use an abundance of metaphorical images to express their realities, becoming “dancing codices” as they embody, acknowledge and reflect the heritage of the Nahua people.

Like the great disc of Coyolxauhqui, Templo Mayor, Coatlicue and the Aztec Sunstone, our histories will continue be unearthed and resurface through the power of resistance, art, and scholarly work preserved, produced and maintained by the indigenous peoples of Anahuak. Like a single star in the eternal cosmic existence of our universe, I humbly offer this body of work to the immense sea of endless knowledge and creations of my people. – Ometeotl

## LITERATURE REVIEW

The intent of this literature review is to critically evaluate how Chicanas and Chicanos, who belong to traditional Aztec dance groups, resist oppression through *Danza Azteca* and the use of indigenous body art. In the first section of this review, I examine how Chicanas/os are able to acquire agency as they tap into an embodied and historically subjugated knowledge within the practice of *Danza Azteca*. The second section examines literature that reflects how *danza* and body ornamentation can provide a pathway for Chicanas/os to reclaim their indigenous roots and decolonize their bodies. In order to see how *danza* and body ornamentation can be employed as forms of resistance, I have also reviewed literature that describes the aesthetics and significance of pre-Cuauhtemoc<sup>1</sup> Mesoamerican dress and body ornamentation. The last section covers literature that depicts contemporary dress and body art Chicanas/os utilize in an effort to replicate pre-Cuauhtemoc Mesoamerican aesthetics, used as platforms to express an indigenous identity. Thus, the guiding question to this examination is: How do *Danza Azteca* and indigenous forms of body art, as positive forms of resistance, provide Chicanas/os with a pathway towards decolonization, identity formation, agency, and empowerment?

### **From Colonization to the Decolonial Imaginary**

From the time of the arrival of Europeans, indigenous people's cultures, languages, and systems of knowledge have been confined to the oppressive grasp of the colonizers. Europeans eliminated many native cultural practices and systems of knowledge as part of the intentional cultural and religious genocide of indigenous people

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<sup>1</sup> I am using the term "pre-Cuauhtemoc" as an indigenous point of reference in regards to the history of the Americas rather than using terms that stem from a European point of reference like "pre-Columbian," "pre-Cortesian," "pre-Hispanic," "pre-Spanish," "pre-colonial," and "pre-conquest."

(Fanon 6; León-Portilla, *Aztec Thought* 69; McCarty 2). The colonizers realized that in order to do away with traditional beliefs, they had to prevent natives from carrying out ritual practices (León-Portilla, *Aztec Thought* 69). Additionally, when the colonizers realized that the practice of writing, singing, painting, sculpting, dancing, and creating art in general (the notion of *in xochitl in cuicatl*, “flower and song”), was a religious act and a way for the Aztecs to communicate with God, cultural genocide was inflicted by the colonizers by prohibiting natives from further practice of their arts and religious activities (León-Portilla, *Aztec Thought* 69). Because having tattoos and other forms of body art was a common ritualistic practice among many native tribes, this art form was also forbidden (Gilbert 101; Dinter 24),

Since the height of the Chicana/o Movement, Chicanas/os have worked towards recapturing a lost connection to their past in order to develop a proud sense of identity. *El Plan Espiritual de Aztlán* was significant in launching a movement towards establishing resistance, cultural maintenance, and cultural affirmation by calling on poets, artists, writers and musicians to produce works that were appealing to the Chicana/o people (Goldman 167; L. Pérez 25). Another facet to resisting cultural genocide has been a reaffirmation of one’s *indigenismo*<sup>2</sup> and holding on to the concept of *Aztlán*,<sup>3</sup> which ties Chicanas/os to the land (Ceseña 86; Contreras 72). Furthermore, indigenous cultural traditions are sometimes used to elaborate political agendas and identity formations by Chicanas/os (Contreras 77). Although it is not critical for Chicanas/os to identify themselves as descendants of indigenous people in order to develop healthy identities,

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<sup>2</sup> *Indigenismo* refers to the affirmation and expression of an indigenous identity.

<sup>3</sup> *Aztlán* is considered to be the ancestral homeland of the Aztecs, believed to be in the U.S. Southwest.

reconnecting to one's native cultural roots can have a strong influence on the Chicano's path towards decolonization and empowerment.

Scholars such as Emma Pérez, Teresa L. McCarty, and Linda T. Smith urge us to realize that we must not only decolonize our histories, but in doing so, we must use our own forms of knowledge and epistemologies (123; 4; 30-34). Emma Pérez proposes the notion of the “decolonial imaginary” as a way to unravel colonialist ideology and to help us rethink history in a way that “makes agency for those on the margins transformative” (123). In order to avoid the very possible circumstance of the colonized becoming like the colonizer and assimilating into a colonial mind-set, Pérez offers the decolonial imaginary as a rupturing space, offering an alternative to what is already written in history (123). She poses that, to decolonize our history and our historical imaginations, we must “uncover the voices from the past that honor multiple experiences, instead of falling prey to that which is easy – allowing the white colonial heteronormative gaze to reconstruct and interpret our past” (123). Pérez argues that we must move into the decolonial imaginary to decolonize all relations of power, so that we do not permit the colonial imaginary to once again (mis)interpret our past and present (123).

Similarly, Teresa L. McCarty believes that native individuals and communities should work towards imagining new kinds of education based on indigenous systems of knowledge and practices (4). Linda T. Smith argues that reclaiming history is a critical and essential aspect of decolonization (30). Smith also reminds us that, “coming to know the past has been part of the critical pedagogy of decolonization,” and “to hold alternative histories is to hold alternative knowledges” (34). In doing so, according to these scholars, we cannot and should not reclaim and reinterpret our histories using the same format and

discipline as the colonizers, but rather use our own indigenous epistemologies<sup>4</sup> and methodologies to do so.

### **Agency and Empowerment Through Danza Azteca**

According to several scholars, Chicanas/os have been able to counteract oppression and marginalization by reconnecting to indigenous systems of knowledge within traditional circles of *Danza Azteca* (Ceseña 82; Huerta 6; Jaeck 44). In *Dancing Across Borders*, Elisa D. Huerta poses that participation in *Danza Azteca* offers rich sites for the articulation, negotiation, and contestation of Chicana/o notions of indigeneity<sup>5</sup> (6). She argues that *danza* provides a critical space for the development of oppositional consciousness and a sense of belonging for many communities, as well as providing a way for *danzantes* to recuperate their indigenous heritage and identity (Huerta 6). In conjunction with Huerta's views, Maria T. Ceseña contends that indigenous identities manifested through *Danza Azteca* are linked to the larger move by Chicanos to reconnect with their indigenous cultures, which grew out of the Chicano Movement (81). According to Ceseña, *danza* has been utilized as a tool by Chicanas/os to gain the power to represent themselves, rather than to be (mis)represented by others (82). Both authors are able to articulate that by practicing within the *danza* tradition, opportunities arise for the recuperation of indigenous identities, which nurture the development of oppositional consciousness.

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<sup>4</sup> Indigenous epistemology values the use of the body's senses to study nature and observable phenomenon as a key source of knowledge about the physical world. It also values knowledge obtained through intangible spiritual/sacred avenues.

<sup>5</sup> Indigeneity is derived from "indigenous," which means born or produced naturally in a land or region. In this case indigeneity is being used to express Chicanos' recognition of their indigenous roots and configurations of cultural-national sentiments.

Another important aspect to consider is the relationship between the individual and the group. Huerta's view is that progression towards self-healing and political readjustment illustrates how *danza* practices of self-discipline and self-sacrifice create a sense of collective belonging, identity formation, and opportunities to develop cultural and political consciousness (Huerta 15). The self-sacrifice and self-discipline Huerta alludes to have to do with the time, money, and physical strain one puts on the body as a commitment to reviving and conserving these ancient traditions. She argues for the necessity to contextualize how the work on the "self" can and does have political ramifications (Huerta 15). Huerta supports this standpoint by adding that body practices can be important in the self-positioning of individuals within community contexts (15). Huerta purposes that the embodied knowledge of *Danza Azteca* provides important spaces for community building and personal identification (11). Following these arguments, one can better understand how, according to Huerta, the performative aspects of *danza* allow for corporeal articulations of oppositional consciousness and potentially, although not necessarily, for progressive politics within individuals and among the group as a collective entity (16).

In looking further into the politicization of Chicanas/os through *Danza Azteca*, the revival of Aztec dance in the twentieth century is utilized as a socio-political signifier whose evolution and growing popularity have been linked to the Chicano's struggle for social recognition, equality, and justice (Aguilar 5; Ceseña 82; Jaeck 44). Lois Marie Jaeck makes a good point in discussing how *danza* grew out of a political movement, and supports the argument that *danza* can provide a platform for agency (44). In concurrence, Mario Aguilar points out that the rapid growth of *danza* in the United States began during

the height of the Chicana/o Movement of the 1960s and 1970s (6). Chicanas/os had to create a new space grounded in indigenous roots in order to acquire the tools needed for survival and empowerment (Aguilar 6). Aguilar further explains that Chicanas/os have learned that by reconnecting to their ancestral heritage, they are able to be active in gaining knowledge and self-empowerment by kinetically linking themselves to the past, present, and future (7). Aguilar argues that the Aztec dance tradition is perhaps the strongest indigenous force, path, or process of finding self-identity and sacred space (3).

Although *Danza Azteca* combines traditional and spiritual disciplines, it can also be compared in many ways to Chicana/o art, both visual and performance, as it offers creative ways to express oneself and builds community among its participants. Because *danza* rapidly grew in the United States during the Chicana/o Movement, along with many other art forms, it's important to understand the affects Chicana/o art has had on the development of agency and identity within the Chicana/o community.

In *Chicana Art: The Politics of Spiritual and Aesthetic Altarities*, Laura E. Pérez's intention is to establish the notion that Chicana literary, visual, and performance art are culturally hybrid, do-it-yourself, non-institutional spiritualities given as gestures of yearning and ofrenda (offering) toward greater personal integrity, empowerment, and social justice (2). Here, Pérez develops a strong line of reasoning that Chicana/o art is a way to challenge the cultural "blind spots" in mainstream values (3). She makes clear that because Chicanas/os have been historically marginalized and erased from history, art became a necessary and effective tool to counter the repression and omissions of Chicana/o culture and history. Pérez considers Chicana artists to be intellectuals whose work embodies theories of resistance and visionary ideals of social change (10). Pérez's



viewpoint affirms how contemporary Chicana/o *danzantes* seek to remember, reimagine, and redeploy ideas and practices as critique and as an alternative to male-dominated, Eurocentric, Christian, capitalist, and imperialist cultures (21).

Additionally, Laura E. Pérez and Gloria Anzaldúa both argue that the arts can help heal “*cultural susto*” (cultural fright sickness) (3, 28; *Border Arte* 107). Pérez states that Chicana/o artists can be compared to the Nahuatl concepts of the *tlahcuilo* (writer, artist) and *tlamatinime* (scholar) in their “reimagining of writers, visual, and performance artists as glyph-makers,” or, in other words, “makers of signs that point beyond themselves, to significations that are spiritually and politically interdependent and simultaneous, and that hold ancient but relevant alternative knowledge’s” (27). Pérez also argues that Chicana/o artists are, thus, engaged in “teaching and healing” by mediating the spiritual growth and well-being of the beholder (28). Lastly, she also claims that the alternative knowledges and practices expressed by Chicana/o artists (writers, visual and performing artists) result in the reproduction of what she calls “spirit glyphs,” which are examples of how “*la cultura cura*” (culture cures) (3), since art provides a way for Chicanas/os to heal *cultural susto*. Similarly, Cherrie Moraga sees present day artists as *tlamatinimeh*, scribes who interpret the signs of the time (190). Gloria Anzaldúa also argues that Chicanas/os have repeatedly attempted to find what we as a people have lost through colonization (history, language, identity and pride) by “digging into our cultural roots” and by making art of our findings (*Border Arte* 107). According to Anzaldúa and Laura E. Pérez, the process of creating art ties us to the Nahuatl concept of “*in ixtli in yollotl*” (making face, making soul/heart), which is a transformative and empowering process (*Borderlands* 73; 27).

Another source that looks at how *Danza Azteca* offers its participants ways to develop an oppositional consciousness is provided by Susana Rostas in *Carrying the Word*. By immersing herself in the practice of *Conchero* dance (a type of Aztec dance with Catholic influence) she came to understand that *danza* has the potential to be political, and creates a sense of presence and energy that can be felt among its participants (138). Rostas soon recognized that the power of *danza* acts as a stimulant that can change consciousness as it works on the dancer's sense of self, and engenders an awareness that was not there before (138).

Rostas argues that the power inherent in *danza* probably accounts, in part, for why the Spaniards repressed the music and dances of the Aztecs soon after the conquest (138). Rostas adds that *danza* pushes the boundaries of the self, producing inner changes provoked by the music and dances, causing the self to "evaporate" (transcend), which brings about empowerment that may seem threatening to others (138).

As explained by Miguel León-Portilla, "It was an unquestionable fact to the *tlatiminimeh* (scholars) that their people had been dispossessed of their liberty and their way of life. The conquerors had destroyed their culture; gone were their gods, their art, in fact, their entire civilization" (*Aztec Thought* 69). This, of course, would have included their dances, songs, and art. Although the cultural heritage of the Nahuatl people was endangered (rather than completely destroyed), it is obvious that many indigenous cultural elements survived colonization and are still with us today. The colonial ordeal that prohibited the indigenous people of Mesoamerica from practicing their cultural traditions in public, helps us better understand how, by practicing a once forbidden tradition, Chicanas/os are embodying and projecting a politicized resistance. Making a

conscious effort to revitalize these sacred traditions is a non-violent and empowering form of resistance against cultural genocide and the marginalization of the Mexican and Chicana/o community.

The literature similarly argues that art and *Danza Azteca* can offer agency for Chicanas/os by providing pathways to reconnect to their indigenous roots while expressing cultural pride. Furthermore, scholars (Ceseña, Huerta, Romero and Rostas) agree that the agency acquired by individuals surmounts the agency of the group and vice versa. Scholars also seem to agree that the politicization of the Chicana/o through *Danza Azteca* grew out of the Chicano/a Movement and continues to grow in popularity. Lastly, the literature reflects that the art has been, and continues to be, used to revitalize and preserve Chicana/o culture, which in turn helps in creating an oppositional consciousness to dominant discourse.

### **Reclaiming the Brown Body: Embodiment of Indigenous Knowledge**

Colonization imposed many restrictions on what natives could do with their own bodies, including the subjugation of embodied knowledge, or knowing through the body. As explained by Cindy Cruz in *Toward an Epistemology of a Brown Body*, “we must develop a critical practice that can propel the brown body from a neocolonial past and into embodiments of radical subjectivities” (658). Cruz recognizes that the body is in “containment” and asks us to question how the brown body is regulated and governed in social institutions (664). Thus, according to Cruz, understanding the brown body and the regulation of its movement is fundamental in developing its transformation (664). Cruz helps us understand that Chicanas/os can decolonize themselves by working towards an

embodied process of decolonization. She also asks us to consider that the body prompts memory and language, builds community and coalition, and is a pedagogical devise, as well as a location of recentering and recontextualizing the self and the stories that emanate from it (668). The argument posed by Cruz opens the possibility that in reclaiming the brown body, by practicing a once forbidden dance and acquiring body art, *danzantes* can once again use the body as a tool to gain indigenous knowledge and develop transformation.

Peter McLaren similarly poses the rethinking of the body as a pedagogical device. According to McLaren, because every “body” carries its own history of oppression, bodies are sites of struggle and can become the primary referent for the politics of knowledge construction (47). McLaren further explains that we must “recognize and redress the discursive conditions under which women, minorities, and other groups are demonized by patriarchy and the social relations of capital so that their presence as racial, cultural, and gendered subjects are effectively struck out of the archives and current narratives of history” (65). He further argues that, in order to successfully bringing forth a new world at the command of our own voices and with the strength of our own hands, we must reclaim our bodies and formulate strategies of opposition whose primary referent consists of new ways of acquiring and expressing knowledge and subjectivity in relation to the body (77).

Susana Rostas explains that *danza* entails a non-visual form of know-how that cannot simply be reproduced and understood by means of verbal description (146). Rostas contends that dance is an embodied form of knowledge that can only be represented by the body (146). In considering the multifaceted factors that are woven into

the experience of dance, Rostas recognizes that *danza* invokes a multisensory consciousness of the body involving sound (music through the use of drums, rattles, and flutes), smell (of *copal*, sacred incense burned in the center of the circle), the visual (aesthetics reflected in regalia and body adornment), the emotional, and the kinesthetic, which all play a significant role as the dancer experiences the dance both in and with the body (144). Here it is important to consider that, as Linda T. Smith explains, indigenous ways of knowing (including knowing through the body) were excluded and marginalized during and after colonization (69). Smith states that schooling was and continues to be systematically designed to “destroy every last remnant of alternative ways of knowing and living, to obliterate collective identities and memories, and to impose a new order” (69). According to Smith, reclaiming a voice is also about reclaiming, reconnecting and reordering those ways of knowing which were submerged, hidden or driven underground (69). Knowing through the body, thus, challenges and goes beyond Eurocentric discourse.

Rostas provides the reader with a specific example by describing how the burning of *copal* (incense) is enabling. She explains that the effect of olfactory substances is known to assist in synchronizing emotional and physical states, and the familiarity of the incense is a stimulus that furthers ritualization by “obstructing discursive reason” and stimulating memory, among other effects (135). Another example given defines how music affects the body. According to Rostas, music also enables ritualization as the rhythm of the music is easily picked up by the body, which enables a group of heterogeneous dancers, who may have never danced together before, to begin to move in harmony with one another (135). In support of this notion, she states that dancing consists

of what the dancer does with her body by means of its embodied practices as well as the body's involuntary response to music. Here, Rostas illustrates ways in which the body acquires awareness through the senses, which in essence, supports the notion of embodied knowledge *danzantes* acquire over time.

Looking further as to how *danzantes* embody agency through *danza*, Elisa D. Huerta argues that the dance tradition of *Danza Azteca* is a critical medium through which Chicanas and Chicanos are able to claim and embody an indigenous (*Azteca-Mexica*) ancestry (6). To reiterate, critical to *Danza Azteca* epistemologies is the idea of knowing through the body (6). As explained by Huerta, the movements performed provide a kind of embodied knowledge for *danzantes* that are based in philosophical, spiritual, and scientific Mesoamerican traditions (11). Like Rostas, she argues that knowing through the body is propelled by the senses, which are provoked by the very sensual characteristics of *danza* (12). Huerta also explains that *danzantes* embody knowledge when they dance in a circle in an attempt to mirror the cycles and rotations of the cosmos, and that some dances are metaphors for everyday activities like planting and harvesting. Thus, such dances allow *danzantes* to embody knowledge that fosters a connection to Mother Earth and to the cosmos (13). The examples offered by Huerta can help us comprehend how *danzantes* learn through the body while connecting to a deeply rooted indigeneity. Cindy Cruz concurs with the notion of embodied knowledge as she powerfully states, "Situating knowledge in the brown body begins the validation of the narratives of survival, transformation, and emancipation of our respective communities, reclaiming histories and identities" (668).

### **Mesoamerican Dress and Body Adornment**

In my search for literature having to do with Mesoamerican body art, I came to realize that scholarly works on this topic are few and far between. However, the following sources provide sufficient information to grasp a general understanding of the various types of dress and body ornamentation used in pre-Cuauhtemoc Mesoamerica. To understand how contemporary Chicanas/os apply and use dress and body adornment as a way to reconnect to their indigenous roots, it is important to review literature that gives insight into what pre-Cuauhtemoc Mesoamerican body modification, dress, and ornamentation was like.

As explained by Rosemary A. Joyce in *Girling the Girl and Boying the Boy: The Production of Adulthood in Ancient Mesoamerica*, the work of transforming the raw material of Aztec children into properly socialized adults was advanced through a series of lifecycle rituals (476). This often included preparation for new forms of body modification (476). Joyce's work provides us with insight as to when, how, and why body markings took place in the growing of a child into adulthood. Although contemporary Chicanas/os may not exactly follow the very specific and ritualistic forms in which body modification was performed in pre-Cuauhtemoc Mesoamerica, my goal is to compare similarities that give insight as to how body-modification provides a pathway to connect to an indigenous identity.

According to Bernardino de Sahagún's indigenous informants, Aztec children experienced their first body alteration at the age of four when their earlobes were pierced during the month of *Izcalli* (qtd. in Joyce 477). These piercings were gradually expanded to ensure that young adults could later wear adult ear ornaments (Joyce 477). In studying various codices, Joyce concludes that approximately every four years from birth through

the early teens, transitions in the lifecycle were visibly marked through changes in practices of body ornamentation and dress (478). For example, the dedication of children to the *calmecac* (school of higher learning) involved their first body markings, which were directly applied to the flesh marked by ritual scarification on the hip and chest. Those destined to the non-religious life, were sent to study at a *telpochcalli* (house of youth, similar to vocational school), at which point the lip was pierced in order to later place a lip plug when the child became an adult (Joyce 478). Lastly, Joyce informs the reader that the use of labrets was postponed until the boy's achievements in warfare (479). Joyce's informative study gives a clear understanding of the importance of body markings in the development of lifecycles, visually marking one's standing within the community.

To supplement Joyce's research, I employed the use of Jacques Soustelle's book *Daily Life of the Aztecs: On the Eve of Conquest*. In this book, Soustelle describes various styles of dress and body ornamentation employed by the Aztecs and neighboring peoples. However, the only example Soustelle shared having to do with tattoos describes Otomí women who covered their bosoms and arms with tattooing in very delicate blue patterns, dyed into the flesh with little knives (131). Steve Gilbert, in *Tattoo History: a Source Book*, shares that Cortez and his conquistadors reported that tattooing was widely practiced by natives of Central America (99). He further shares commentaries written by Gonzalo Fernández de Oviedo y Valdez, stating that the natives "imprinted on their bodies the images of their demons, held and perpetuated in black color for as long as they live, by piercing the flesh and the skin, and fixing it in the cursed figure" (qtd. in Gilbert 101). This description not only supports the theory that tattoos were used extensively



throughout Mesoamerica, but also that the Spaniards regarded them as diabolical.

Other excerpts from Spanish accounts in this book explain that tattoo patterns often depicted animals (99). Another report concludes that warriors were tattooed to commemorate their achievement in battle, and that the bodies of old heroes were covered in “hieroglyphs” (99). Gilbert also cites Diego Landa’s *Account of the Affairs of the Yucatán* to illustrate women’s use of body ornaments, including nose piercings, gauged ears, and tattoos. The literature above provides evidence that both men and women adorned their bodies in a variety of ways (101).

In *The World of Tattoo*, Maarten Hesselt van Dinter briefly describes the stylization of Mesoamerican body art. In agreement with Gilbert’s findings, Dinter explains that the number of images tattooed on one’s body, indicated a warrior’s status (215). He further shares that tattoos were usually inscribed on the chest and thighs with glyphs of stylized apes, tigers, snakes, eagles and other birds (215). In *Dances of Anahuac*, Samuel Martí and Gertrude Kurath reference the *Florentine Codex* to illustrate that Motecuhzomah wore a turquoise diadem (headband or crown), also referred to as the “royal diadem” (56). They add that, “all put on their turquoise nose plugs and their turquoise ear pendants, made of fine turquoise” (56). We can assume that the color turquoise represented royalty, since, according to Soustelle, only royalty wore a turquoise *tilmatli* (cloak) (132). I also found an illustration created by an indigenous post-conquest artist depicting Cuauhtemoc, the last ruler of Tenochtitlan, wearing a nose ornament labeled “*ixiuhyacamiuh*” or “his turquoise nose arrow,” again alluding to the conclusion that the color turquoise represented royalty (Meyer and Sherman 125).

The examples offered below are similar in style to what modern-day *danzantes* use

as regalia when dancing. As explained by Soustelle, the man's chief garment was the loin-cloth, or *maxtlatl*, which went round his waist and between his legs, to be tied in front: the two ends were often fringed and embroidered, and fell before and behind (131). Some were very simple while others were elaborately ornamented (Soustelle 131). Men also used a cloak, the *tilmatli*, made of either agave or cotton, and sometimes rabbit-hair and feathers (Soustelle 132). In contrast to the white and unadorned cloaks worn among the common folk, dignitaries donned cloaks that exhibited an extraordinary wealth of colors and patterns (Soustelle 132). The priests' *tilmatlis* were black or very dark green, and they were embroidered with skulls and bones (Soustelle 132). The *tlahtoani*'s (revered speaker, ruler) cloak was turquoise (equivalent of the Roman purple), and was called the *xiuhtilmatli*, the turquoise cloak (Soustelle 132). The basis of the Mexican woman's costume was the *cueitl*, or skirt, made of a length of cloth wrapped round the lower part of the body, tied at the waist by an embroidered belt, and falling almost to the ankles (Soustelle 134). Women wore a blouse called a *huipil*, which was worn outside the skirt and embroidered at the neck. Soustelle's informative descriptions will help us see similarities of the attire *danzantes* use during, and even outside of, dance presentations and ceremonies.

Lastly, Soustelle shares that the indigenous people of Mexico had an overflowing variety of jewels and headdresses (138). The women wore earrings, necklaces and bracelets on their arms and ankles (Soustelle 138). Consistent with Joyce's research, Soustelle found that men had pierced the septum of their nose to hold gem or metal jewels; they also made holes in the skin beneath their lower lip so as to wear chin ornaments of crystal, shell, amber, turquoise or gold (138). He also explains that men

placed huge and splendid structures of feathers upon their heads or their backs. In this display of rank and luxury everything was strictly regulated in conformity with the hierarchic order (138).

This style of dress and ornamentation is comparable to *danzantes*' display of dress, ornamentation, and headdresses to mark rank within the dance group, which will be explained in the following section. Again, limited in the literature are thorough descriptions of tattoos including how and why they were inscribed onto the body's surface. There is also lack of information as to what kinds of symbols and patterns were used for tattoo designs, and what they signified. I did find however, that Christians outlawed tattoos because they viewed them as "barbaric and heathen" (Dinter 10).

### **Indigenous Aesthetics of Contemporary Danzantes**

A person can reclaim the right to do as they wish to their body by modifying it, and rejecting what societal norms have regulated as what is or is not an acceptable presentation of one's self. According to Daniel Rosenblatt in *The Antisocial Skin: Structure, Resistance, and "Modern Primitive" Adornment in the United States*, the concept of connecting one's self to native ways in order to explore the inner self, is generally seen as a threat to society, because it challenges Eurocentric hegemony, making it a form of resistance (293). Rosenblatt establishes a clear line of reasoning that body art can help express one's identity while resisting the dominant culture's attempts at imposing cultural and social norms onto others (310). In addition, he claims that some people use tattoos to express and alleviate dissatisfaction with the social roles imposed on them by the mainstream, and that, by marking their bodies, they claim for themselves

some type of refuge against oppressive social conditioning (310). Similarly, as Laura E. Pérez argues, the use of indigenous symbols is a decolonizing struggle at the epistemological level where being, existence, meaning and knowledge are defined (4). This argument is significant in truly understanding the strength and empowering act of incorporating the use of indigenous symbols in the decolonization process of the Chicana/o.

Laura Pérez refers to artwork as a site where the disembodied (divine, emotional, or social) is acknowledged, invoked, mediated upon, and released as a shared offering (6). Since Pérez also refers to art as performance, this notion can be applied to the act of dancing, as well as adorning one's body with indigenous cultural symbols. Pérez makes clear that art can embody a sense of spirituality, which is then politicized as an offering (6). She goes on to explain that the use of indigenous glyphs is a way to map pathways beyond alienation and disempowerment of today's cultural and geographical deterritorialization of the Chicana/o (22). Pérez takes it a step further by posing that the implementation of glyphs rooted in Mesoamerican worldviews, point to that which is outside of verbal and visual language, to the realm of the spiritual or to culturally different ideas of non-European cultures (35). Through these arguments, one can come to understand that the spiritual process of decolonization helps one remember, envision, and inscribe their own interpretations of glyphs and other indigenous aesthetics as cultural signs that can provide illumination and transformative ways of being.

Another important point that Pérez makes is that clothing and body decoration signal the nature of membership within a given culture, whether it's normal, privileged, marginal, in opposition, or ambiguous (50). She makes clear that these are cultural

practices that produce, reproduce, interrupt, or hybridize new cultural values (50). We can apply this theory to the dress and ornamentation *danzantes* use to produce new cultural values outside of mainstream norms that signal membership in their indigenous dance communities. In this way, Chicanas/os challenge Eurocentric perspectives, as well as repressive ideologies. As explained by Pérez, since the colonization of indigenous peoples, upper class Eurocentric perspectives have traditionally viewed painting of the body, tattooing and scarification as primitive (81). By implementing the use of such body modification, Pérez argues that Chicanas/os disrupt Eurocentric discourses of aesthetic, moral, and cultural superiority (82).

Similarly, Ellie D. Hernández poses that the political use of clothes or fashion elicits a stylization of ethnicity and captures political moments of identity play (109). Hernández explicitly explains and supports this notion in *Postnationalism in Chicana/o Literature and Culture*, and more specifically in the chapter entitled “Chicana/o Fashion Codes: The Political Significance of Style.” Here, Hernández contends that fashion offers an individual immediate self-value and instant valorization of a self-image. She establishes the notion that the ability to generate a self-image offers an agency of self-creation. She also stresses that fashion codes delineate identity and community in a way that informs new resistances and methodologies (110). Let us apply this notion, not only to the dress codes that Chicanas/os use while dancing, but also to how they apply fashion codes in their everyday lives such as when Chicanas wear *huipiles* paired with jeans, or when a Chicano lets his hair grow long and wears ear plugs. Thus, as Hernández states, the codifying styles of dress produce both the desired effects of public spectacle and revolutionary chic (115). She clearly explains that oppressed peoples have little control

over their bodies or what they wear. This makes adornment all the richer as a statement about resistance, alienation, and circumventions.

Through forms of indigenous body art, *danzantes* can assert a self-proclamation of being native people. As stated by Steve Gilbert, acquiring tattoos and other forms of body modification, was common practice among many tribes before colonization (99). Miguel León-Portilla informs us that Aztec culture was based on tradition, arts, education and religious practices that resulted in the creation of many sacred designs and symbols, and explains that Nahuatl philosophic thought revolved around an aesthetic conception of the universe and life, for art “made things divine,” and only the divine was true (*Aztec Thought* 182). Maarten Hesselt van Dinter follows suit by stating that a tattoo is a consciously applied decoration that, like any other artwork, is a product of the human spirit (15). Consequently, when *danzantes* acquire tattoos with such sacred symbols, they are not only taking ownership of their blood rite to use such symbols, but are also connecting to their indigenous past by enacting rituals their ancestors performed before colonization.

Laura Pérez offers her perspective arguing that within the metaphor of the social body as text, dress and body ornamentation are writings on the body, and about it (51). Body, dress and body ornamentation speak of how they are inscribed within the social body and how they act upon it (L. Pérez 51). She argues that indigenous body art draws attention to body decoration as dress, but also to the body itself as social skin (L. Pérez 75).

In *Carrying the Word*, Susana Rostas gives examples of contemporary *danzantes* in Mexico who try to replicate more authentic attire as reproductions of *amoxtli* (codices -

ancient Nahuatl illustrated manuscripts) have become more widely available (117).

Though Rostas applies her findings to dancers in Mexico, the same can be applied to dancers who live and practice *Danza Azteca* within the U.S. She explains that dancers' *trajes* (dance regalia) are adorned with deities and conceptual symbols such as *olin* (movement) and symbols representing water, rain, fire, and wind (117).

Rostas continues by offering examples of what contemporary dancers might wear as part of their regalia. Many women, for example, wear a hand-woven indigenous *huipilli*, which are usually decorated with woven or embroidered motifs in a wide range of colors on a white cotton background (122). She further explains that, like garments worn by male dancers, women's indigenous *huipiles* are very similar to those seen in *amoxtili* (122). In this manner, women are imitating what their predecessors wore, while also paying homage to contemporary indigenous women and their struggles (Rostas 122). Women accentuate their *huipiles* and skirts with headdresses, hanging cloths, ribbons, belts, small bags, necklaces, and other adornments depicting various indigenous images and motifs (Rostas 122). Unfortunately, Rostas offers few examples of women's attire in her book, while giving more examples of men's regalia. Looking at pictures included in her book, along with countless pictures available from other sources and on the Internet, it is obvious that variations among women's dance attire are as diverse and visually striking as are the men's.

Rostas does, however, articulate the importance and significance a dancer's attire encompasses. For example, she states that the details of a dancer's attire should reflect the "state of conquest," or level of development, that the dancer has achieved in *danza* (124). This is comparable to how the *Azteca*, and other indigenous people of Mexico,

used clothing to mark social status. Preferably, a dancer begins his/her journey with a white *traje* (regalia) and very few feathers (if any) representing somewhat of a blank canvas (Rostas 124). In time, dancers acquire the right to add symbols, colors, and feathers as competence is achieved and recognized by her *jefe* or *cabeza* (dance teacher and respected elder) (124). One way in which dancers begin implementing the use of symbols is by adding designs to their garments associated with their birth dates, according to the *tonalamatl* (Aztec sun stone calendar) (Rostas 124). As dancers gain indigenous knowledge through time and experience, they gather insight as to how these initial symbols should evolve and be depicted on their regalia (124). Rostas makes an important point explaining that dancers invest in their garments as well as their inner selves (124). In this way, dancers build up their “protection,” for the garment is a manifestation of a dancer’s personal power (124). In deciphering Rostas’s research, one can infer that dancers attain agency and empowerment through gaining knowledge of themselves as indigenous people, better equipped to protect oneself from oppressive ideologies. This empowerment can also be transferred to street clothes as Chicanas/os seek indigenous aesthetics as a form of protection and personal power.

Looking further into how costumes, dress, and body adornment become statements of empowerment, Rostas poses that a dancer’s costuming is very much a way of circulating ideas about her identity in a semiotic form (127). To add to this, Xuan Santos in *The Chicana Canvas*, pays particular attention to Chicanas who acquire tattoos and why. According to his studies, Santos found that by choosing to transform and modify the body with a Chicana style tattoo, Chicanas reaffirm a sense of sisterhood with the cultural values of *compadrazgo* (a bonding relationship between Chicanas/os) (106).



According to his studies, tattoo designs Chicanas selected became cultural markers that represent *Chicanisma* (107). Furthermore, Chicanas who adorned their bodies with Chicana nationalistic and racialized motifs, indicated that they seek to affirm their individual cultural character as part of a larger set of collective identities; in this case, a Mexican-based, indigenous, or pan-ethnic identity (Santos 108). More specifically, Chicanas who attained a Mesoamerican style tattoo claimed that they did so in order to affirm their indigenous ancestry (Santos 107). Thus, according to Santos, Chicanas decorated their bodies to mark their identities with physical borders in an attempt to embody a connection to their Chicana nationalist and racial identities (107). Although Santos studied only Chicanas and their tattoos, similar concepts and theories can be applied to further understand how tattoos are used to reflect an indigenous identity among *danzantes*.

In my goal to reach a well-balanced study, I also researched literature that specifically illustrated the importance and relevance of the “aesthetic” for indigenous artists. In *Indigenous Aesthetics: Native Art, Media, and Identity*, Steven Leuthold speaks of native artists and intellectuals in general. His findings relate to how the notion of indigenous aesthetics can be applied to the world of Aztec dance tradition. For example, he states that the aesthetic arises as an important aspect of self-representation to the larger non-native public (Leuthold 1). More importantly, Leuthold claims that an awareness of and willingness to participate in indigenous aesthetic expression increasingly signifies belonging within native communities (1). Thus, Leuthold establishes that in native communities the expression of worldviews is central to an indigenous aesthetic (1).

Additionally, Leuthold claims that many native communities have recently focused

on the ways that “culture” is at the heart of the creation of national, tribal, and group identity (5). He also finds that all forms of art, including visual, music, and dance, are aesthetic expressions that are especially important in contributing to a collective identity (5). As expressed by Leuthold, some of these expressive art forms may be considered traditional, others contemporary, but all are factors to forming native identities (5). His findings suggest that by implementing an indigenous aesthetic, the development of individual and collective native identities can be achieved, destabilizing the histories of hegemony and oppression.

Unfortunately, I was not able to find literature that documented the use of Aztec symbols as tattoo designs employed by contemporary Chicanas/os, specifically Aztec dancers. What I did find, however, is an abundance of information on gang related tattoos and prison tattoos. This narrow assessment is problematic because it reinforces the negative stereotypes of tattoos and how Chicanas/os adorn their bodies with them. My goal is to debunk this stereotype by offering a counter perspective on how the use of indigenous style tattoos and other forms of body art can be positive forms of resistance. Additionally, it is important to consider that body modification was termed as barbaric and heathen by Europeans, which perpetuated the notion that such ritualistic forms of embodied expressions were uncivilized. This Eurocentric view continues to plague the minds of many who continue to view those who acquire body art as social outcasts, rebels, or outlaws.

## **Summary**

Understanding the Chicano’s history of colonization is pivotal in comprehending how Chicanas/os have come to resist oppression by reclaiming one’s indigenous roots

through *Danza Azteca*. Liberating one's body through the use of native forms of dress and body art is a positive form of resistance Chicanas/os have employed to meet this challenge. At the time of colonization, native people were stripped of their cultures and prohibited from doing anything that would preserve their traditions. This cultural genocide and oppressive social circumstance, has permeated the original inhabitants of this continent for centuries. Social uprisings throughout history have led to the growing trend of present day Chicanas/os, among other descendants of indigenous people, to resist oppression and marginalization in a variety of ways.

This study is an effort to shed light on the influence that the tradition of *Danza Azteca* has had on the many Chicanas/os who practice these traditions within the United States. Although the effects of colonization have negatively impacted Chicanas/os, they have strived to reclaim their indigenous roots in remarkable ways. *Danza* has played a pivotal role in the process of developing a more indigenous identity, in addition to fostering an embodiment of social and political consciousness among *danzantes*. Moreover, indigenous body art, adopted by many Chicana/o *danzantes*, has been used as a way to reclaim their brown bodies and native roots while resisting oppression and marginalization from the dominant society. The ritual of altering their body and practicing an ancient dance tradition are methods in which Chicanas/os are able to liberate their brown bodies from the clench of oppression, cultural genocide, and marginalization.

## CHAPTER ONE

### FROM COLONIZATION TO THE DECOLONIAL IMAGINARY

#### **The Colonial Aftermath**

The history of European oppression that Chicanas and Chicanos have inherited begins with the Spanish conquest and colonization of the indigenous populations of Mexico, followed by the annexation of over half of Mexico's territory after the U.S./Mexican war of 1848 (Gómez 89). Sociologist Laura E. Gómez's critical race study of the hypodescent rule,<sup>6</sup> links the notion of Manifest Destiny to the American colonization of northern Mexico, and urges us to take seriously what she has termed the "double colonization" of the American Southwest (89). Gómez explains that this region was colonized twice, first by Spain and then by the United States. She further argues that both the Spanish and the American colonial experiences were grounded in racism – "in a system of status inequality built on presumed racial difference" (89).

The violent occurrence of colonization threatened the existence of core elements of indigenous cultures including language, traditions, religion, forms of government, native spirituality, and systems of knowledge<sup>7</sup> (Fanon 6; León-Portilla, *Aztec Thought* 69; McCarty 2; Smith 69). This experience has formed a wedge and disconnection between Chicanas/os and their indigenous roots that have reinforced the ongoing colonization of the Chicana/o community. Frantz Fanon explains that, "National culture under colonial domination is a culture under interrogation whose destruction is sought out

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<sup>6</sup> Hypodescent is the rule that automatically assigns the children of a mixed union or mating between members of different socioeconomic groups to the less privileged group.

<sup>7</sup> Indigenous systems of knowledge refers to the unified knowledge that originates from and is characteristic of a particular society and its culture; it is knowledge that is built up by groups of people through generations of living in close contact with nature. It builds upon the historic experiences of a people and adapts to social, economic, environmental, spiritual, and political change.

systematically” (171). He also points out that the systematic negation of the “other” is done so in order to deny the “other” any attribute of humanity, which forces the colonized to constantly ask the question “Who am I in reality?” (182).

It can be difficult for Chicanas/os to completely develop their identities without acquiring accurate histories of their indigenous past or understanding their ancestors’ systems of knowledge (McCarty 3). According to Peter McLaren, “certain types of [Western] knowledge are used to reinforce dominant ideologies, which in turn serve to mask unjust power relations among certain groups in society” (64). From the perspective of critical educational theorists, the curriculum in mainstream schools represents much more than a program of study, a classroom text, or a course syllabus (McCarty 3; McLaren 49; Smith 33). Rather, it represents the introduction to a particular form of life; it serves in part to prepare students for dominant or subordinate positions in the existing society (McLaren 64). McLaren urges us to “recognize and redress the discursive conditions under which women, minorities, and other groups are demonized by patriarchy and the social relations of capital so that their presence as racial, cultural, and gendered subjects is effectively struck out of the archives and current narratives of history” (65). By being disconnected from their own histories and indigenous systems of knowledge, Chicanas/os will continue to be dependent on a system that keeps them oppressed and from becoming self-sufficient. To counter this, Chicanas/os must tap into alternative histories and indigenous epistemologies.<sup>8</sup>

According to cultural critic Philip G. Altbach, “Traditional colonialism involved the direct political domination of one nation over another area, thus enabling the colonial

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<sup>8</sup> Indigenous epistemology values the use of the body’s senses to study nature and observable phenomenon as a key source of knowledge about the physical world. It also values knowledge obtained through intangible spiritual/sacred avenues.

power to control any and all aspects of the internal and external life of the colony” (452).

Neocolonialism is yet another force that continues the legacy of colonialism as Altbach explains:

Neocolonialism means the impact of advanced nations on developing areas, in this case with special reference to their educational systems and intellectual life.

Modern neocolonialism differs from traditional colonialism in that it does not involve direct political control, leaving substantial leeway to the developing country. It is similar, nevertheless, in that some aspects of domination by the advanced nation over the developing country remain. Neocolonialism is partly a planned policy of advanced nations to maintain their influence in developing countries, but it is also simply a continuation of past practices. (452)

In critically analyzing the pedagogies of our current school system, we can conclude that they are systematically designed to dehumanize and maintain people of color oppressed. Linda T. Smith reminds us that colonizers have characterized natives as primitive people who were incapable of using their minds or intellects, of inventing things, creating history or institutions, producing anything of value, or knowing how to use land and other natural resources (25). Smith further states that by lacking such virtues, indigenous people were disqualified not only from civilization, but also from humanity (25). When we consider how these tactics have been deployed to establish the cultural alienation and oppressive condition of Mexicans and Chicanas/os both in Mexico and in the United States, we understand that nothing was left to chance and that the final goal of colonization was to convince the indigenous population that their history was barbaric. To be more direct, Frantz Fanon writes:

The sweeping, leveling nature of colonial domination was quick to dislocate in spectacular fashion the cultural life of a conquered people. The denial of a national reality, the new legal system imposed by the occupying power, the marginalization of the indigenous population and their customs by colonial society, expropriation, and the systematic enslavement of men and women, all contribute to this cultural obliteration (170).

Thus, one must understand that history is about power (Smith 34), and that, in order to establish long-term domination, native histories and cultures were marginalized and excluded from Western history, which was written by and for the benefit of Westerners (Fanon 157).

The colonial powers during the sixteenth century in Mexico did everything possible to do away with the Nahuatl culture (León-Portilla, *Aztec Thought* 69). When faced with the detrimental colonial reality of their time, the *tlamatinimeh* (scholars) realized that their people had been dispossessed of their liberty and way of life. Their religion, arts, and entire civilization suffered great losses as a result of the violent clash between the Europeans' religious beliefs and the spiritual world of the Nahuatl people (León-Portilla, *Aztec Thought* 69). Miguel León-Portilla provides us with an excerpt from a speech given by several *tlamatinimeh* to the Spaniards, according to information given by native informants in the accounts of sixteenth-century Franciscan friar and ethnographer Bernardino de Sahagún:

You said that we know not the Lord of the Close Vicinity, to Whom the heavens and the earth belong. You said that our gods are not true gods. New words are these that you speak. Because of them we are disturbed, because of them we are

troubled. For our ancestors before us, who lived upon the earth, were unaccustomed to speak thus. From them we have inherited our pattern of life which in truth did they hold... And now, are we to destroy the ancient order of life? Of the Chichimecs, of the Toltecs, of the Acolhuas, of the Tecpanecs? Here, oh Lords, do nothing to our people that will bring misfortune upon them, that will cause them to perish.... We cannot be tranquil, and yet we certainly do not believe. We do not take your teachings as truth, even though this may offend you... Is it not enough that we have already lost, that our way of life has been taken away, has been annihilated? (qtd. in León-Portilla, *Aztec Thought* 65)

Here, the *tlamatinimeh* proclaim that not even the fear of death could stop them from expressing their concerns and last efforts in salvaging their cultural traditions and religious beliefs (León-Portilla, *Aztec Thought* 67). More importantly, it gives us a glimpse of the great losses the indigenous peoples of Mexico experienced as a result of colonization and genocide.

In order to establish a new order that ensured dominance and control, the Spaniards dehumanized the indigenous population of Mexico through institutional and religious policies that invalidated, negated, and even criminalized their cultural and religious traditions. For instance, the Spaniards deemed the Nahuas' religion as barbaric and heathen, as they forcefully replaced it with the Catholic religion, and those who were caught practicing the Nahua religion were punished and even executed (McCarty 2). Dehumanization takes place as a result of injustice, exploitation, oppression, and violence (Freire 44), and is necessary to justify various policies of either extermination or domestication (Smith 26).



Once established that indigenous people were less than human, savages, heathens, and irrational, the subjugation of their cultures, religions, and languages was put in motion. Cultural invasion, as well as the manipulation of it, also served the ends of conquest of the indigenous population (Freire 152). This occurrence was established by the invaders' minimizing of the indigenous culture, imposing their own view of the world upon the native population, which inhibited its creativity and forms of expression (Freire 152). Cultural invasion ultimately leads to the cultural inauthenticity of those who are invaded, who may also become convinced of their intrinsic inferiority (Freire 153).

Following this rationale, it is important to point out that indigenous forms of knowledge and schooling were also intentionally wiped out (León-Portilla, *Aztec Thought* 69; Smith 28). According to Miguel León-Portilla, the educational system of the Nahuas, which instilled high moral standards and discipline among its pupils, focused on the training and education of wise men and women known as *tlamatinimeh*<sup>9</sup> (those who know, scholars, sages, scientists) (*Aztec Thought* 15). A function of the *tlamatini* was to teach students the moral quality existing in "that which is human" (León-Portilla, *Aztec Thought* 15). Taking on the role of moralist, the *tlamatini* was also a *tetezcaviani*, "one who puts a mirror before others," which could be interpreted as "one who teaches others to be prudent and careful" (León-Portilla, *Aztec Thought* 13).

To fully understand Nahuatl epistemology and pedagogy, it is necessary to investigate the meaning of the words "human" and "student." In the English language the term "human" is passive. In contrast, the term *in ixtli in yollotl*<sup>10</sup> (face and heart or

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<sup>9</sup> *Tlamatinimeh* is the plural form *tlamatini*, which means: one who knows, scholar, sage, and scientist.

<sup>10</sup> Personal communication with Fermin Herrera, defining the terms: *olin*, *in ixtli in yollotl* and *momachtiani*.

physical body and spirit), which refers to “person,” has as its base the word *olin*, meaning movement or energy (Herrera). *Olin* may also be defined as the dynamic quality inherent in human beings. This concept reflects notions of “human agent,” “human mover,” “human doer,” etc., which are active terms rather than passive. Like the word “human” and the concept of “*in ixtli in yollotl*,” the term “student” and its Nahuatl counterpart *momachtiani* also differ in substance. *Momachtiani* means “one who causes himself or herself to know, to grasp, to comprehend.” This definition explicitly indicates an assertive, responsible, and proactive attitude, while in English the word “student” does not (Herrera). The terms “human” and “student” cannot accurately depict the sense of active engagement and responsibility one took upon oneself in attaining a well-rounded education based on morals and the “humanizing of the will.” This “humanizing of the will” was one of the basic tenets of Nahuatl education, as *tlamatinimeh* (scholars), *temachtianimeh* (teachers), and *momachtianimeh* (students) actively and consciously worked towards reaching this goal.

This Nahua educational system, instilled with high morals, came to a halt with the arrival of the Spaniards as they “destroyed and abolished all of the customs and disciplined ways that the Indians had” (León-Portilla, *Aztec Thought* 144). Nahuatl *amoxтли*<sup>11</sup> (books/codices) describing the intellectual culture of the Nahuas, were either destroyed or sent to Spain in order to abolish or conceal all evidence of indigenous culture (León-Portilla, *Aztec Thought* 12). In their quest to validate the colonization of the natives, the Spaniards considered the Nahuas to be idolaters and savages, and aimed at

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<sup>11</sup> *Amoxтли* is the Nahuatl word for “book.” The *amoxтли* are ancient Nahuatl books, made of paper from the bark of *amate* (wild fig tree) folded like an accordion, in which *Mexica* philosophical, religious, and historical information were documented. Although popularly known as “codices” (singular, codex), which is a Latin word meaning block of word or book (Herrera).

converting them to the Spanish way of life, both religious and social, and this ultimately destroyed the Nahuas' social order and disciplined organizations. Indigenous epistemologies and pedagogies<sup>12</sup> were replaced with Western thought and an educational system that reinforced the colonizers' position of power.

As argued by Frantz Fanon, colonialism disconnected indigenous people from their histories, their landscapes, their languages, their social relations and their own ways of thinking (qtd. in Smith 28). Indigenous ways of knowing and views of history were suppressed and considered “primitive” and “incorrect.” The negation of indigenous knowledge, which challenged and resisted the mission of colonization, was a critical maneuver in establishing a colonial ideology (Smith 28). For example, pre-Cuauhtemoc<sup>13</sup> native histories and knowledge were preserved by several mechanisms: *tlahcuilolli* (pictographic writing), *nehtotiliztli* (dance), *in xochtl in cuicatl* (poetry), *toltecayotl* (art) and *ihmoloca* (oral tradition), which were (and are still) referred by Westerners as invalid forms of knowledge and documenting history because they were not considered to be “objective” or “scientifically based” methodologies. Because of this invalidation of native methodologies, indigenous people now learn about their history as told by the colonizer. At the time of colonization, a new theory of knowledge was imbedded throughout school curriculum, which continues to systematically exclude and marginalize accurate native histories and indigenous ways of knowing. Linda T. Smith further shares that:

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<sup>12</sup> Nahuatl pedagogies, or instructional strategies, included teaching in a highly disciplined fashion that was meant to instill high morals among students.

<sup>13</sup> Like professor of Nahuatl, Fermin Herrera, I use the term “pre-Cuauhtemoc” as an indigenous point of reference in regards to the history of the Americas rather than using terms that stem from a European point of reference like “pre-Columbian,” “pre-Cortesian,” “pre-Hispanic,” “pre-Spanish,” “pre-colonial,” and “pre-conquest.”

These forms of disciplines affected people physically, emotionally, linguistically, and culturally. They were designed to destroy every last remnant of alternative ways of knowing and living, to obliterate collective identities and memories and to impose a new order. (69)

Similarly, Teresa L. McCarty concludes that the identity and status of indigenous peoples are directly tied to epistemologies that are autochthonous to particular peoples and places (2). Thus, without our native epistemologies to guide us, we will remain a colonized population.

In Western thought, epistemology can be described as the theory of knowledge with regard to its methods, validity, and scope. However, we should take into account that the term “epistemology” may have different implications to diverse groups of people. For instance, the Nahuatl term *tlaixmatiliztli* refers to acquiring knowledge by means of observation and experience. We can extract the meaning of the word *tlaixmatiliztli* by analyzing its parts: *tla*=things, *ix*=by means of the eyes/face, *mati*=to comprehend, *liztli*=process of, or “the process of comprehending things by means of the eyes/face” (observing or experiencing) (Herrera). This form of acquiring knowledge entails the important element of using the body’s senses (which is of utmost importance in the practice of *Danza Azteca*, as explained in chapter 2).

The disconnect between native peoples and their own epistemologies has been detrimental to indigenous populations for centuries, which reinforces oppressive conditions. Because this model of oppression and cultural invasion still exists, Chicanas/os have learned to blame themselves, hate themselves, and terrorize themselves (Anzaldúa, *Borderlands* 45). As Gloria Anzaldúa puts it, “Most of this goes on

unconsciously; we only know that we are hurting, we suspect that there is something wrong with us, something fundamentally wrong” (*Borderlands* 45). Anzaldúa offers a vivid example:

In the Gringo world, the Chicano suffers from excessive humility and self-effacement, shame of self and self-depreciation. Around Latinos he suffers from a sense of language inadequacy and its accompanying discomfort; with Native Americans he suffers from a racial amnesia which ignores our common blood, and from guilt because the Spanish part of him took their land and oppressed them. He has an excessive compensatory hubris when around Mexicans from the other side. It overlays a deep sense of racial shame. (*Borderlands* 83)

This example can help illustrate the concept of “*cultural susto*” or “cultural fright sickness,” that Anzaldúa describes as the “frightening” of spirit from one’s body-mind in the colonial and neocolonial ordeals, the result of which is the “in-between” state of *nepantlah*, the postconquest condition of cultural fragmentation and social indeterminacy (qtd. in L. Pérez 21). *Nepantlah* is a Nahuatl preposition that means “in the middle”.

Here, Anzaldúa uses the term *nepantlah* as a way to describe the “in-between” state that Chicanas/os find themselves in; in-between cultures, languages, identities, etc. in reference to their experiences as descendants of indigenous peoples from Mexico, while living in the U.S. where they are expected to assimilate. Today, Chicanas/os continue to struggle as they work towards healing the cultural *susto* and strive towards re-membering their fragmented identities through various forms of resistance.

## Forms of Resistance

Discriminatory social models created to keep minorities in subordinate positions, stimulate various forms of resistance to develop by those who are oppressed (McLaren 64). Often, forms of resistance have negative effects on the community. For example, marginalized students may resist mainstream education within the school system by challenging the teacher, by not doing their homework, or by misbehaving in class (McLaren 64). Because students do not connect with school curriculum, they may resort to random acts of violence and refuse to learn at all (McLaren 64). This behavior can have a devastating outcome in the educational experiences of students with dire consequences affecting their futures.

Herbert Kohl describes how individuals attempt to resist oppression in *I Won't Learn From You*, by arguing that some reject the dominant culture by “not-learning” (4). Kohl explains that, “not-learning tends to take place when someone has to deal with unavoidable challenges to her or his personal family loyalties, integrity, and identity” (6). A person can perceive the danger of losing his or her self by agreeing to learn from a stranger from the dominant culture, which in turn, causes one to not want to learn (Kohl 6). Students may reject learning school curriculum that excludes or negatively reflects their cultural heritage. Consequently, resistance will often times develop as students attempt to fight against the erasure of their identities in the face of oppressive ideologies (Kohl 65).

Not learning can help individuals cope and function in society rather than to become overwhelmed by feelings of complete hopelessness (Kohl 29). For others, the act of not-learning can eventually lead to them being categorized, stigmatized, and even

institutionalized and punished (Kohl 29). Regrettably, communities are negatively impacted as a consequence of the Chicano's resistance towards learning and doing well in school, which leads to high dropout rates, poverty, substance abuse, and gang violence. However, some forms of resistance can have a powerful and positive impact on individuals and groups of people. As Kohl argues, "In times of social movements for justice, such refusal (of dominant schooling) is often turned into more positive mass protests and demonstrations, and to the development of alternative learning situations" (29). Thus, I propose that one way in which Chicanas/os can resist the affects of colonialism, is by utilizing *Danza Azteca* as a pathway that can offer alternative ways of regaining indigenous epistemologies and establishing a renewed indigenous perspective of life, history, identity, and culture.

In an effort to break away from the colonialist ideology that is profoundly imbedded in us, Emma Pérez offers us what she terms the "decolonial imaginary." According to Pérez, this new category can help us rethink history in a way that can create transformative agency and empowerment for marginalized populations (123). She argues that in order to decolonize our history and our historical imaginations, voices from the past must be uncovered that honor multiple experiences, while not allowing "the white colonial heteronormative gaze to reconstruct and interpret our indigenous histories" (123). Pérez argues that the "colonial imaginary" can easily affect the way the past and present of indigenous peoples are interpreted, and proposes that the "decolonial imaginary" should be used instead to decolonize all relations of power (123). In other words, native peoples cannot continue to research, observe, interpret, and document their histories and present experiences in the same manner or through the same perspective of

colonialist ideologies, nor can they continue to learn the history of their own people as told by their oppressors. In order to do this successfully we must recover our own stories of the past, a powerful form of resistance, which are inextricably tied to the recovery of our languages and epistemological foundations (Smith 39).

Native intellectuals, including artists, writers, poets, teachers, and other professionals who engage in producing culture, are important to the process of decolonization because of their ability to reclaim, rehabilitate and articulate indigenous cultures (Smith 69). *El Plan Espiritual de Aztlán*, a manifesto written during the Chicana/o Civil Rights era, was significant in launching a movement towards establishing resistance, cultural preservation, and cultural affirmation by calling on poets, artists, writers and musicians to produce works that were appealing to the Chicana/o people (Goldman 167).

Furthermore, indigenous cultural traditions are sometimes used to elaborate political agendas and identity formations by Chicanas/os (Contreras 77). Today, as in the past, the spiritual, creative and political resources that indigenous peoples draw from one other provide alternatives for our communities. Linda T. Smith argues, “While the indigenous movement is encapsulated within the politics of self-determination, it also involves a revitalization and reformation of culture and tradition, as well as an increased participation in the rejection of Western ideologies” (110). Although it is not critical for Chicanas/os to identify themselves as descendants of indigenous people in order to develop healthy identities, reconnecting to their native cultural roots can have a strong influence on the Chicano’s path towards decolonization and empowerment.



For some individuals, one of the first things to be confronted is their own identities as indigenous people and their connected identities to other indigenous people (Smith 136). Frantz Fanon reminds us that in order to “escape the supremacy of white culture, the colonized intellectual feels the need to return to his unknown roots and lose himself, come what may, among his ‘barbaric’ people” (155). When we produce scholarly, cultural or creative work using the past, according to Fanon, we must do so with the intention of opening up the future, of spurring our people into action and fostering hope (167). *Danza Azteca*, a traditional and spiritual art form that survived colonization, allows Chicanas/os to explore and determine their indigenous identities. This identification as native people also prompts us to reexamine and reimagine our indigenous histories and cultural roots. These are all powerful and positive forms of resistance that are imperative for the Chicana/o community to conceive, nurture, and establish a decolonial imaginary while striving for a postcolonial reality.

## CHAPTER TWO

### DANZA AZTECA: A PLATFORM FOR AGENCY AND INDIGENISMO

The Chicano Civil Rights Movement of the 1960s and 70s began in response to centuries of colonization and oppression of the Chicano community (L. Pérez 25; Romo 23). This movement prompted the unification of creative Chicanas and Chicanos under the banner of solidarity, identification as native people of *Aztlan* (the U.S. Southwest), cultural pride, and resistance (L. Pérez 26). It was during this time period that *Danza Azteca* began to grow in popularity among politicized Chicanas/os, and became a spiritual tradition that addressed the political and spiritual needs of a community struggling to gain civil rights and respect (Ceseña 81; Huerta 6).

In order to better understand the artistic and spiritual pathway of *Danza Azteca*, a historical analysis of this discipline is required. Through his ethnographic studies, Miguel León-Portilla concluded that Nahuatl philosophic thought revolved around an aesthetic conception of the universe and life (*Aztec Thought* 182). This philosophic thought was based on the notion that art “made things divine and only the divine was true” (182). To the Nahuas,<sup>14</sup> and to contemporary *danzantes*, the arts, including *danza*, is a way to connect to the divine, to grow spiritually, to have a better understanding of their purpose, their existence, and of life itself by attaining truth.<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> I refer to the peoples of central Mexico as the Nahuas, which is an umbrella term that encapsulates various indigenous groups who spoke the Nahuatl language, including the Aztecs. Also, the term “Aztec” can be interchangeable with the term “Mexica,” which is a more accurate term to use.

<sup>15</sup> The Nahuatl word for “truth,” *neltiliztli*, shares the stem *nel*, meaning “true,” with the terms *nelhuatl*, meaning “root”, and *nelhuayolt*, meaning “root, base, foundation.” *Nel* has the connotation of solid firmness or deeply rooted. “Truth” for the Nahuas represented well-grounded stability.

As explained by Kurath and Martí in *Dances of Anahuac*, the Aztecs believed dancing to be praiseworthy, like deeds of charity and of penance (25). Kurath and Martí refer to passages from Fray Toribio de Motolinia's accounts in *Memoriales*:

In these religious festivals and their dances, they not only called on and honored and praised their gods with songs but also with the heart and with the movements of the body. In order to do this properly, they had and used many patterns, not only in the movements of the head, of the arms and of the feet, but with all their body...and this they called *macehualiztli*, penance and good deed. (25)

Jacques Soustelle defines *macehualiztli* as “an act meant to acquire merit,” and explains that it is a word used to describe those dances that were performed before the gods<sup>16</sup> in order to acquire merit in their eyes (70). The literal translation of *macehualiztli* is “reward” or “happiness.” Thus, Aztec dance, comprised of extraordinary technique, expression, and intense emotion, is a way for dancers to offer penance and good deeds, which, in turn, is rewarding and brings happiness. The profound and deeply spiritual music and dance of the Aztecs, which were mediums used to connect with the natural world, were and continue to be vital forces in the life of the indigenous community (Kurath and Martí 26). According to Kurath and Martí, Aztec music and dance “are the very heartbeats of the native way of life, which we can no longer ignore” (25).

*Danza Azteca* is rooted in a pre-Cuauhtemoc ceremonial and public dance tradition that was an integral part of the religious, political, and military foundation of the *Mexica* civilization (Martí and Kurath 15). After the Spanish conquest, the new colonial order forced Catholicism upon the indigenous survivors, which led to the banning and

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<sup>16</sup> Most Mexica elders and *danzantes* in general do not believe that their Mesoamerican ancestors worshiped multiple gods, but rather, honored all the manifestations of Omēteotl, a dual god composed of male and female energies – Omētecuhli and Omēcihuatl.

eradication of their religious practices, arts, dances, philosophies, and ideologies (León-Portilla, *Aztec Thought* 69). In an attempt to preserve their traditions, the *Mexica* altered their dances so as to conform to the Catholic religion (Royball 218). According to Jimmy Newmoon Royball, those *danzantes* who “adapted” to Catholicism “changed” their devotion and dedication of dances to Catholic saints and other spiritual entities (218). They were also required to follow strict mandates that included restricting their clothing to European-style clothes, slowing down the tempo of their music and dances, and replacing indigenous drums with European instruments such as the stringed lutes and *conchas* (stringed instruments made with armadillo shell) (Royball 218).

After more than five hundred years, the Catholicism imposed upon the tradition of *Danza Azteca* resulted in the fusion of the two, forming what is now recognized as the *Conchero* tradition of Mexico. For instance, *Concheros* typically hold *velaciones* (vigils) the night before a dance ceremony in which they incorporate Catholic prayers and *alabanzas* (religious songs) (Rostas 6). Arnoldo C. Vento points out the two schools of thought regarding the *Conchero* tradition: (1) Those who see it as syncretic, as a process of colonialism, and (2) Those who see it as a spiritual and sacred tradition with hidden meaning, interpretation and symbolism (59). For instance, the Aztecs were mandated to pray to the Christian cross, but continued to view it as a symbol representing the four sacred directions. *Concheros* also changed and encoded the names of some *danzas* in order to preserve their hidden meaning, like the *danza* known as *olin*, which represents the four directions, was renamed “*cruz*” (cross) within the *Conchero* tradition.

José Flores Peregrino, *capitán* of a *Conchero danza* troupe in Austin, Texas, offers an example by discerning the difference between Christian and native crosses:

To the native, the cross symbolizes the balance, the four winds... The crosses of San Andrés and Ketzalkoatl are balanced, whereas the Christian cross is out of balance with its horizontal points too high. The center is in the middle of the cross... This is where man becomes and that is why the elders of ancient times were conquerors of the four winds... They were persons who had learned and were able to achieve and understand the energy of the four winds... The cross connects with Nahui Ollin [sic], the four movements in harmony and motion. (qtd. in Vento, 60)

Pre-Cuauhtemoc *Danza Azteca* was preserved by those who carried out the tradition in absolute secrecy risking punishment or even death from Spanish authorities (Royball 219). Royball argues that the *Mexica* relied on oral tradition to preserve the practice of *Danza Azteca* in order to avoid being caught with physical evidence (219). It is because of this preservation that the tradition of *Danza Azteca* was able to survive colonization and is still with us today, and continues to unfurl in fascinating ways. The preservation of *Danza Azteca* throughout the centuries is a testament to the primary role of indigenous traditions in the creation of postcolonial identities. This pre-Cuauhtemoc form of *Danza Azteca* offers Chicanas/os opportunities to express cultural pride, formulate indigenous identities, and acquire indigenous knowledge.

Although Mexican indigenous dance groups are termed “*Danza Azteca*” or “*Danza Mexica*,” indigenous ancestry is not a pre-requisite for participation in this dance tradition. It is common practice to have members in *danza* groups that represent diverse indigenous groups from all regions of Mexico (Rostas 5) and the U.S. (Estrada 44). While the *Azteca-Mexica* peoples are the most commonly thought of when referring to

the pre-Cuauhtemoc indigenous populations of central Mexico, the fact that various populations of indigenous peoples existed (and still exist) simultaneously throughout Mexico needs to be taken into account. Because indigenous histories have been suppressed, it can be difficult for Mexicans and Chicanas/os to trace their specific native lineages. However, *danza* can offer a means for *danzantes* to recuperate their indigenous heritage and identity, and is a critical medium through which Chicanas and Chicanos are able to claim and embody an indigenous ancestry (Huerta 6).

Another aspect to consider are the various reasons why people participate in *Danza Azteca*; some dance for religious conviction, others as part of their search for a group and ethnic identity, and others as part of a more personal quest for individual identity (Rostas 5). Some groups, like the Los Angeles based *Danza Mexica Cuauhtemoc*, practice traditional pre-Cuauhtemoc dances while also being politically involved in defending the civil rights of indigenous communities. In turn, the type of *danza* group Chicanas/os partake in can influence the magnitude of impact they have on society as *danzantes*.

*Danzantes'* contributions not only preserve and revive Mesoamerican knowledges and traditions, but also give voice to social justice issues faced by indigenous populations. For example, political *danza* groups will likely be well informed of circumstances taking place in Chiapas, Mexico where the EZLN (Zapatista Army of National Liberation) is actively involved in defending the civil rights of native communities. Furthermore, such dance groups may disseminate information to promote awareness and gather support for EZLN's political efforts. Such groups may also be active in defending the rights of undocumented immigrants in the United States by

participating in demonstrations, protests, marches, and voicing their concerns, while emphasizing the Mexican's indigenous roots to the American continent.



Figure 2.1 *Danza Mexica Cuauhtemoc*, demanding immigration reform, 2012.

Today, *Danza Azteca* is also known as “*Danza Chichimeca*,” “*Danza de los Concheros*,” “*Danza de Conquista*” (Aguilar) and “*Danza Mexica*” (Rostas 6).

Regardless of which type of *danza* they participate in, what all *danzantes* seem to have in common is pride in their indigenous heritage and a strong desire to express, rather than suppress, their indigenous roots (Ceseña 93). In essence, *danza* provides a system of identity, social ties, and spiritual ritual that transcends language, gender, political borders, and socio-economic class (Aguilar).

Within the *danza* tradition there are no restrictions as to who can participate, as long as those who wish to become *danzantes* are respectful of the group's protocols. Both

women and men are able to participate and attain high status within groups. Political borders are irrelevant as *danzantes* from both sides of the border learn from one another and dance together often. *Danzantes* understand that borders are merely political and do not allow such oppressive constructs to form a wedge between themselves and other native “relatives.” *Danza Azteca* is also composed of *danzantes* from all walks of life and all socio-economic statuses. *Danzantes* are as diverse as are their languages, which include Nahuatl, Spanish, and English. Some are bilingual or trilingual while others are monolingual in either language. Regardless of one’s personal journey through life, *Danza Azteca* provides a space for membership, family, and self-discovery for a growing number of *danzantes* (Aguilar).

### **Tlaachtopenaitoliztli – Prophecies**

An interesting aspect to consider in the resurgence of Aztec dance throughout Mexico as well as the U.S. are various indigenous *tlaachtopenaitoliztli*,<sup>17</sup> or prophecies, that foretell this very revival of native customs. Although the study of these prophecies deserves a much lengthier and detailed analysis, my intent is to provide a concise summary in order to better understand the connection between these prophecies and the phenomenon of the contemporary recuperation of *Danza Azteca* among Chicanas/os.

The first prophecy described below comes from the Incas. Despite the fact that this prophecy is not directly derived from the Nahua people, it is important to consider the historical sharing of knowledge and cultural exchange among all native peoples of the Americas. This is especially significant today as indigenous peoples strive to see each

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<sup>17</sup> *Tlaachtopenaitoliztli* analyzed in its parts is: *tla*=something, *achto*=beforehand/first, *ito*=saying, *liztli*=the act of. Hence *tlaachtopenaitoliztli* means “the act of saying something beforehand” like prediction or prophecy (Herrera).



other as relatives while preventing political borders from overshadowing their common indigenous roots and shared history of colonization. A key element of this prophecy is its foretelling of the unification of the people of the south and the people of the north, who would include Chicanas and Chicanos. “The Prophecy of the Eagle and the Condor” goes as follows:

There will come a time when the jaguar will return to the Andes. The sun will become fierce and the condor will disappear. At this time, the people of the eagle, *los norteamericanos*, will come to gain knowledge from the people of the condor, the indigenous people of South America. This knowledge sharing between the people of the eagle and the condor will allow for an opening, a doorway in perception, through which humanity can enter a new reality. At this time, a powerful Inca, a sun god, will come to the planet. This powerful Inca will be filled with such great light that a look or a touch can heal. (Flake)

Some interpret the eagle as representing the modern, materialistic, technological society in which the people of the eagle have developed intellect at the expense of the heart (Flake). The people of the condor represent the indigenous people of the world who live in harmony with the land, and possess heart and wisdom that come from being in balance with nature. Although spiritually rich, they are materially impoverished, mostly because forces of the developed world are encroaching on their natural resources.

In order for the people of the eagle and the people of the condor to survive, they must come together and learn from one another (Fraser). The standard interpretation is that this prophecy foretells the sharing of indigenous knowledge with the technologies of science, the balancing of yin and yang, and the bridging of northern and southern cultures

(Perkins 209). However, most powerful is the message it offers about consciousness; it says that we have entered a time when we can benefit from the many diverse ways of seeing ourselves and the world, and that we can use these as a springboard towards higher levels of awareness (Perkins 209). It is a time of partnership, love and healing, and a transition out of an era of conflict and turmoil into more sustainable and earth-honoring ways (Fraser).

Aztec dancers on both sides of the border have worked towards fulfilling this prophecy by coming together and learning from one another (Estrada 44). The continuing growth and acquirement of indigenous knowledge among modern-day Chicanas/os can also be seen as a given testament to this prophecy. Gabriel Estrada adds by describing how, in Pancho Lane's documentary *The Eagle's Children*, General Aranda, a "general" of the *danza* tradition in Mexico City, emphasizes the significance of this *tlaachtopenitliztli* by offering an invitation to U.S. Aztec dancers to attend ceremonies in Mexico saying, "and I give my leave to you, desiring that our conquering spirits of the winds give strength to you, so that one day you can have *palabra* in this pueblo of Chalma" (44). Here, General Aranda is attempting to fulfill the prophecy of the eagle and the condor by inviting *los norteamericanos* to Chalma in an effort to learn from one another. "*Palabra*" (word) means that dancers will need to speak to each other and learn through oral tradition, as videos or writing are not the medium by which one primarily learns *danza* (44). Also, within the tradition of *Danza Azteca*, *palabra* signifies that a *danzante* has the authority to speak and/or lead (Rostas 8). So when General Aranda is offering *palabra* to *danzantes* from *norteamerica*, he is creating opportunities for the people of the south and the people of the north to exchange knowledge and learn from

one another. This direct speaking to one another not only opens pathways to learn from each other, but also helps in establishing relationships between the people of the north and the people of the south, as foretold in the prophecy “The Eagle and the Condor.”

Another way in which indigenous peoples of the Americas are working towards fulfilling this prophecy is through the “Peace and Dignity Run,” which began in 1992 as a way to bring attention to current political struggles of indigenous peoples across the American continents. The Run takes place every four years, in honor of the four directions. Cecile Mills, a runner who participated in the 1992 Run shares:

We were there on October 11, 1992 to celebrate the 500th anniversary of the last day before Europeans arrived in the Americas. The runners, some of whom had begun the "Peace and Dignity" spiritual journey from South America, and others in Alaska, had finally arrived in Tenochtitlan, Mexico. The eagle and the condor, the symbol of North and South America, have united in the ancient Mesoamerican city. The prayer run throughout the Americas was spiritual, yet it was also political. The very presence of hundreds of thousands of indigenous peoples from throughout the Americas, including hundreds of Chicanos, made the event political. They came to honor the elders, the medicine people, the children and the future generations, and to share the spiritual ceremonies of the different peoples.

([www.indigenouspeople.net](http://www.indigenouspeople.net))

The delineated path of the Peace and Dignity Run, begins at two points, Alaska and Panama, both leading to the mid-point of Tenochtitlan, Mexico. The northern path runs through California where numerous Chicana/o *danzantes* join the run and continue towards Mexico.



Figure 2.2 Peace and Dignity Journey, Panama, 2009.

The second prophecy to contemplate has to do with a cosmic phenomenon marked on the Mayan calendar due to occur on December 21 of the year 2012. The 2012 phenomenon comprises a range of eschatological beliefs according to which cataclysmic or transformative events will occur on December 21, 2012. This date is regarded as the end-date of a 5,125-year-long cycle in the Mesoamerican Long Count calendar. Various astronomical alignments and numerological formulae have been proposed as pertaining to this date (Wikipedia). There seem to be people who believe that the world will end on this date. However, according to oral tradition, this date marks the end of the Fourth World of the Hopi and Maya, and start of the Fifth World, a world of transition (Stray). This is the same as the end of the Fifth Sun of the Aztecs and the start of the Sixth Sun (Stray). Thus, according to Mayan elders like Don Alejandro, this momentous date in which cosmic bodies are to align, does not point to any sort of earthly catastrophe, but rather, marks the beginning of a new cycle when humanity will reach higher levels of consciousness needed to heal humanity and Mother Earth.

The last *tlaachtópaitoliztli* to consider is known as “Cuauhtemoc’s Last Speech,”

which took place on August 21, 1521 immediately following the Spanish conquest. This *tlaachtopaitoliztli* has also been preserved through oral tradition. Cuauhtemoc, the last *tlahtoani* (revered speaker/leader) of the Aztec civilization, addressed his people as he proclaimed:

Our Sun has gone down. Our Sun has been lost from view and has left us in complete darkness. But we know it will return again, that it will rise again to light us anew. But while it is there in the House of Silence, let us join together. Let us embrace each other, and in the very center of our being, hide all that our hearts love and what we know is the Great Treasure. Let us hide our Temples, our schools, our sacred soccer game, our youth centers, and our houses of flowery song so that only our streets remain. Our homes will enclose us until our New Sun rises. Most honorable fathers and most honorable mothers, may you never forget to guide your young ones and teach your children while you live. How good it has been and will be. Until now, our beloved Anahuac sheltered and protected our destinies that our ancestors and our parents enthusiastically received and seeded in our being. Now we will instruct our children how to be good. They will raise themselves up and gain strength and, as goodness, make real their great destiny in this, our beloved mother Anahuac. (Vento 62)

This speech and prophecy given by the last *tlahtoani* of the Aztecs is a prayer that elders have kept for over 500 years (Vento 62). It is every *danzante*'s responsibility to know and understand the history and significance of this speech. The following explanation and interpretation of Cuauhtemoc's speech and prophecy has been safeguarded and handed down by elders within the *danza* tradition:

At the fall of the Aztec civilization, when the Spaniards captured Cuauhtemoc, he knew that the fate of his people was dim. Before he was assassinated he was able to give one last speech and prophetic message to his people. To the Aztecs, the sun leaving and being completely out of view meant that the age of their people had come to an end. However, Cuauhtemoc prophesized that a new age would illuminate his people in the future, meaning that there would be a revival of their culture and traditions. At the time of the conquest (during the time of darkness) many of our ancestors were slaughtered and in constant danger of losing their lives if they did not conform to European colonization and do away with all of their cultural and religious beliefs and practices. Cuauhtemoc, trying to reassure his people during their darkest hour, instructed them to keep their traditions hidden so that they may survive the onslaught of cultural genocide. Cuauhtemoc used the term “the great treasure” to refer to his people’s traditions, religion, customs, arts, histories, philosophies, and sciences. It did not represent the riches and gold that the Spaniards were hungry for. Cuauhtemoc explained to his people that their heritage must be taught and handed down to forthcoming generations but in secrecy or encoded, until it was safe to do so openly, when the New Sun (era) came into being.

*Tlahtoani* Cuauhtemoc’s prophecy further indicates that when the New Sun arises, many years after colonization and when it was safe for the *Mexica* people to come out of their houses and into the streets, the children would revive the *Mexica* culture. It was prophesized that the New Sun would rise when the face of Cuauhtemoc could be seen again without provoking violence onto his descendants. According to oral tradition,

many years after colonization, when Mexico began to mass-produce a coin with an image of Cuauhtemoc's face (1947-1949), the tradition of *Danza Azteca* sprouted and quickly spread throughout Mexico and later throughout the Southwest of the United States. It is believed that the children who would revive the *Mexica* culture that Cuauhtemoc referred to are present day Mexicans and Chicanas/os, descendants of the *Mexica* people.



Figures 2.3 and 2.4 Pre-Cuauhtemoc and contemporary visual representations of *Tlahtoani* Cuauhtemoc.

In examining these prophecies from various indigenous cultures, there seems to be unanimous agreement concerning the emergence of a new era (Vento 62). As Carlos Vento puts it, many believe this new era consists of “a return to the non-material and ecologically balanced view of reality, shared by all Native American peoples, that will bring about a unification of thoughts and thus fulfill the prophecies of the ancestors” (62). There appears to be general consensus in the above mentioned prophecies that this purification period will be a time in which humankind will have the opportunity to evolve, and in which we can consciously help the process by visiting sacred sites to “strengthen our energy bodies” or to do exercise to “engage our energy bodies” (Stray).

Today, as *danzantes* “strengthen and engage their energy bodies,” they are able to freely express themselves as indigenous people and practice *Danza Azteca* without the threat of persecution. According to Gabriel S. Estrada, there are an estimated fifty thousand to one hundred thousand *danzantes* in the United States and Mexico (44). The development of the growing number of *danzantes* across both countries is something that should be further analyzed as we move towards a more liberated and just society for our communities. Also worth noting is the choice individuals make to live by the code of *Tlahtoani* Cuauhtemoc’s *tlaachtopaitoliztli* and the powerful impact it can have on their ability to overcome oppressive social conditions. This prophecy is profound to many *danzantes* and can highly influence them towards becoming agents of social change in order to help fulfill its message.

### **Danza Azteca in the United States**

During the 1960's, the objectives of the Civil Rights Movement were fueled with the celebration and recuperation of indigenous ancestries in the formation of sociopolitical ideologies that challenged the accepted notions of acculturation imposed by a Eurocentric hegemonic colonial structure (Huerta 6). Among their concerns was the role that the Roman Catholic religion played in the invasion of Mexico and the destruction of Mesoamerican thought and culture (Huerta 6). The growth of *Danza Azteca* in the U.S. is also attributed to the Chicanas/os’ tie to the Southwest, recognized by Chicanas/os as “*Aztlan*”<sup>18</sup> (Ceseña 86). The concept of *Aztlan* played a crucial role in the development of Chicana/o nationalism, made popular by Chicano poet Alurista when

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<sup>18</sup> *Aztlan* is considered to be the ancestral homeland of the Aztecs, believed to be in the U.S. Southwest.



he presented *El Plan Espiritual de Aztlán* at the first Chicano National Conference held in Denver, Colorado in 1965 (Ceseña 86). *El Plan* called for unity, economic and institutional justice, equal opportunities to quality education, self-defense against police brutality, and for cultural and political liberation necessary for reclaiming the cultural identity of the Chicana/o (Ceseña 86).

Although *danzas* representing the Mexican cultural heritage existed within the U.S. long before the 1960s, the sociopolitical struggles that took place during the Chicana/o Movement fostered a reincarnation of *danza* as a possibility for stronger relationships between indigenous peoples of the North and those of the South (Huerta 8). Understanding that U.S. political agendas were affecting Mexicans and Chicanas/os on both sides of the border, Chicanas/os began to see the connection between their own struggles in the United States and the struggles going on in Mexico and throughout Latin America (Ceseña 87). María T. Ceseña explains that *Danza Azteca* “provided an extremely interactive and visible way to connect with Mexico, that was connected to a much larger *danza* movement that had already been going on in Mexico for centuries” (87).

It was during this time and under these circumstances that the teachings of *maestros/temachtianimeh* (teachers) of *Danza Azteca* from Mexico, Andrés Segura and Florencio Yescas, began integrating their teachings of *danza* and indigenous knowledge into the spiritual, cultural, and political consciousness of many Chicanas/os (Huerta 8). While Yescas’s presentation of *Danza Azteca* was shared in a cultural context, Segura presented it in a *Conchero* or traditional form. Yescas's version of *danza* is concentrated in the Southern California, San Diego, and Tijuana areas, while Segura's version is more

visible in the Texas border region (Huerta 8). Since then, *danza* has grown and spread in various forms throughout the United States Southwest region, also recognized as *Aztlan*, or the original homeland of the *Mexica* people.

Today, *danzantes* are able to work towards greater personal integrity, empowerment, and social justice, as contemporary Chicanas/os who seek to remember, re-imagine, and redeploy indigenous ideas and practices as critique and alternative to the oppressive social construct imposed by a Eurocentric normative perspective (L. Pérez 21). Amalia Mesa-Bains reminds us that it is through memory that we connect the past to the present, the old with the new (qtd. in L. Pérez 23). In this context, *danza* not only reflects our history, but is also a construction of ideology that provides a space for *danzantes* to recreate a system of ideals based on an indigenous perspective. For instance, this may include reviving customs, traditions, rituals, and ceremonies within the *danza* tradition, like *Danza Mexica Cuauhtemoc's Xilonen* ceremony in which a young woman takes on the role of representing her dance group in the community. The *Xilonen* ceremony is also the time when children under the age of four take on Nahuatl names and are presented to and recognized by the *danza* community. In this way, Chicanas and Chicanos look to the past to construct their future.

### **Indigenous Forms of Knowledge**

According to oral tradition and presented by scholars such as Elisa Huerta and Jimmy Newmoon Royball, *Danza Azteca* is an expressive cultural art form based on the movements of the sun, moon, and planets (13; 219). As Kurath and Martí explain, during dance ceremonies “offerings and circuits were guided by the cardinal points and the

corresponding positions of the sun” (87). Like their understanding of time, space, and the rotation of cosmic bodies represented in their calendars, the Aztecs developed the *Danza Azteca* tradition in the formation of a circle, or a series of concentric circles, with one *danzante* leading the group in the center of the circle, representing the sun, and the other *danzantes* representing the moving planets around the sun (Huerta 13). Through this physical embodiment and understanding of the Nahuas’ notion of cosmic relationships, *danzantes* not only recognize a “heliocentric” model of the solar system, but also embody the cosmos itself (Huerta 13). To add, Carlos Vento explains that the drum represents the center of the world; its beat is the heartbeat of the world that unifies all dancers’ heartbeats as one (62).

Kurath and Martí explain various dance formations used during pre-Cuauhtemoc times that expressed natural phenomenon. For instance, the vertical movements inherent in leaping, was associated with rain. While the snake dance was horizontal, representing earth, and danced for crops (Kurath and Martí 88). A combination of leaps and snake dance movements brought together the vertical and horizontal designs of sky and earth (88). Other dances may represent important life necessities such as hunting and raising children. Contemporary *danzantes* come to understand that in each dance step there are encoded histories and embodied representations of the natural world that are understood and deciphered through the practice of *Danza Azteca* (Vento 62).

*Danzantes* are keepers and interpreters of native knowledge that has been historically persecuted by institutionalized powers. Native knowledge, which *danzantes* aim at protecting, includes indigenous languages, dances, songs, arts, mathematical concepts, calendar systems, and oral histories. This is critical in the move towards

decolonization that challenges the systematic exclusion of native histories and knowledges that has taken place since the onset of colonization throughout the Americas. During colonization, Western knowledge was used to discipline the colonized; the most obvious forms of discipline were through exclusion, marginalization and denial (Smith 69). Linda T. Smith argues, “reclaiming a voice in this context has also been about reclaiming, reconnecting and reordering those ways of knowing which were submerged, hidden or driven underground” (69). Reclaiming and reviving indigenous knowledge is of utmost importance for *danzantes* in their quest towards decolonization and adopting an indigenous way of life.

In helping to unearth and protect native knowledges, *danzantes* walk the path of *tlilli tlapalli*, the path of black and red ink. The expression *tlilli tlapalli* (black red) simply means “writing,” but also represents wisdom and knowledge of things difficult to understand (León-Portilla, *Aztec Thought* 12). According to Laura E. Pérez, this path leads towards creating one’s own *in ixtli in yollotl*;<sup>19</sup> the Nahua concept of “face” or “personality” to that of “divinized heart,” to express personhood as the attunement between inner and outer being, the person and the community, the earthly and the divine (L. Pérez 257). In Nahua thought, life is the process of aligning the outer (face, physical) with the inner (heart/spirit), and making for one’s self the face and heart of a harmonious and spiritually guided person of higher purpose (L. Pérez 257). The term “*ixtli*,” or face, has the connotation of having a morally developed personality (León-Portilla, *Aztec Thought* 13). “*Yollotl*” (heart), which has as its root the word *olin* (movement, energy),

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<sup>19</sup> As explained in chapter 1, the term *ixtli yollotl* is a metaphor for “person.” *Yollotl* has as its base the word *olin*, meaning movement or energy. *Olin* may also be defined as the dynamic quality inherent in human beings. I am sharing Pérez’s interpretation of this concept to highlight its significance with regards to the spiritual path walked by *danzantes* in their effort to align the physical with the spiritual.

embraces the act of being a human agent indicative of the driving force within one's being.

Also of significance in one's quest towards consciousness, is the Nahua concept of *neyolmelahualiztli*, which is the process of giving direction to the potential (Herrera). Examining the parts of this term helps in understanding this concept further: *liztli* means "process," or "the act of," *melahua* can be defined as "to set straight," or "to give direction to," *yol* is an alternate stem of *yollotl* (heart, potential, energy, movement), and *ne* is an impersonal prefix. Put together *neyolmelahualiztli* can be interpreted as "the act or process of giving direction to one's potential, heart, or energy"<sup>20</sup> (Herrera). This process of giving direction to one's potential by developing a "wise face and good heart," was the basis of Nahua education. According to Nahua belief, the arts, including *danza*, have the capability of facilitating the process of developing integrity between "the face and the soul" (L. Pérez 306). This supports Pérez's theory that "the arts embody and assist the critical, truth-seeking, and oppositional consciousness that is necessary to both social and spiritual wellbeing" (306).

*Danzantes* work towards reaching new ways of acquiring knowledge through indigenous perspectives that foster a reconceptualization of self and reality. Gloria Anzaldúa taught us that *la facultad*<sup>21</sup> and other forms of "inner knowledge" affirm the "divine within," the "supernatural" or the "spirit world," and represent alternative forms of perception, other modes of consciousness, epistemologies, and paths of knowledge (qtd. in L. Pérez 32). These alternative forms of knowledge and epistemologies are in resistance to the privileged Euroamerican and European dominant cultures (L. Pérez 32).

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<sup>20</sup> Personal communication with Nahuatl linguist, Fermin Herrera.

<sup>21</sup> *La facultad* can be referred to as "intuition" or "an inherent mental or physical power."

*Danza* provides an alternative way of thinking; thinking through the body. Movement of the body combines culturally based experiences with cognitive patterns, confirming that ways of moving are ways of thinking (Nájera-Ramírez, Cantú, and Romero xvi). When Chicanas/os embody pre-Cuauhtemoc Aztec dance movements, being cognizant of what they represent, they are learning to think about their own indigenous history and existence through the body. Therefore, *danza* can be a powerful means to gain and portray cultural knowledge and experiences as well as facilitate expressions of identity (Nájera-Ramírez, Cantú, and Romero xvii).

In *danza* terms, the group is referred to as *yahualli*, *el círculo*, the circle. Mario E. Aguilar shares with us the oral tradition that states, “The *yahualli* distinguishes the ritual sacred space where the ancestors, the living, and the yet-unborn can gather to create self-determination.” Within the circle there is an “energy” that can be felt when in motion; the ambience is charged by the activity of the many *danzantes* moving in coordinated juxtaposition (Rostas 138). Susana Rostas, who also gathered her information through oral traditions and teachings from *capitanes* of the *Conchero* tradition in Mexico, argues that the outcome created when the various senses act in unity, create a harmony quite unlike that found in everyday interaction (138). She also theorizes that this unique and powerful phenomenon inherent in *danza* probably accounts, in part, for why the Spaniards repressed the music and dances of the Aztecs soon after the conquest (138). Rostas further explains, “It is what dance can do to the boundaries of the self, it is the inner changes wrought by dance and the accompanying music and song as the self evaporates that are empowering and might make it seem threatening (to others)” (138).

Contemporary reinterpretations and traditions of *Danza Azteca* offer opportunities for the articulation, negotiation, and contestation of Chicana/o notions of indigeneity<sup>22</sup> as complex configurations of cultural-national sentiments, oppositional consciousness toward racist objectification, and a means of meeting community needs, especially in terms of youth outreach through cultural knowledge and healing practices (Huerta 6). The *danza* circle also reflects the reality of an ancient tradition, which can be described as a “permeable wall” that keeps in attributes that have helped indigenous people survive throughout history while also allowing in new traits that help people survive in new and unexpected situations (Aguilar).

An elder of the *danza* tradition and pupil of *Temachtiani* Andrés Segura, Mario E. Aguilar explains that this tradition is “ever flowing between the tools left by the ancestors and new realities being faced by their descendants.” Aguilar further explains that, “*La Danza Azteca* provides a permeable wall of tradition that gives its participants membership in community, identity with other practitioners, and a living kinetic link to the past, present, and future.” Examples of “tools left by the ancestors” include *la Danza Azteca*, the Nahuatl language, traditional sweat lodges, and naming ceremonies, which all provide “grounding, energy, and knowledge” that help the “*Mexicohuani*” (those that have risen, or come out of Mexico) grow and prosper in “times of ethnic hatred, gang warfare, and substance abuse” (Aguilar). Similar to Gloria Anzaldúa’s interpretation of *nepantla* as an “in-between space”, Aguilar concludes:

Due to the U.S/Mexico war, the *Mexicohuani* have had to create a new ‘space’ – neither completely ‘American’ nor ‘Mexican.’ The search for sacred space, for a

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<sup>22</sup> Indigeneity is derived from “indigenous,” which means born or produced naturally in a land or region. In this case indigeneity is being used to express Chicanos’ recognition of their indigenous roots and configurations of cultural-national sentiments.

heritage rooted not in the persecutions and discriminations suffered in the last 175 years in the United States, but in the indigenous roots of the American continent, has given Chicana/o communities of the twenty-first century new tools for survival and empowerment. *Danza Azteca* is one of these powerful tools in that it unites “*Mexicoehuaní*” of all genders, languages, socio-economic and educational levels into one circle that encompasses the ancestors, the living, and the yet unborn into a circle of *ollin* [sic] that creates self-determination, empowerment, social justice, and internal peace.

Aguilar applies his interpretation of “*olin*” (which literally means “energy” or “movement”) to support his argument that the “movement” towards self-determination and social justice is not just for the betterment of Mexican-origin populations, but is also part of a global struggle by all living beings for equality, justice, spirituality, and peace.

Like Laura E. Pérez’s interpretation of *in ixtli in yollotl*, and Gloria Anzaldúa’s interpretation of *nepantla*, Aguilar’s interpretation of *ollin* [sic], can help us understand how contemporary Chicanas/os and *danzantes* apply Nahuatl concepts to the modern challenges they face as neocolonial indigenous peoples. Although preserving ancient ways intact as much as possible is important, one must consider the fact that culture is always evolving and that the circumstances in which indigenous people live today differ greatly from how their ancestors lived before colonization. In many ways, the reinterpretation of terms and native customs can be empowering for contemporary native peoples.



## **Danza Mexica Cuauhtemoc**

The focus and purpose of this study is to explore present-day manifestations of pre-Cuauhtemoc *Danza Azteca*, rather than the Catholic and native synthesis that produced the *Conchero* tradition. To clarify the distinct differences between the two traditions, Elisa D. Huerta explains:

While the *Mexica* tradition of *Danza Azteca* can be considered derivative of the *conchero* tradition, *Mexica danzantes* have widely disavowed affiliations and references to Catholicism that are highly visible in the *Conchero* tradition, including the use of stringed instruments, like *conchas* and *mandolinas*, that are considered European impositions. Many *Mexica danzantes* also make a point of using all-natural fibers and materials for all aspects of their ritual practices, including *trajes* (regalia), as commonly seen in Chicana/o communities (9).

As previously mentioned, diverse Aztec dance circles fulfill various purposes, which are mostly cultural and spiritual in nature. Some, like *Danza Mexica Cuauhtemoc*, a *Mexica* and not *Conchero* dance group, are cultural, spiritual, and political. To better understand the goals and purpose of *Danza Mexica Cuauhtemoc*, I have included the mission statement and guiding principals of this group, as follows:

*Danza Mexica Cuauhtemoc* is a community of people dedicated to the preservation and promotion of the *Mexica/Azteca* culture, ceremonies, warrior dances, accurate history and traditions. *Danza Mexica Cuauhtemoc* works to build unity, understanding, mutual respect and harmony amongst all nations. This is done by coming together and supporting one another in the struggle for political, economic, environmental, social and cultural justice. We preserve our culture by

teaching and practicing the *Mexica/Azteca* dance tradition, learning the accurate and true history of our people, practicing arts and crafts, studying the Sun Stone (Aztec calendar), studying and practicing the language of Nahuatl, studying *Mexica/Azteca* and Mayan math, building political consciousness and much more. We encourage the public to come and learn with us, watch us dance, or invite us to share our *danza* at schools, community spaces or at political demonstrations in the community. We are not a performance dance troop. This is our culture and we live accordingly. ([www.cuauhtemoc.org](http://www.cuauhtemoc.org))

This mission statement is carried out by *Danza Mexica Cuauhtemoc*'s dedicated *jefes*, *cabezas*, and *danzantes* on an ongoing basis as they adopt these guiding principles and apply them to all aspect of their lives. *Danza* and the ideals instilled within it, become a way of life for *danzantes* as they strive towards developing their own *in ixtli in yollotl*.

As told by *Temachtiani Pastel* (*jefe* of *Danza Mexica Cuauhtemoc*) and various other elders within the *danza* tradition, *Danza Mexica Cuauhtemoc* was established during the early 1980s in Southern California when Salvador Rodríguez, a direct descendant of *Tlahtoani* Cuauhtemoc, gave three *capitanes de danza* (leaders and teachers of *danza*) soil from the final resting place of *Tlahtoani* Cuauhtemoc. This gift symbolized a blessing that gave the *capitanes* permission (*palabra*) to establish traditional Aztec dance groups in the United States. One of the three *capitanes* was Arturo "Pastel" Mireles, who established *Danza Mexica Cuauhtemoc* in the Los Angeles area immediately following this momentous ceremony. Under Pastel's direction and leadership, *Danza Mexica Cuauhtemoc* has since grown into a widespread traditional and political Aztec dance organization with branches throughout Southern California,

Arizona, and Minnesota. To this day, Arturo “Pastel” Mireles, who is nearly seventy years old, continues to fulfill his obligations as *capitán* to all *danzantes* within the dance group *Danza Mexica Cuauhtemoc*.



Figure 2.5 *Temachtiani* Arturo “Pastel” Mireles, 2012.

*Danza Mexica Cuauhtemoc* gives its members an outlet to resist by providing opportunities to be politically active as they develop a social consciousness that leads to promoting justice within their communities. They do this by participating in political demonstrations that defend the civil rights of Mexican, Chicana/o, and indigenous communities ([www.cuauhtemoc.org](http://www.cuauhtemoc.org)). *Danza* also offers its members opportunities to

embrace learning by exposing *danzantes* to ancient sources of knowledge they can identify with (Vento 62). Furthermore, *danzantes* often develop a strong sense of cultural pride as well as a positive self-esteem through the cultivation of a more indigenous identity (Aguilar). These mechanisms provide methods, which enable *danzantes* to resist oppression, marginalization, and assimilation in a positive manner that can ultimately empower the communities they serve.

I have been a member of *Danza Mexica Cuauhtemoc* for fifteen years and a *cabeza*<sup>23</sup> for ten years, which has allowed me to become very familiar with the inner workings of this political group whose mission is to empower communities of indigenous descent. The objective of *Danza Mexica Cuauhtemoc* is to offer its members opportunities to tap into indigenous systems of knowledge, and to learn accurate histories of their people. This is done through the learning of the choreography and significance of many dances, and being exposed to the Nahuatl language, ancient codices (*amoxtili*), Nahua philosophy, native spirituality, and the learning of the Aztec Calendar. In addition to holding a regular dance practice, most dance circles organize workshops in which elders and *maestros* share indigenous knowledge with *danzantes*. *Danzantes* typically adopt *danza* as a way of life by bringing in aspects of this tradition into the spectrum of their everyday lives including their personal and professional relationships, values, belief systems, health, education, and spiritual development.

As *danzantes*, we continuously develop our social and political consciousness within the social construct of *danza*. While becoming more aware of who we are as indigenous people, we begin to develop a stronger sense of identity and empowerment.

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<sup>23</sup> A “*cabeza*” is head representative and leader of a dance circle.

As members of *Danza Mexica Cuauhtemoc*, we become politically active by participating in *batallas* (battles) in the community. *Batallas* are considered to be dance presentations that are connected to a political issue and/or manifestations that look to defend the civil and human rights of Mexican, Chicana/o, and other indigenous communities. Thus, *Danza Mexica Cuauhtemoc* not only preserves *Mexica* history, culture, dances, and traditions, but also fosters *danzantes* into becoming politically active individuals and agents of social change.

### **Protocols of Danza Azteca**

As stated earlier, every *danza* group can either be slightly or drastically different from the next as far as details of protocol are concerned. Here, I offer my insight and experience as a *cabeza* of *Danza Mexica Cuauhtemoc* within the tradition of *Danza Azteca*. To be clear, although there may be similarities with other Aztec and *Conchero* dance groups, the following short description of Aztec dance protocol is specific to *Danza Mexica Cuauhtemoc*.

The foundation of these protocols is based on a military hierarchy that is necessary to facilitate, maintain, and protect the circle and its people's traditions and historical integrity. I would like to stress the difference between *danza*'s concept of this hierarchy in comparison to the Western notion of a military hierarchy. First, by stating that we are organized militarily and that we are "soldiers" or "warriors" does not imply that we are literally going into physical combat with other human beings. As explained by Carlos Vento, "*danzantes* engage not in wars of conquest but in the ongoing battle within us and around us, a battle between the positive and negative" (62). What we are

fighting against are negative ideologies that harm and endanger the dignity and humanity of any person or community. At the micro level, we as *danzantes* who are conforming to the beliefs of our Nahua ancestors, must work towards becoming better people by ridding ourselves of negative attributes like being selfish, self-centered, pretentious, materialistic, jealous, lazy, etc., as we strive to develop our own *in ixtli in yollotl*. This extends into the macro level that spawns from the self, to the family, and then to the larger community. Within the larger context of society, *danzantes* fight to revive, restore, preserve and protect our cultural heritage and traditions, as well as our human rights and dignity as indigenous people. In this way, we are taught that we are spiritual warriors. Through *danza*, we are politicized and taught the importance of unity and harmony amongst all nations. We come to understand that acquiring knowledge through an indigenous perspective is crucial for our survival as indigenous people.

At the top of *Danza Mexica Cuauhtemoc*'s hierarchy is the *capitán* or *jefe*, which in this case is Arturo "Pastel" Mireles. His wife Judith Mireles, is next in command and is also considered to be a *capitana* or *jefa*. The next in line are the *cabezas*, who head the various "circles" under *Danza Mexica Cuauhtemoc*. As stated before, there are dozens of dance circles in Southern California, Arizona, and Minnesota, and each is lead by a *cabeza* under the direction of our *jefes*. In some cases, the *cargo* (obligation/duty) of heading or leading a group can be shared among two or more *cabezas*, as is the case in the circle I participate in. Teotl Goitia is the *cabeza* with *primera palabra* (first word), meaning he is the main *cabeza* who carries most of the responsibility and authority in our circle. Myself and Magdalena Rodríguez (Teotl's wife) are second and third *cabezas*. Magdalena is also the group's *copalera* (caretaker of *copal* incense). In accordance with

protocol, neither *cabeza* can make a decision without consulting with the other two *cabezas*. We work together in making decisions for the wellbeing of our *círculo* until we come to a consensus, which we then take to the our immediate circle of dancers for approval.

Important to our philosophy is treating everyone with respect and valuing everyone's opinions. The formation of the "circle" itself implies that, although a hierarchical system is used to maintain some sort of structure, we are all considered equals and worthy of being treated with respect. This equality and feeling of mutual respect can be compared to the Mayan notion of *In lak'ech*, which *danzantes* learn to embrace. *In lak'ech* means "I am another yourself" or simply "I am you," and is a salutation which recognizes and honors the presence of another spiritual being experiencing human life. The fact that this term is Mayan (rather than Nahuatl) is indicative of the cross-cultural exchange among Mesoamerican (as well as Northern Native American) peoples. Recognizing that such cultural exchange occurred during pre-Cuauhtemoc times as it does today, it is common for Chicanas, Chicanos, and *danzantes* to recognize philosophical worldviews from various indigenous cultures.

*Danzantes* are appointed *cargos* (positions of leadership and responsibility) by the *cabezas* as they acquire knowledge, experience, and demonstrate humbleness and leadership. Possible cargos include *sargento/a* (sergeant), *huehuetero* (drummer), *copalera* (fire keeper), *bandera/estandarte/pantli* (carries flag), historian, and *caracolero* (blows conch shell), among others depending on the needs of each circle.

The *sargento's* *cargo* is to maintain the balance of the circle by helping to place *danzantes* within the dance circle in such a way as to distribute the energies of

male/female, child/elder, and experienced dancers/novice dancers, evenly throughout the circle's sacred space. The *sargento* also helps the *cabeza/s* keep a close eye on everything that is occurring within and outside of the circle to ensure that everything is running smoothly and that everyone is safe.

The “*huehuetero*” with “*primera palabra*” is first in command among the drummers. He or she “leads” the rhythm and the pace of the drumbeat, representing the unifying heartbeat of the circle, while following the lead dancer's steps. *Danzantes* interested in learning how to drum can do so under the apprenticeship of the head *huehuetero*, but only after knowing at least four dances as a *danzante*. Once the apprentice drummer is able to gain enough musical mastery to know how to drum for a minimum of at least ten different dances, he or she will be officially recognized as a *huehuetero*.



Figure 2.6 Apprentice *huehuetero*, 2012.



The *copalera* also plays a crucial role within the circle, which is to be fulfilled by a woman. She is responsible for keeping the fire and *copal*<sup>24</sup> burning throughout the ceremony in the center of the circle, or *ombligo* (navel of the circle). The smoke produced by the sweet aroma of the burning *copal*, represents the spirit of our ancestors. As Elisa D. Huerta shares, “*Copal* is sacred and serves as a conduit, a bridge between the heavens and earth, carrying *danzantes*’ prayers from this world to the other” (4). Ceremony cannot be carried out without *copal*, without the presence of the ancestors.

In addition to the caretaking of *copal*, the *copalera* is also responsible for ensuring that there is good and positive energy within the circle by blessing and cleansing the *danzantes*, *armas* (rattles, shields, regalia), drums, and anything that should enter the circle in addition to the area where the ceremony is to take place. She must ensure that the sacred medicines (*copal*, sage, obsidian, water, and other sacred elements) are present on the *ombligo* (central altar) and well taken care of. Objects that represent the five sacred directions are placed on the altar accordingly. For example, in the east objects that represent masculinity and water may be placed. On the western side of the altar, objects that represent femininity and earth are placed, while objects that represent elders, wind, and reflection will inhabit the northern quadrant. In the south, objects representing our youth, the element of fire, and creativity, are present. Lastly, the *copal* is placed in the middle, representing spirit and heart.

Every group should appoint a woman to carry a *pantli* (flag) into “battle.” The most commonly used flag is the Mexican flag. Another flag that is often seen is the

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<sup>24</sup> *Copal* or *copalli* is tree resin in the form of incense used by Mesoamerican cultures.



Figure 2.7 Copalera, Día de los Muertos ceremony in Ventura, CA, 2007.

original *Mexica* flag with a turquoise background and an image of an eagle with a symbol representing water and fire in its beak (misinterpreted as a snake when the national Mexican flag was created). The *danzante* appointed with this duty must carry the flag into battles and ceremonies and continue to dance while holding the flag through the very end of the ceremony or *batalla*. To distinguish, a ceremony has more to do with upholding the customs and traditions of our ancestors, while a *batalla*, on the other hand, refers to a dance presentation that takes place in correlation with issues of social justice. Either way, the *bandera*, or *pantli*, should be present.



Figure 2.8 Original *Mexica* flag.



Figure 2.9 *Atl-tlachinolli*, water and fire.



Figure 2.10 *Danzante* upholding the *cargo* of representing the flag, 2012.

Also of significance are the historians and *caracoleros* (conch shell blowers). The historians are responsible for providing the circle with accurate and relevant historical teachings that would enhance and expand dancers' knowledge of the Nahuatl language, calendar systems, philosophy, history, etc. The historian is thus, a *tlamatini* (one who knows) and a *temachtiani* (teacher), who is very much respected and valued within the circle. Lastly, the *caracolero*, usually a male, is in charge of sounding the conch shell to signal the beginning of a ceremony or *batalla*, and also to invoke the spirit of our ancestors. The *caracolero*, may also blow the conch shell whenever a need arises and

instructed by the group's *cabeza*. Other *cargos* can be created and assigned depending on the size and need of each circle.



Figure 2.11 *Caracolero*, Cuauhtemoc Ceremony, 2012.

There are also protocols to follow in terms of the regalia *danzantes* wear that stem from pre-Cuauhtemoc times. As individuals developed and evolved into more knowledgeable or accomplished members of society in pre-Cuauhtemoc Mesoamerica, they were marked with elaborate clothing and/or body ornamentation of distinction (Soustelle 138). Similarly, those new to the tradition of *danza* start by wearing a simple white *traje*. Women wear a white *huipilli* (blouse) and a white skirt with slits open along the sides so as to make dancing easier. Men wear white pants, which may or may not be

accompanied by a white shirt. At this stage, they may also wear a red and black *faja* (wide woven belt) and a red headband (representing the path of *tlilli tlapalli*). Beginners are then taught to decipher the *tonalamatl* (Aztec Sunstone), and learn which symbols represent their birthdates. It is important to understand the significance of these symbols so *danzantes* gain a deeper awareness of their personal attributes and unique energies. Their birth symbols are then painted onto and incorporated in the design of their white *trajes*, using only black, red, and white colors in the design.

*Danzantes* must then learn the dance *olin*, a short and simple *danza* offered at the beginning and end of every *danza* as a way of asking permission to dance, and also as a way to give thanks. *Olin*, or movement, represents the dynamic quality found in all life forms, and is a fundamental dance that introduces basic concepts of *danza*. It incorporates steps that represent the four sacred elements of fire, water, air, and earth. It represents the duality<sup>25</sup> present in all natural manifestations of life. It also stands for important journeys we may experience in life. Once *danzantes* learn this dance and are able to lead the group in dancing *olin*, they are then given permission to use a *sonaja* (gourd rattle).

The next step in a *danzante*'s development is learning and presenting to the group four dances. Once this goal is successfully met, *danzantes* are then able to utilize *chachayotes*,<sup>26</sup> which are worn around the ankles to keep in rhythm with the drumbeats while dancing. *Chachayotes* make a rich sound, similar to the sound a rattlesnake makes with its tail, and represent happiness, knowledge, children and the element of earth. It is said that happiness comes from the *chachayotes*' sound because they bring light into the

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<sup>25</sup> A key element in Nahua philosophy was the concept of duality, a balance between two equal and opposing forces.

<sup>26</sup> *Chachayotes* are large seedpods from the *ayayotl* tree in Mexico also referred to as *chachayotls* or *ayayotls*.



darkness, which can be interpreted as enlightenment and knowledge giving meaning to the phrase “planting seeds of consciousness,” commonly used within *danza*. The *chachayote* seeds also represent children in that they need to be cared for and nurtured in order for them grow into strong and healthy beings of consciousness.



Figure 2.12 Citlali and Xochitl, “seeds” born into the tradition of *Danza Azteca*.  
Photo by Marie Gregorio-Oviedo.

Over the years, as *danzantes* become more familiar with Nahua concepts and dance choreographies, they acquire more *conocimiento y conciencia* (knowledge and consciousness). This development of consciousness and embodied memorization of dance choreographies are recognized when *danzantes* are able to present ten *danzas* to the group, who are then given permission to don a *copilli* (headdress) with feathers and full regalia with as many colors and designs as one chooses. *Cabezas* are able to wear the most colorful feathers, like those of macaws. What a *danzante* wears reflects their

identity via their birth symbols, and level of development within a group. Thus, when *danzantes* come together during large ceremonies, it is easy to recognize their level of mastery and experience within the tradition of *danza*. Those wearing a full colored *traje*, *copilli*, and *chachayotes* will be recognized as experienced dancers and may be asked to carry out important *cargos* and carry *palabra* during a ceremony.



Figures 2.13 Beginner *danzante* in white. Figure 2.14 Experienced *danzante* in full regalia.

This structure is necessary to carry out *batallas*, *ceremonias*, and dance presentations. *Danzantes* who carry *cargos* are expected to carry out their duties by following the protocols of the group so that all may run smoothly. It is a very efficient model that serves our purposes whether we are carrying out a simple dance practice or officiating a large ceremony composed of dozens or even hundreds of *danzantes*. Below I offer a detailed description of how a typical ceremony is carried out. In this case, I will

use the annual “Cuauhtemoc Ceremony,” which takes place in honor of *Tlahtoani* Cuauhtemoc the last Saturday of every February.

### **Ceremony in Honor of Tlahtoani Cuauhtemoc**

According to oral tradition, when the Spanish *conquistadores*, led by Hernán Cortéz, began the conquest of Mexico, Cortéz captured the *Mexica tlahtoani* Motecuhzomah, and ruled the empire from behind the throne. In 1520, however, the Aztecs, under the leadership of Cuauhtemoc's uncle Cuitlahuac who had succeeded Motecuhzomah as the *Mexica's tlahtoani*, rebelled and expelled the Spaniards. Cortéz regrouped his men and prepared to recapture Tenochtitlan. By this time Cuitlahuac had died, and Cuauhtemoc inherited the throne.

In May of 1521, the Spaniards began the siege of the city. The Aztecs fought valiantly, but the water supply dwindled when the Spaniards cut the aqueduct, and by August, with most of the city in ruins, the Aztec defense finally collapsed. Cuauhtemoc attempted to escape but was captured by Cortéz's men. Cuauhtemoc asked to be killed, but Cortéz refused, taking him to his headquarters in Coyohuacan (Coyoacán) and keeping him under house arrest. Cuauhtemoc remained in captivity for a long time. On one occasion he was subjected to brutal torture because the Spaniards, believing that he knew where the Aztec treasures were hidden, decided to force Cuauhtemoc to reveal the locations of the gold. Oral tradition tells us that Cuauhtemoc endured the suffering as his feet were smothered in oil and burned yet revealed no secrets.

Here, it is important to point out what Western “historians” have failed to understand. According to oral tradition, there was a significant misunderstanding between



Cortéz's and Cuauhtemoc's interpretation of the word "treasures." Although Cortéz strictly referred to gold and other material riches, the Nahua notion of treasure was in reference to knowledge (codices/books, historical documents), art (which represents truth and the divine), and anything that represented and preserved their cultural heritage including their elders who carried much knowledge and safeguarded their oral traditions, their women who gave birth to humanity and passed on cultural traditions to their families, and children who were the most precious treasures of all, and whom ensured the future of our people's cultural heritage.

At the time of the conquest, Cuauhtemoc instructed his people to hide all that was dear to them as he said, "hide all that our hearts love and what we know is the Great Treasure" ([www.cuauhtemoc.org](http://www.cuauhtemoc.org)). He told his people to hide their temples, and schools, sacred soccer game, youth centers, and houses of flowery song (art centers) so that only their streets remained ([www.cuauhtemoc.org](http://www.cuauhtemoc.org)). This demonstrates that the *Mexicas'* notion of "treasures" differed drastically to that of the Spaniards. When Cortéz was torturing Cuauhtemoc, his intention was to discover where they had hidden their gold and jewels. However, what Cuauhtemoc kept in secrecy, and died protecting, was his people's *sabiduría* and cultural heritage, the true "Great Treasures."

Cuauhtemoc was hanged near the town of Itzancanal on February 26, 1525. In honor of his brave and heartfelt determination of protecting our cultural heritage, *Danza Mexica Cuauhtemoc* dutifully carries the honor and obligation of hosting the annual Cuauhtemoc ceremony. This ceremony has manifested itself for over twenty years. *Danzantes* from all over California as well as parts of Arizona and Minnesota come together to remember the great sacrifices *Tlahtoani* Cuauhtemoc endured so that we may

have the privilege of continuing the traditions our ancestors began so many years ago.

Much effort goes into the planning and implementation of this ceremony. First and foremost, a location is determined which usually takes place at a public park in the Los Angeles area, in the heart of a Mexican/Chicano *barrio* (neighborhood). The location is intentionally chosen so as to attract the attention of the residents in hopes of establishing relationships with the community, and also so that the community is exposed to these traditions and become aware that they can participate in *Danza Azteca* if they so choose. Once the location is chosen and time of ceremony is determined, invitations and announcements are sent to all *danza* groups both within and outside of *Danza Mexica Cuauhtemoc*, and to the surrounding communities.

The day of the ceremony, the hosting *círculo* is in charge of setting up the area where the dancing will take place. Flowers are placed around the outer perimeter of the circle to delineate the sacred space. The center altar is prepared where *copal* and elements representing the five sacred directions are placed. An eating area is also set up for *danzantes* to eat after the ceremony. As mentioned earlier, the *armas* (drums, rattles, flowers, sacred medicines, offerings, etc.), the circle, and its surrounding area are blessed and cleansed with *copal* to create a sacred space where positive energy and good prayers can be produced and freely move about.

Once everything is in place, *Temachtiani* Pastel signals the *caracoleros* to sound the conch shell every five minutes, four times. This informs *danzantes* how much time is left before the ceremony begins. Meanwhile, *danzantes* quickly get themselves ready as they fill their *copillis* (headdresses) with feathers of all colors and sizes, change from their street clothes to their colorful and magnificent *trajes* (regalia), fasten *chachayotes*

onto their ankles, and gather any other *armas* they may use as part of their regalia.

When the last signal of the *atecocolli* (conch shell) is sounded, *danzantes* begin to form lines behind *temachtiani* Pastel and other *cabezas*. The *sargentos* help balance the lines, making sure that children are in the center where they can be watched over and protected. Experienced dancers are interwoven throughout the lines among the newer *danzantes* and also at the very end to ensure that no one gets left behind. The ceremony begins with a procession through the community and can take up to an hour. *Copaleras* join the procession as they take their place at the front of the lines, where the *copal* continues to purify, protect, and invoke the spirits of the ancestors. Meanwhile, other *copaleras* stay behind to maintain the burning of copal within the circle where the ceremony is to take place. Flags are also at the front of the procession.



Figure 2.15 *Danzantes* on procession in Maywood, California in February of 2012.

As *danzantes* return from the procession, *copaleras* await them at the entrance of the circle (facing the east) as they bless and cleanse *danzantes* before entering the circle. Once all *danzantes* are inside the circle, *temachtiani* Pastel leads the ceremony and begins by dancing *olin* (movement), or *permiso* (permission), as a way to ask our ancestors and land permission to begin the dance ceremony. He offers the dance “*olin*” to

each of the four directions, dancing in each quadrant until he has offered this dance a total of four times. After this initial ritual of asking for permission, *temachtiani* Pastel then calls every *cabeza* representing a *circulo* into the center of the circle to hand over *palabra* to the *cabezas*, who are responsible for deciding how the rest of the ceremony will be conducted. This consists of appointing *cabezas* to carry out various *cargos* (duties).

The person who carries *primera palabra* is in charge of leading the ceremony by dancing in the middle of the circle while the rest of the dancers follow along. The *danzante* with *primera palabra* is also obligated to pass *palabra* to all other *cabezas* so that each group is represented and given the opportunity to lead the ceremony for the duration of one *danza*. Huerta similarly states that this “acknowledgement of each person’s participation as a *danzante* in ceremony occurs as each *danzante* takes her or his turn to dance in the center of the circle; this rotation speaks to the centrality of respect and balance found in *Danza Azteca* philosophy” (13).

Other *cabezas* are given *cargos* as well. A female *cabeza* is appointed to be in charge of all the women of the group, meaning that women and girls need to ask her for permission to exit and enter the dance circle’s sacred space during the ceremony. The same goes for the men, as a male *cabeza* is asked to carry this *cargo*. This is done so that the energy flowing within the circle is not disrupted. Additionally, another *cabeza* may be asked to take charge of greeting incoming *danzantes* at the eastern door and then placing them in the circle, keeping the balance of male/female, child/elder, etc. in mind. The list of *cargos* can be as long or short as the organizing *cabezas* see fit for that particular ceremony. The ceremony can last anywhere from two to four hours, and sometimes

longer. Amazingly, the majority of *danzantes* last to the very end, strongly believing that the energy produced within the circle is what fuels this extensive ceremonial offering.

Towards the end of the ceremony, *danzantes* gather at the center of the circle as *cabezas* turn in their *palabras* and *cargos*, and share humble and kind words of gratitude. Once all *cargos* have been turned in, other *cabezas* and *danzantes* are given the opportunity to speak if they so choose. Some may offer words of gratitude, suggestions for the next ceremony, words of wisdom, issues facing their communities, a call for action, or announcements of upcoming ceremonies or *batallas*. Finally, all *danzantes* shake hands as a gesture of solidarity and brotherhood/sisterhood having shared such a powerful ceremony together. After the ceremony, *danzantes* change back into their street clothes and enjoy a more relaxed celebration of feasting and entertainment. It is a powerful community-building experience infused with spirituality, cultural pride, and *indigenismo* (indigeneity).



Figure 2.16 Closing *palabra* at Cuauhtemoc Ceremony, 2012.

## CHAPTER THREE

### TESTIMONIOS FROM DANZANTES ON THE BLACK AND RED ROAD

In order to honor the alternative knowledge's handed down to us by our ancestors through the use of oral tradition, I made the conscious decision of including *testimonios* (living testimonies) as part of my research. The following *testimonios* offer insight into the lives of contemporary *danzantes*, allowing us to look further into the influence *Danza Azteca* has on its participants by analyzing their lived experiences. The first two *danzantes*, Teotl Goitia and Magdalena Rodríguez (husband and wife), are members and *cabezas* of *Danza Mexica Cuauhtemoc*'s circle in Ventura, California. The third interview comes from Teotl's mother, Mixtli Goitia who started dancing at a young age and is responsible for Teotl having grown up within the tradition of *danza*. She too is a *cabeza* of *Danza Mexica Cuauhtemoc* and offers great insight and knowledge into the world of *danza* and Mesoamerican philosophy.

The third participant, James Tlakatletzin (Firekeeper) Vega, is a well-respected and beloved *temachtiani* (teacher/elder) within the *danza* community. He is a leader and "firekeeper" within the sweat lodge tradition in the Ventura area. *Temachtiani* Tlakaletzin is an independent *danzante*, meaning he is not an official member of any particular group. However, he works closely with all *danza* groups in the area by regularly visiting each group's dance classes and ceremonies where he shares his energy, dances, knowledge, and teachings.

Following each interview, I offer a brief analysis of these *danzantes*' experiences and, more importantly, how *Danza Azteca* has influenced their lives.



## Teotl Goitia



Figure 3.1 (Photo by Marie Gregorio-Oviedo)



Figure 3.2

### 1. What initially drew you to *Danza Azteca*?

*Danza* was introduced into my life when I was very young around the age of three or four years old, when my mom joined a group in Mexico. I was too young to give it much thought at that time, but when I was re-introduced to *danza* at the age of eleven or twelve, the sound of the drum captivated me. Drumming today feels just as powerful and spiritual as the first day I started to drum.

### 2. In what ways, if any, has *danza* shaped or transformed your identity?

I consider myself lucky to say that, since *danza* was weaved into my life from such a young age, *danza* has always been my identity. *Danza* has definitely kept me grounded to my identity and has opened my eyes as to how important it is for this to be passed on to the next generations, most importantly to my own children.

### 3. Why do you feel it is necessary for *Danza Azteca* to exist in our modern world?

*Danza* is extremely important. From a personal perspective, I see it as a platform where one brings all disciplines of one's life to one moment in time including the physical, mental, spiritual, emotional, and social aspects of oneself. From a communal standpoint, *danza* as we practice it, gives the opportunity to all of those who have left their native lands to recuperate a little of what they had to leave behind. It allows mothers, fathers, and kids to have something in common, and it allows the community to regain a sense of

pride in who they really are. Lastly, from a political angle, *danza* represents resistance to the material mentality; it helps remind society that we are still here, and that all indigenous people still struggle for their basic human rights.

4. What purpose does *danza* serve?

*Danza* is incredibly versatile; there are families that may use *danza* as a way to survive and others as a way to stay fit. For me, *danza* is mostly medicinal, whether I am dancing at a corn ceremony, at practice after a long day, or a demonstration against police brutality. *Danza* generates energy, energy that creates healthy change.

5. What responsibilities do you have as a *danzante* within and outside of your *danza* group?

Within the group I carry the overall responsibility of our circle. One of my main responsibilities is that, no matter where or what we are dancing for, we create a positive, healthy, and harmonious environment for anyone who is present. Outside of the circle, all *danzantes* have the responsibility of carrying him/herself with dignity in all aspects of life.

6. Are there specific roles that members are given or earned?

There are many roles and responsibilities that any given *danza* circle will call for, such as drummer, *caracolero*, *copalera*, *bandera/estandarte*, and *primera*, *segunda*, and *tercera cabeza* (first, second, and third in command). I imagine, given the structure of a circle, there could be dozens of roles to be filled. All in all, any roles, tasks, and/or responsibilities should be earned in the form of knowledge, experience, humbleness, and leadership.

7. What are some of the pros and cons of *danza*?

I cannot think of any cons when it comes to *danza*, which is not to say bad things do not happen. When things go negatively, and they occasionally do, it is due to human flaw not principles of *danza*. *Danza* has an endless array of pros. As I mentioned earlier, *danza* will serve virtually any purpose one desires and, if I can put it in a nutshell, I perceive *danza* as a ‘generator of positivity.’

8. What is the importance/meaning of the *traje/arma* to you and the *danza* group as a whole? Please share a little about your own *traje/arma* and its significance. Did you make your *traje/arma*?

I have numerous *trajes* and an “arsenal” of *armas*. Some I have made and some I have purchased. Your *trajes/armas* are very important given that, in most cases, the *traje/arma* speaks of who you are and what you represent. I have some *trajes* with my birth symbols on it. I have another representing the date of my wedding, which contains my birth symbol along with the union of my wife and daughter’s symbols/energies.



9. What/how do you feel when you are dancing?

The diversity of *danza* is incredible. How you feel when you dance may depend on the purpose of why you are there. I may feel strong when dancing for a cause in my community, I feel connected when dancing for a loved one who has died, I feel happy when my son is being bathed in corn, I felt love and support on my wedding day, and, ironically, I can feel energized at practice after a long stressful work day.

10. Other than choreography, what else have you learned through *danza*?

*Danza* has taught me to be responsible for myself and others, how to be a leader, how to organize and motivate, how to resist, how to smile when it hurts, how to be strong when I am tired, how to address difficult social situations, how to be creative, how to think, act, and dance all at once. *Danza* has also taught me how to teach, and how to be humble. *Danza* has taught me that I will never know it all.

11. Have you become politically active because of *danza*? Explain.

Political activism was and has been instilled in me from a young age. Not only has *danza* helped me evolve my own political views, but has also exposed me to many social causes.

As Teotl explains, *danza* has played a very significant role in his life. These traditions are now being celebrated by three generations: his parents, himself and his wife, and their children. *Danza* has given Teotl and his family unique opportunities to mark important life events, such as weddings and baptisms, through *Mexica* rituals. In his years of experience as a *danzante*, he has learned how to dance, drum, teach, lead, decipher the *tonalmatl* (Aztec Sunstone), and understands the meaning of many Nahuatl words, concepts, and sacred symbols. Important to note is his very well developed political and critical consciousness, which fuels his determination and activism in his community.

## Magdalena Rodríguez



Figure 3.3



Figure 3.4

### 1. What initially drew you to *Danza Azteca*?

I was a freshman at UCSB and went to a multicultural event one night. One of the presentations was *Danza Azteca*, and I was changed after that. I remember this feeling of awakening inside my body and mind. The sound of the drum, *caracol*, and *chachayotes* spoke to my heart. I was pretty shy at the time, but I went out of my way to find out who I could contact to get more information on how I could be part of *danza*.

### 2. In what ways, if any, has *danza* shaped or transformed your identity?

Being of biracial descent, *danza* is where I felt at home with myself. *Danza* helped me feel more comfortable with myself, it affirmed my identity. It felt right. It awakened a part of me that was always there, and it allowed me to come out of my shyness. It gave me voice, strength, passion for knowledge, and for community; things that were always there, but *danza* was the path or vehicle in which I was able to express these things.

### 3. Why do you feel it is necessary for *Danza Azteca* to exist in our modern world?

I think *danza* is very important especially in this time of consumerism, capitalism, and individualism. *Danza* teaches connecting oneself to the natural world, something that the American culture is so disconnected from. *Danza* is the connection to ancestors and cultural identity. *Danza* is about community. *Danza* is also cultural awareness and it is also about resistance to oppression, to cultural genocide, and to racism.

4. What purpose does *danza* serve?

I think *danza* can be empowering to individuals and communities. *Danza* is a source of pride. Often, I have seen the community feel humbled and proud to be connected to their culture by having *danza* at their *marcha*,<sup>27</sup> or community meeting, or fundraiser. For me *danza* is also prayer; when you dance, energy is created and that energy can be dedicated to someone or something.

5. What responsibilities do you have as a *danzante* within and outside of your *danza* group?

I am a co-*cabeza* in our *círculo* and I am also the firekeeper<sup>28</sup> for the *círculo*. That means I have a say in decisions made on how the circle is run. And as a firekeeper, I am responsible for keeping the energy ‘in a good way’ making sure the medicines are present and taken care of. As far as outside the circle, I am involved in other grass-roots community organizations that work within the community and in other arenas and offer our help as a *danza* group and individually when the need arises.

6. Are there specific roles that members are given or earned?

There are *cargos* (responsibilities) that can be given to individuals in the group that show they reflect that spirit of the *cargo*, and show commitment and knowledge to carry out the responsibility in a good way. A *cargo* is given to you by a *cabeza* or elder. It is not like running for student body president for example. Some *cargos* are lead dancer, firekeeper, *cabezas*, *bandera* (she who is responsible for the flag in battle), balance keeper, and historian.

7. What are some of the pros and cons of *danza*?

For me the pros include a connection to spirituality that meets my needs as a human and the connection to earth. It lends to my physical and mental health. It is a healthy and meaningful way of life. One con that I see is when *danza* is commercialized and used as a means to make profit. Another con I have seen is that it can create divisions among *danza* groups, which may be caused by different philosophies, difference in opinions, and a way to ‘out dance one another,’ almost like a competition. When it gets to that point, I feel that the meaning of *danza* is lost to those groups or individuals.

8. What is the importance/meaning of the *traje/arma* to you and the *danza* group as a whole? Please share a little about your own *traje/arma* and its significance. Did you make your *traje/arma*?

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<sup>27</sup> *Marcha* is the Spanish word for “march,” a political demonstration or street protest by a large group or collection of people which consists of walking in a mass formation.

<sup>28</sup> The “firekeeper” is the caretaker of *ombligo*/center of the dance circle where an altar is placed consisting of objects representing the four directions/elements and where the *copal* is kept.

A person's first *traje* is white, representing that the person is just starting and is learning the ways of *danza*, but has shown enough commitment to be given a *traje* to wear. *Armas* can include a *sonaja* (rattle), *chachayotes* (seedpod rattles worn around the ankles), a feather fan, *plumas* (feathers) for a headpiece, a shield, and a staff. If a person dances with a *sonaja* they have exemplified that they have learned and demonstrated to the circle that they know how to dance *olin*, which is an offering or permission dance offered to Creator and to the ancestors of the land. If a person dances with *chachayotes*, then they have demonstrated to the group that they can lead four *danzas* and understand the meaning of those *danzas*. If a person has a colored *traje* and feathers for their headpiece, they have demonstrated knowledge of and can lead ten *danzas*. I have earned a *sonaja*, *chachayotes*, and a colored *traje*. I also dance with a feather fan of red-tail hawk tail feathers that I made. For me the red-tail hawk is my spirit guide. In high school I had a dream of flying with hundreds red-tail hawks. During this time in my life I would go to the foothills of the Sierra Nevadas almost every weekend with my mom to visit friends of hers that were building a house on forty acres of land. So, I would go off on my own and sit on the rocks or go for a walk all day and just listen and be out there for hours. Red-tail hawks are plentiful there. Looking back now, that time was when I was most connected to earth and spirit and when I had my most powerful dreams. Since that time, red-tail hawks have always appeared when I pray or at important ceremonies for my family and myself. So I dance with the fan to honor the red-tail hawk and give thanks for that connection. The *trajes* I have made have represented my family, specifically my children. *Danza* is prayer, so having a *traje* representing your children is me praying and giving strength to my children. *Trajes* have spirit, and so the energy I create while dancing with that *traje* has a purpose. I am working on one now that has a geometric design, but very colorful, to represent the beauty of *danza*.

#### 9. What/how do you feel when you are dancing?

When I dance I feel connected to spirit, to the earth, to being human. It is like unplugging yourself from the modern technological world and being a real, true being in the natural world. Feeling and dancing in harmony with the *huehuetl* (drum) is amazing and healing. The energy that I create as well as the energy that is created within the circle is transcending. I give of myself completely. I give all my physical energy and spiritual energy when I dance. I think of the *danza* I am dancing and what it represents. If it represents the eagle, then I become the eagle and mimic the eagle's movements as I dance. I let go of all inhibitions, of ill thoughts, and just let my body go in movement. If I am dedicating a *danza* or my energy for someone or something, then I concentrate on that prayer while I dance.

#### 10. Other than choreography, what else have you learned through *danza*?

I have learned a different kind of discipline, one in which you really think about how you carry yourself in this world and your contributions to this life. I have learned about the creation stories of our ancestors, the significance of the sun calendar and the different calendar systems within the stone, just to name a few things. It has also inspired me to go back to learning how to live organically, like growing my own food and to cook

traditional foods. I have also learned the connection of many modern day Mexican traditions that stem from our ancestors' traditions or concepts.

11. Have you become politically active because of *danza*? Explain.

I grew up in a politically active home so *danza* just added to it. I am specifically proud to be part of a group that feels *danza* can be used as a means to fight the modern day political and racial battles we face. For me, when I dance at a march or political event, I am saying 'I resist your oppression,' 'I am hear with my ancient footsteps with the heartbeat of the earth,' 'you cannot break the circle.' *Danza* is non-violent, but extremely powerful in spirit.

12. Is there anything else you'd like to add?

*Danza* and its values are a way of life for my family and I. It is very important to my husband and I to pass this way of life onto our kids. To instill in them identity, that they are warriors for their community, to think of others, to place value in ancient knowledge, to have a sense of responsibility, to learn cultural ways, to be strong in who they are so that they do not waver in the battles that they will have to fight in life, and so that they make good decisions for themselves when bad influences come their way.

Evident by her *testimonio*, Magdalena reflects a profound knowledge of Nahua concepts, and a deeply spiritual perspective on life. Although she was very shy in her younger years, *danza* prompted the growth and evolution of her inner self as she transformed into a strong *danzante*, a leader within her circle, as well as an activist in her community. She is firm and strong in her belief of the good *danza* has to offer her and her family. Magdalena also demonstrates a strong commitment of preserving and reviving her ancestral roots.

## Mixtli Goitia



Figure 3.5



Figure 3.6 Mixtli with grandson, Tlahuiscál.

### 1. How long have you been dancing? How and why did you become a *danzante*?

I have been dancing for twenty-nine years, and since I was a girl I have always had a great admiration of my indigenous roots and pride in my name. When I lived in Mexico, those who had Nahuatl names were made fun of. During the early 80's, seeing the injustices that were committed against the indigenous artisans in Mexico City, my mother decided to organize a cooperative of indigenous artisan production. In addition, we also visited many communities in the sierras of Guerrero, one of which was Ixcateopan de Cuauhtemoc. During that time, the first procession in commemoration of Cuauhtemoc was being organized in Ixcateopan, where we met painter, sculptor and teacher Estrella Newman who asked me to represent the "tender corn," and from that moment I began to develop my consciousness, not only of *danza* but of everything that represented *Mexica* philosophy. For that reason, I decided to continue as a *Mexica* dancer.

### 2. Briefly share what you know about the history of *danza*.

Aztec dance was a way in which our ancestors secretly kept the organization and order of their communities and native armies in tact after the Spanish conquest. Our ancestors protected themselves within the churches, which were built on indigenous ceremonial temples, and organized guilds dedicated to the preservation of the collective order.

*Danza* was transformed after the Mexican Revolution when leaders from the brotherhood called for native traditional clothing and customs to openly reaffirm the collective order that survived through *danza*. After 1949, when the location of Cuauhtemoc's tomb was revealed, a new

movement began called *Mexicayotl* and *danza* was divided into the *Concheros* and *Mexicayotl*.

Between the 60's and 70's, Florencio Yescas, a *capitán* of *Danza Mexicayotl* from Tacuba, went to work in the U.S. to raise money to establish "The House of the *Danzante*" while also sharing the knowledge and philosophies of some of the eldest *capitanes* of *danza* known today. This is how the new movement of *danza* began in the U.S. Since then, *danza* has grown primarily to fulfill the need of rescuing the identity and pride of our roots.

### 3. How was *Danza Mexica Cuauhtemoc* established?

Around the mid-80's, a caravan from Ixcateopan de Cuauhtemoc, led by Don Salvador Rodríguez, came to the U.S. and met with indigenous *jefes* (leaders) including *jefes* from the Gabrielinos (Shoshones) Nation, Manuel and Vera Rocha who were *capitanes de danza*, to celebrate the first official ceremony in honor of Cuauhtemoc and to open (begin) *danza* in Southern California.

At this ceremony, a symbolic delivery of soil from Ixcateopan was handed to *maestro* Arturo Mireles (Pastel) by Don Salvador Rodríguez Juárez Chimalpopoca, a direct descendant of *tata* Cuauhtemoc. In this way, permission was granted to carry Cuauhtemoc's name and *Danza Mexica Cuauhtemoc* was officially established.

### 4. What do *danzantes* gain from participating in a traditional and political *danza* group such as *Danza Mexica Cuauhtemoc*?

The development of self-sacrifice and self-discipline; mental, physical, political, and cultural.

### 5. Describe how *danza* can be a form of resistance against oppression and marginalization.

Due to the structure of command within our group, we can effectively maintain a resistance for long periods of time. We defend the needs and demands of our communities, taking political action. As *danzantes*, we are obligated to fight for the dignity and humanity of our people through service, discipline and sacrifice. *Danza Mexica Cuauhtemoc* has supported various struggles for social justice, particular to the *Zapatista* solidarity movement.

### 6. What are the major philosophies of *danza*?

*Danza* is a vehicle to lead us to two supreme objectives of the philosophy of Anahuac. Once we are able to domesticate or overcome our individualism, we are able to convert ourselves, and we can become representatives of the collective, in order to reach one of our life's supreme goals, which is to serve others, as in the culture of our ancestors. In serving others, we see them not as simple subjects but as sacred beings, carriers of the essence of the universal generating force. Being aware of the great danger that hovers over the continuation of life on earth (*Tonantzin*), as a living being; of all the living species including human beings.

### 7. What is the purpose/goal of *danza*?



To reach higher levels of consciousness, to purify the body and soul, to venerate and be grateful to the forces that give us life, and to maintain harmony with the earth and the cosmos.

8. Explain the physiological effects *danza* has on the body. How does one learn *Mexica* philosophies through *danza* (through the movement of one's body)?

*Danza Mexica* is a means of energizing the *danzante*'s body and the surrounding space by creating a magnetic field throughout the circle using movement and anthropocosmic dance steps, which generates a biochemical component called endorphins that bio-energizes the *danzante*'s body, making it potent while healing and maintaining it healthy.

9. Share what you know about pre-Cuauhtemoc indigenous forms of body art.

Art was used to establish one's identity and distinction through ceremonial rites by nations, to show unity, rank within a society, and within family structure. Pictorial art was prepared with natural inks that came from insects, plants, fruits, flowers and blood from certain animals. Even in present times, indigenous communities still maintain and use this manifestation of art on gourds, clay, textiles, makeup, and even on the body as forms of expression.

10. In addition to dancing and making/wearing indigenous *trajes*, explain the significance of how body art is used to express an indigenous identity.

The poetic word, ancestral songs, and self-sacrifice are all forms of cultural expression. The writing of the body, as a form of expression, is a language that expresses something in particular. Through the development of symbolic or mythical images on the body, is an encoded language that shapes the fabric of a sacred tradition.

11. Explain how *danzantes* are able to learn about sacred symbols created by their *Mexica* ancestors and how/why they use them on *trajes* or body art.

*Danza*, in general, can be seen as an encyclopedia for learning each ceremony, every move that is made within the circle of *danza*, and symbols that represent animals, forces of nature, the cosmos, or movements made by the human body. From the first day that a person decides to start the path of *danza*, his apprenticeship begins. The symbols and body art of our people are part of our identity. They highlight what we feel and who we are. They are part of our history, destiny, and future. They are part of a destiny written by our ancestors, as indicated on our calendar, the *Tonalpohualli*.

12. What role does art and creativity play in the lives of *danzantes* and why is it so important? How is this connected to *Mexica* philosophies?

Art, creativity, and the philosophy within *danza* are linked with one another and are extremely important. Without them we could not express the meaning of *danza* in its full splendor. They are complementary to one another as if it were a single body that requires having bones, joints, muscles, and skin to be able to function correctly.



13. What role does *danza* play in this world of modernization and globalization for the *Mexica* people of today?

Today, *danza* plays an important role in people from every lifestyle, both in the U.S. and Mexico, and is a reflection of the social reality in which we live. There are people who follow the path of *danza* because they feel lost, confused, are in search of a divine wisdom, and are trying to find themselves. For *danzantes* such as these, *danza* becomes a form of self-sacrifice. On the other hand, there are dancers that develop as warriors, who have dedicated their lives to serving their people, maintaining their foundation with humbleness, determination, consciousness, and wisdom in order to keep the natural order of Mother Earth. In this way we learn not to fall into a lifestyle of excess characterized by the overall global modernization that exists today.



Figure 3.7 Mixtli Goitia with her teacher Estrella Newman, and one of Newman's paintings of a *danzante*.

## James Tlakatletzin Vega



Figure 3.8 James and Joanne Vega  
Photos by Marie Gregorio-Oviedo



Figure 3.9

### 1. What initially drew you to *Danza Azteca*?

The yearning to learn the significance of *danza*, to reconnect with my ancestry, and learn the ways of our *Mexica* ancestors.

### 2. In what ways, if any, has *danza* shaped or transformed your identity?

*Danza* has enriched my identity through the teachings from elders within *danza*; especially learning the knowledge of our ancient count of times, the *tonalmachiotl*, which is referred to as the Aztec calendar system, and is related to our sun's prints. My first introduction to these ways was by Andrés Segura, who was commissioned by his elders to come to the USA and teach the knowledge and customs from the root of our *Mexica* nation. There was a time when the playing of *danza*'s original instruments, such as a drum, or *huehuetl*, were prohibited by the invaders to a point that if these ancient instruments were used within hearing range and/or sight, *danzantes* doing so would result with having their hands cut off by Cortéz's emissaries. Andrés Segura was a traditional *Conchero-danzante* that helped maintain the encoded wisdom, philosophy, songs, and *danza* of our ancient indigenous ancestry. It was through these teachings from Andrés Segura that traditional rituals and original culture, which have existed thousands of years since before the slaughter and invasion of Cortéz, Spaniards, and Europeans, that the meaning of *danza* exists. This includes the philosophy and concept of *mexicayotl*, which stems from the root of the *Mexica* and other indigenous cultures like the *Chichimeca*,

*Olmeca, Tolteca, Totonaca, Maya, Teotihuacana, Azteca, and Zapoteca*. Songs would be conducted with the use of an armadillo shell, a special instrument similar to a guitar. The use of oral tradition helped *Concheros* pass along ancient traditions, rituals, philosophy, psychology, and culture as a tool/strategy to protect and maintain ancient traditions despite the deadly syncretism that was devastatingly executed and was produced by the Roman Catholic Church. What comes to mind when I think about *Concheros y Concheras*, male-female *danzantes* that helped preserve and codify our ancient teachings, are images of martyrdom and of our last spokesperson *Tlahtoani Cuauhtemotzin*, which translates to ‘eagle that descends’ and grand defender of our ancient indigenous nation of *Anahuac* (the four areas of land that were originally surrounded by water).

It was *Temachtiani* Andrés Segura who awakened in me the ‘genetic memory’ of my ancient ancestors when I first smelled *copal*, resin from the sacred *copalli* tree from Mexico, and is considered to contain the spirits of our ancestors. He gave me my first lessons of our ancient culture, which included: *copal*, the sacred sunstone-*tonalmachiotl*, and Nahuatl, the Uto-Aztecan language that has existed from as long ago as the times around Christ’s birth. Nahuatl is currently spoken throughout North and South America, especially along *Aztlan*’s west coast and throughout the fifty states of America, and throughout Mexico’s thirty-one states.

In 1994, modern day *Zapatistas* rose up in the hills of ancient America in Chiapas declaring its indigenous existence in defending our ancient cultures. This was the same year that I met *Conchero temachtiani* Andrés Segura Granados from Mexico, Tenochtitlan. Andrés shared himself through the teachings of hundreds of generations ago. He opened my spirit to absorb the medicine of our ancestors as I saw a plumed cloud of white smoke rise into the morning air as the sun rose in the east like an eagle/*cuauhtli*, and hummingbird/*huitzilin*. When Andrés vocalized in Nahuatl an ancient cosmic and spiritual prayer song *in xochitl in cuicatl*, the flower and the song, he breathed out and brought forth our ancient indigenous medicine and teachings. Furthermore, Andrés activated the ‘bioenergetic’ existence of my mind, body, and spirit. It was as if a serpent’s vibration entered my bioenergetic personhood.

3. Why do you feel it is necessary for *Danza Azteca* to exist in our modern world?

*Danza* is important since it provides physical, mental, spiritual, cosmic and emotional wellbeing. It serves as a tool for healing. It allows for the sense of belonging and camaraderie and includes traveling to various communities and historical sites. *Danza* creates a feeling of connectedness along with a sense of community and empowerment. It increases ones identity and self-esteem, provides cultural enrichment along with ancient knowledge, and makes available opportunities to be involved with communities, families, and with the development of our children and youth. *Danza* also allows for the dissemination of our culture and heritage through presentations, representing, and defending our indigenous nations while expressing our beliefs along with the ability to stand up, defend, and support just causes.

4. What purpose does *danza* serve?

*Danza* can help create balance in a person; physiological, psychological, spiritual/cosmic, and emotional, while creating a form of purification. It also helps to create a more positive environment. *Danzantes* in movement, the concept of *olin*, create fields of positive energies along with the burning of *copal*. *Danza* also serves as a platform to educate the masses about our culture. It also serves as a form of political involvement. Another thing that *danza* serves as is camaraderie and development of friendships and relationships.

5. What responsibilities do you have as a *danzante* within and outside of your *danza* group?

I do not belong to a specific *danza* group. I am an independent *danzante*. However, I have belonged to three *danza* groups in Ventura County. I am thankful that I have developed many friendships in *danza* since 1994 and am allowed to participate at their practices, presentations, and ceremonies. There are several responsibilities that group members have. For example, women may learn and then earn the responsibility of taking care of the sacred fire and *copal*. Another member may be asked to defend and take care of the group as individuals arrive to participate, and includes directing individuals throughout practice or during ceremonies. A collective effort of participation is one of the philosophies of *danza*. Other responsibilities are to learn about our ancient culture, learn how to obtain an interpretation of a person's birth identity or *tonalli*. Members are required to learn dance steps and earn items that are used as part of this ancient custom and ritual. Participants are to be cognizant of the arrival time and other protocols associated within and outside of a *danza* group. To enter and exit a dance circle has a specific protocol. Drummers are to follow the steps of each individual dancer. Walking in a direction to the left is required. While a dance practice is completed or after a ceremony, it is important to be extra observant and quiet as others speak and only speaking when someone asks you to do so. It is also important to be acknowledged before speaking. Most dance groups require its members to help, or serve, in some capacity in a dance group, during practice, and for a ceremony. Another responsibility stems around having proper behavior inside and outside of the group. Some dance groups do not allow any of their members to learn or practice nor attend dance presentations with other *danza* groups.

6. Are there specific roles that members are given or earned?

Yes, specific roles are given and earned. Most of the time, designated roles are given to group members, especially if a group is the host of an event or presentation. However, sometimes roles are given to *danzantes* from outside the host group if there is an issue or concern that inhibits the host group's lead *danzantes* from carrying out *cargos*. Also, if there is an unexpected emergency that would keep *cabezas* from leading a dance presentation, any group member may be asked to represent, lead, or conduct a practice or actual ceremony. Another example is that a group member may have to fulfill the responsibility of leading dance practice. Someone else might be asked to keep the history

of the group. Roles and even the items a group member wears are earned.

7. What are some of the pros and cons of *danza*?

Pros provide the ability to have a sense of belonging, increase self-esteem, and help create harmony. Learning about our ancient culture is another pro. *Danza* provides an opportunity to purify and heal our mind, body, and spirit. It allows for relationships to develop. The ability to define one's identity through the ancient calculation of their birth symbols is another positive aspect of *danza* that allows *danzantes* to learn much about themselves through an indigenous perspective. Cons include not having unity or conformity within a group, personality conflicts or egocentrics, jealousies, and gossip, which create dissention. Also, *danza* could become an addiction if it takes away from or interferes with a group member's responsibilities at home. Sometimes the person or persons in charge of a group and/or group members could cause friction in a group. Sometimes a dance group could mainly focus on the aspect of the dances and leave out the dissemination of cultural/historical and/or the actual meaning of the dances. There are many groups that do this more often than not.

8. What is the importance/meaning of the *traje/arma* to you and the *danza* group as a whole? Please share a little about your own *traje/arma* and its significance.

To me a *traje*, or regalia, represents who I am according to the day that I was born. I am upholding our ancient traditions that our ancient relatives died for. My *traje* is an extension of my psyche. It also represents the earning of my regalia along with an expression of cultural pride. My regalia reflects my birth identity. It includes: a condor/*kozakauauhtli* (eagle with a collar), and represents the recycling of thoughts and the conservation and recycling of items and not being wasteful. Another birth symbol is the obsidian butterfly/*itzpapalotl*, which signifies constant metamorphosis. I have aspects of a person with the willingness and strength like that of a hummingbird from the left/*huitzilopochtli*, like the sun returning from its most southern left side. My regalia also depicts the fire serpent/*xiuhcoatl*, which relates to fire and a desire to learn and of being a learned individual '*quetzalcoatl*.' Colors also represent the sun and its solar energy along with wisdom. It also has symbols of fire and water and of a staff holder that leads the way. I have a couple of headdresses. One reflects Motecuhzomah Xocoyotzin, and the other Cuauhtemotzin, who were spokespersons of our ancient culture.

9. What/how do you feel when you are dancing?

When I dance I feel pain in my muscles along with sweat. After a while, I transcend and begin to feel lighter as if transforming into a winged entity. I feel pride while meditating. I feel stronger and happier. I feel like I am living the dream of our ancient ancestors, the *Mexica*. Besides what I feel, I also think about the struggles and individuals that I keep in my heart. I sometimes think of my deceased relatives which include my mother, father, niece, grandma, grandpa, relatives, and especially my oldest son, Anthony 'DJ Speedy' Vega, who became an Aztec drummer while in elementary school, and despite being born with all odds against him due to many physical and physiological handicaps, he was a

very strong, determined, and gifted drummer.

10. Other than choreography, what else have you learned through *danza*?

I have learned to adapt to the group dynamics and personalities of each group and its instructors. I have learned and continue to learn Nahuatl, gather information from the ancient codices, *Mexica* philosophy, and cosmic spirituality (cosmology). I have also learned how to interpret and determine a person's identity, gifts, characteristics, and potentials they receive at birth through the sunstone - *tonalmachiotl*.

11. Have you become politically active because of *danza*? Explain.

I have been politically active and a community activist since before participating in Aztec dance. However, by participating in Aztec dance, I have had more opportunities of political involvement and activism. For example, I have been participating with the protection of the 'Cradle of Aztlan' in Blythe, California helping *Temachtiani* Alfredo Figueroa by helping to prevent solar companies from further damaging our sacred intaglio sites.

This rich exploration of *Danza Azteca* and all its elements from James Tlakatletzin Vega, is a true gift and huge contribution to my work. As evident, *temachtiani* Tlakatletzin comes from a long line of *danzantes* who have learned the ways of our ancestors through oral tradition. This short synopsis of *temachtiani* Tlakatletzin's *vivencias* (lived experiences) does not do justice to the immense amount of knowledge that he has inherited. Being that he learned under the direction of *temachtiani* Andrés Segura, this piece ties in nicely to the historical steps and contributions that *temachtiani* Andrés Segura offered to Chicanas/os in the U.S. Because of Segura's dedication to reviving and preserving our indigenous heritage, he was able to ensure that there would be future generations of knowledgeable teachers such as *temachtiani* Tlakatletzin to continue this legacy and priceless labor of love.

## CHAPTER FOUR

### TOLTECAYOTL: THE ROLE OF ART AS A FORM OF HEALING AND EMPOWERMENT

#### **In Xochitl In Cuicatl**

The *toltecayotl* (art) of the Nahuatl people came in many forms including music, dance, poetry, pottery, textiles, jewelry, feather mosaics, murals, architecture, and *amoxтли* (books). For the purpose of this study, art in general, and the function it served within Nahuatl society, is analyzed to better understand the profound significance Mesoamerican metaphors and symbols convey for contemporary *danzantes*. To gain a deeper understanding of the Nahuas' concept of art, it is important to distinguish the difference between a symbol and a metaphor: a symbol can be an image or an object that associates two things and can have both literal and figurative meanings that can suggest something deeper; while metaphors are comparisons between two ostensibly different things. For instance, a metaphor might read, "Her life was a tree that had just lost its leaves," while the symbol might be the tree itself representing the cycle of death and rebirth through the loss and growth of leaves.

The Nahuatl people believed that through metaphor and symbol,<sup>29</sup> by means of "poetry and truth," one could become a *yolteotl*, one with "a heart rooted in the divine," which obtained all the symbolism and creative force of the Nahuatl religion (León-Portilla, *Aztec Thought* 172). This concept can be better understood by analyzing the term *yolteotl*, which is composed of two nouns, *teotl* meaning God or "Creator," and

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<sup>29</sup> In Nahua thought, the arts were used as metaphor to represent the cosmic creativity that shapes and maintains life. For example the notion of "flower and song" is a metaphor for poetry. Symbols are the visual representations of these metaphorical ideas.

*yollotl* meaning heart. *Yollotl* contains the root word *olin*, meaning “movement” or “energy.” The term *yolteotl* can thus be understood as “creative energy” (Herrera). In Nahuatl thought, because producing and “creating” artistic metaphors and symbols leads to the development of a “heart rooted in the divine,” artists and poets were referred to as *yolteteoh*.<sup>30</sup>

*In xochitl in cuicatl*, meaning “flower and song,” is a metaphor that stands for “poetry,” “art,” and “symbolism” (León-Portilla, *Fifteen Poets* 54). Sound scrolls coming out from mouths of priests and other personages, can be found in indigenous books and murals, representing the spoken word. Some of these sound scroll symbols are more complex with flowers affixed around the edges to symbolize the “flowery words” that were sung or recited as poems (León-Portilla, *Fifteen Poets* 3). The use of the expression “*in xochitl in cuicatl*” was used specifically to refer to the composing and reciting of poetry and song (which included the use of instruments, dance, and costume), and generally to refer to creative and artistic activity (like creating metaphorical images/symbols, poetry, and painting/writing) (Figueroa and Harding 73).

The Nahuas believed that poetry “enraptures man,” and that by intensifying his emotions and perceptions, it enables him to perceive what he ordinarily would not, and that only he who comes under such divine influence is able to speak of “truth on earth” (León-Portilla, *Aztec Thought* 77). Miguel León-Portilla argues that in their quest for truth, the *tlamatinimeh* concluded that “the only truth on earth” was poetry – “song and flowers,” that was produced as a result of poets and artists having had “conversed with their hearts” (*Aztec Thought* 75).

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<sup>30</sup> *Yolteteoh* is the plural form of *yolteotl*.



It is important to keep in mind that in Nahua thought “poetry” also refers to song, dance, music, and painting. As an artist working towards attaining “truth,” one could gain an understanding of the meaning of life and one’s purpose on earth, a difficult task to achieve. The Nahuatl word for “truth,” *neltiliztli*, shares the stem *nel* (of *nelli* meaning true) with the terms *nelhuatl*, meaning “root,” and *nelhuayotl*, (*nel*=true, *hua*=that which has, *yotl*=abstract suffix) meaning “that which has truth” (Herrera). *Nel* has the connotation of “solid firmness” or “deeply rooted.” In essence, “truth” for the Nahuas represented well-grounded stability, or “one grounded in the truth,” a “true” person. Becoming a “true” person was the lifelong goal of artists.



Figure 4.1 Sound scroll on the right with flower on top symbolizes song/music (Plate 2 of the Codex Borbonicus).

The Nahuas felt that poetry could be produced by tapping in to one’s *facultad*,<sup>31</sup> or intuition, which required one to delve deep into the inner self and converse with the heart. Similar to Gloria Anzaldúa’s argument that *la facultad* is a form of knowledge,

<sup>31</sup> *La facultad* can be referred to as “intuition” or “an inherent mental or physical power.”

Miguel León-Portilla summarizes how the use of one's intuition as a type of knowledge was critical in composing poetry for the Nahuas:

True poetry derives from a peculiar type of knowledge, the fruit of authentic inner experience, the result of intuition. Poetry is, then, a creative and profound expression, which, through symbol and metaphor, allows man to discover himself and then to talk about what he has intuitively and mysteriously perceived. (*Fifteen Poets* 76)

Because poets were considered to be true masters of the word, they were addressed as *tlamatini*, "one who knows." This "knowing" was achieved through meditation and *la facultad*, which would then allow one to produce and create poetry, song, music, and art that could communicate the mysteries of humanity on earth, the beyond, and the divine (*Fifteen Poets* 70).

One of the most well known Nahua poets was, and still is, Nezahualcoyotl who was a *tlahtoani* (ruler) of Tezcoco and counselor to the *Mexica* of Tenochtitlan (*Fifteen Poets* 70). León-Portilla points out that although other *tlamatinimeh* were also rulers with power equal to or even greater than that of Nezahualcoyotl, they never achieved his level of prestige as a "master of things both human and divine" (*Fifteen Poets* 71). As a result, other poets/*tlamatinimeh* expressed words of praise demonstrating an appreciation of Nezahualcoyotl's profound wisdom. The following poem from the Culhuacan region demonstrates such praise:

On a mat of flowers  
you paint your songs, your word,  
prince Nezahualcoyotl.  
Your heart is in the painting,  
with flowers of all colors  
you paint your songs, your word,

prince Nezahualcoyotl. (qtd. in León Portilla, *Fifteen Poets* 71)

Taking into account that flowers metaphorically represent “truth” and songs represent “poetry,” the words in this poem are profound as Nezahualcoyotl is depicted as “painting songs” onto a “mat of flowers.” The art that is produced is considered to be a reflection of Nezahualcoyotl’s heart, or divinized heart, a *yolteotl*.

The following poem gives us a glimpse into Nezahualcoyotl’s wisdom and conception of the Giver of Life:

With flowers You paint,  
O Giver of Life!  
With songs You give color,  
with songs You shade  
those who will live on the earth.  
Later You will destroy eagles and tigers:  
we live only in Your painting  
here, on the earth.

With black ink You will blot out  
all that was friendship,  
brotherhood, nobility.

You give shading  
to those who will live on the earth.  
We live only in Your book of paintings,  
here on the earth. (qtd. in León Portilla, *Fifteen Poets* 83)

In this metaphorical poem, Nezahualcoyotl reveals the Nahua’s belief that the Creator and Giver of Life “paints” life on earth, and that humanity “lives” in Creator’s “book of paintings.” The universe was thought to be Creator’s *amoxtl*i and *in xochitl in cuicatl*, expressed through a continual work of art, visual and performance (Figuerola and Harding 73). Hence, when conversing with one’s heart to create art, artists follow in Creator’s footsteps in their attempt to produce their own *in xochitl in cuicatl* and representations of life.

*In xochitl in cuicatl, tilli tlapalli* (the black and red ink) is a *difrasismo*, or dualistic term composed of two nouns. The Nahuatl people were strongly inclined to conceive in dualistic terms; when wanting to express an idea with maximum clarity and precision, they isolated two of that idea's qualities. This use of language enabled the Nahuas to turn abstract mental images into concrete ideas that were vigorous, dynamic, and rich in meaning. The *difrasismo* "*tilli tlapalli*" refers to the black and red ink used to paint symbols and metaphors in their *amoxtli*. These two colors symbolized *escritura y sabiduría* (writing and wisdom). Like the poet, the painter-writer was also considered to be a *tlamatini* as well as a *yolteotl*.

The *tlahcuiloh* (painter) was very important in Nahuatl culture because it was he who painted the *amoxtli* with black and red ink. The process of writing and creating art entailed the contemplation over the traditions and doctrines of the people's religion and philosophy (or worldview) so that the artist may become "divinely inspired" and create works that were rooted in God and in truth (León-Portilla, *Aztec Thought* 175). Through this process the *tlahcuiloh* had to learn how to converse with his heart, and became a *yolteotl* (León-Portilla, *Aztec Thought* 172). Using information provided by native informants in Bernardino de Sahagún's work, Miguel León-Portilla further explains:

The artist would emerge as a man able 'to communicate with his own heart (*moyolnonotzani*),' who ponders over the ancient myths, the traditions, and the great doctrines of his religion and philosophy. By communicating with his own heart, he discovers and activates his potential destiny; he is divinely inspired, he is transformed into a *yolteotl*, and has become a visionary, eager to transmit to objects his divine inspiration. He may choose the *amatl* paper of the [*amoxtli*], the

surface of a wall, precious metals, plumes, or clay as the material for his art and symbol. With these soulless substances he devises a metaphor, *in xochitl in cuicatl*, or ‘flower and song.’ Thus, the artist permits the people to see and to ‘read’ on the stone, on the walls, and in all works of art a meaning for their lives on earth. (*Aztec Thought* 175)

Here, the Nahua native informants explain that the artist used soulless (or lifeless) materials like paper or the surface of a wall, to create “flower and song,” producing art that is infused with symbolic and metaphorical representations of life and truth. For example, in creating an *amoxtli*, a *tlahcuiloh* used ordinary *amatl* paper to paint images related to calendrical, astronomical, ritual and divinatory matters that gave meaning to their lives on earth. Understanding that art and symbolism created by a *tlahcuiloh* who, in order to be a true *tlahcuiloh* must have also become a *yolteotl* by conversing with his heart, the art created represented the truth and was, in turn, divine.



Figure 4.2 The four directions with plumed serpents and deities (Codex Borgia 6).

## Contemporary Interpretations of Pre-Cuauhtemoc Art

Through the participation in traditional Aztec dance, *danzantes* are exposed to and gain knowledge of symbols, metaphors, information in *amoxtli*, and Nahuatl philosophical concepts in relation to the notion of *in xochitl in cuicatl*. Having a profound grasp of this concept, *danzantes*' choosing of particular symbols for their *trajes* and tattoo designs, illustrates their yearning for truth and understanding of their existence and purpose on earth as indigenous peoples.

Alex Grey poses a powerful question, "Is art merely the fashionable expression of artists' egos and a reflection of the world they live in, or can art become a healing path that reveals the beauty and holiness of ourselves and our world, projecting an ideal of what we and our wounded world may become?" (qtd. in L. Pérez 122). Just as the Aztecs believed that art was a divine representation of truth, which carries a healing element, the Chicanas/os of the Chicano Civil Rights Movement also called for healing through the arts. Inez Tovar Avila offers her interpretation of how the Nahuatl concepts of *yolteotl*, *in ixtli in yollotl*, and *in xochitl in cuicatl* are represented in the work produced by contemporary *tlahcuilo*hs (Chicana/o artists):

*Ollin* [sic] – movement, *yollotl* – heart, *yolteotl* – inspired heart, *in ixtli in yollotl* – face and heart, *in xochitl in cuicatl* – flower and song... To arrive at what is original to us as a people, to recover as people our faces and hearts, as the ancient *tlamatinimeh* said. To resist profoundly the annihilation of our culture – that is what we have wanted to achieve as Chicano artists, that is our work and our desire. (qtd. in Herrera-Sobek 40)

Here, Avila beautifully illustrates the importance of embracing Nahua philosophies and concepts of art to resist cultural genocide and revive the Chicano's indigenous identity.

It was during the Chicano Movement of the 1960s and 1970s that Chicana and Chicano artists became "visual articulators of the movement's political agenda" (Romo 23). One of the goals of the movement was to empower the Chicana/o community by celebrating and honoring its cultural heritage through the arts, including visual and performance art (Romo 23). The art that affirmed their Mexican cultural heritage often integrated pre-Cuauhtemoc symbols (Romo 23). During this dynamic time, Chicanas/os returned to the past in order to invigorate the future. Professor of Chicana/o Studies, María Herrera Sobek adds, "The gods and goddesses of antiquity acquired new meaning and new energy within Chicano politics and cultural expressions" (xix). As a literary critic and folklore scholar, Herrera frequently points out how Chicana/o creativity is nurtured by their ancient traditions in order to re-envision history, art, poetics, and political ideologies. Herrera argues that the Chicanos' shared heritage and unity is what will help construct a better future in which social justice is a reality and not merely a figment of the imagination (xx).

In her analysis of Chicana art, Tere Romo concludes that, in the course of their artistic explorations, Chicanas have developed their own visual language of cultural resistance and personal transformation (25). She adds that, for Chicana artists, there is no distinction between the importance of art in personal and community survival. Romo argues that when a Chicana artist expresses her vision, she brings visibility not only to herself as an artist, but also to the community that she represents (25).

The following visual is a painting entitled “*Cihuateteo con Coyolxauqui y La Guadalupana*,” by Chicana artist Santa Barraza. This image illustrates the expression of self and community as Santa Barraza represents not only her own indigenous roots and *mestizaje*,<sup>32</sup> but also that of the Chicana/o community. In this image we see Mesoamerican symbols like that of Coyolxauqui, as well as Catholic symbols like the angel, and a fusion of both European and Nahua religion represented by *La Virgen de Guadalupe*. Barraza’s painting is a visual and cultural expression that pays homage to the *cihuateteoh* (spirits of women who died in childbirth) (30). Also of significance are the tattoos on Cihuateteo reflecting the use of body art used in pre-Cuauhtemoc times.



Figure 4.3 Santa Barraza, *Cihuateteo con Coyolxauqui y La Guadalupana*, 1996 (Santa Barraza, plate 12).

Santa Barraza articulates that her “artwork becomes a manifestation of a struggle to create a new American identity, affirming cultural congestion and survival,” as she expresses her “experience as a *Mexica Tejana*, and Chicana, occupying, interpreting,

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<sup>32</sup> *Mestizaje* is a term used to describe the fusion between indigenous and European cultures.



defining, and living in a unique space of disassociation of identity, enriched with culture and legends" ([www.serieproject.org](http://www.serieproject.org)).

The following image illustrates a painting created by Chicana artist Yreina Cervantes, entitled *Big Baby Balam*. In this self-portrait, Cervantez puts on display the recognition and reality of her indigenous roots through the use of facial tattoo patterns inspired by pre-Cuauhtemoc Olmeca masks (See Fig. 5.13). In Cervantez's words:

The painting *Big Baby Balam*, the jaguar scribe (see symbol on hand) makes reference to the connection to the ancestors, memory, embodied knowledge and transformation. The facial tattoos /symbols are inspired by Olmeca masks and iconography representing rain, maize, regeneration and of course again the jaguar, known as Tepeyollotl the "heart of the mountain." (Personal communication)

Through her description and artistic expression, Cervantez exhibits the connection and *conocimiento* she has of her ancestral roots. The implication presented by this painting is yet another example that reflects the revival of indigenous knowledge and Mesoamerican body art within contemporary Chicana/o communities, which are used as a way to develop and express the acknowledgement of their indigenous heritage.

As seen with Chicana/o artists, by reclaiming the Nahuatl concept of the universe and transforming it into contemporary spirituality, *danzantes* also create artistic spaces that unify personal healing with cultural resistance. In learning the significance of and displaying an array of symbolism on their *trajes*, body art, and *danzas*, *danzantes* play a crucial creative role in putting their ensemble of artistic and indigenous expression together. In their expressive act of dancing and wearing Mesoamerican art, they are not only representing themselves as indigenous people, but are also representing their

communities and ancestors. In this way, *danzantes* are able to begin the healing process through cultural resistance.



Figure 4.4 Yreina Cervantez, *Big Baby Balam*, 2000. Watercolor 24x18 inches. Collection of the artist.

In *Decolonizing Methodologies*, Maori scholar Linda T. Smith argues that creating is not just about artistic endeavors of individuals, but about the spirit of creating (158). The spirit of creating and using one's imagination enables people to rise above their own circumstances, to think of new forms of expression or new inventions while holding one to old ones. For example, *danzantes* may not have access to the same materials used to create *trajes* exactly the way they were made before colonization, like quetzal feathers and fabrics made of maguey fiber. However, they find new ways to recreate dance regalia in a way that pays homage to pre-Cuauhtemoc attire by using materials that are available to them like pheasant and macaw feathers, as well as various

types of fabric. In this way, *danzantes* overcome the loss of resources as a result of colonization, and are able create *trajes* similar to that of their ancestors.

Smith believes that imagination enables people to rise above their own circumstances, and foster inventions and discoveries that facilitate improvements to people's lives and uplift spirits (158). The way in which *danzantes* discover and apply new ways to create *trajes* or to revive pre-Cuauhtemoc *danzas* shows that creating is about channeling collective creativity in order to produce solutions to indigenous populations (Smith 158). Similarly, Frantz Fanon expresses, "By imparting new meaning and dynamism to artisanship, dance, music, literature, and the oral epic, the colonized subject restructures his own perception...the world no longer seems doomed" (176). Paulo Freire adds, "radicalization, nourished by a creative spirit, is always creative" (37). Likewise, Gloria Anzaldúa argues that *conocimiento* (consciousness) is reached through creative acts, such as writing, art-making, dancing, healing, teaching, meditation, and spiritual activism – both mental and somatic, since the body is also a form and a site of creativity (*This Bridge* 542).

As we have seen throughout the history of colonization, we must be aware of oppressive strategies meant to inhibit our creativity. For instance, if we examine the current "banking" concept of education, we can come to the conclusion that it is designed to inhibit our creativeness and critical thinking skills, which keeps the colonized oppressed (Freire 77). As explicated by Freire:

The banking system of education, which serves the interests of oppression, is also necrophilic. Based on a mechanistic, static, naturalistic, spatialized view of consciousness, it transforms students into 'receiving objects.' It attempts to

control thinking and action, leads women and men to adjust to the world, and inhibits their creative power.” (77)

Thus, Freire urges the colonized community to recognize and overcome this oppressive strategy by encouraging the colonized to engage in creative action and argues that “cultural revolution” is “the revolutionary regime’s maximum effort” at *conscientização* (critical consciousness) (158).

The reclamation of Chicana/o consciousness has been captured within Chicana/o art and scholarship since the onset of the Chicano Movement. Critical information of the Nahuas’ concept of art in Miguel León-Portilla’s work has been a motivating factor in Chicana/o artists’ and other intellectuals’ attempts to reintegrate the indigenous into their expressed identities (L. Pérez 26). Chicana/o artists have embraced the Nahuas’ concepts of the *tlahcuiloh* (painter/scribe) and *tlamatimeh* (scholars-sages-scientists) in their reimagining of writers, visual artists, and performance artists as “glyph-makers,” that is, according to Pérez, “makers of signs that point beyond themselves, to significations that are spiritually and politically interdependent and simultaneous, and that hold ancient but relevant alternative knowledge’s”<sup>33</sup> (27).

Since dance is an art form, *danzantes* fit into the category of being artists or *toltecatls*, derived from the word Toltecs, whom the Aztecs highly regarded as artists and *ylteotls*. They are also *tlahcuilohs* because, in conformity with the Nahua notion of art and its ability to connect people to the divine, *danzantes* are highly encouraged and expected to design, create, and make their own regalia and *armas* (Rostas 124).

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<sup>33</sup> Here, alternative knowledge refers to knowledge not produced or influenced by Western or Eurocentric perspectives, such as the Nahuas’ knowledge and concept of cosmology, religion, art, etc. The use of the term “alternative” to describe indigenous knowledge is problematic because it implies that the standard against which everything should be measured is western European (Herrera).

As an active member of the *danza* community, I have seen an increasing number of *danzantes* inscribe sacred Mesoamerican symbols onto their very skins as tattoos, taking their creative expressions to another level. Inspired by Mesoamerican art and symbolism, *danzantes* must also become *tlamatinime* (one who knows) in order to decipher and understand the numerous Aztec symbols created by the *tlahcuiloh* and *yolteteoh* of the past. This includes recognizing and understanding the significance of symbols incorporated within the *tonalamatl* (Aztec book of days), which then enables *danzantes* to derive meaning from their birth symbols that are often times included in the design of their regalia (Rostas 124) and tattoos. Throughout their participation in *Danza Azteca*, *danzantes* acquire intellectual affirmation of indigenous epistemologies<sup>34</sup> that characterize the aesthetics of their *indigenismo*.

During dance ceremonies, which are often in the public's view, *danzantes* play a crucial role in preserving and displaying sacred images to each other as well as to the community at large. Such images are those that were created by pre-Cuauhtemoc *yolteotls*, and are considered to be sacred because they were inspired by the divine, and represent truth. By exhibiting Mesoamerican images on *trajes* and even on their skin, contemporary *danzantes* revive ancient traditions of dress and body adornment while reclaiming an indigenous identity.

Reclaiming and displaying these sacred images is a form of resistance against the attempted eradication of the Nahuatl culture by the Spanish colonizers, and from the marginalization of the Chicano's indigenous roots still evident today. As more and more Chicanas/os become connected to their indigenous past, greater possibilities for

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<sup>34</sup> Indigenous ways of acquiring knowledge, such as knowledge attained through the movements performed in *Danza Azteca*.

Mesoamerican images to emerge from the ashes also surface. The process of this continued cultural revival and evolution aids in the healing of the community and of the self.



Figure 4.5 *Traje* with Mesoamerican image of Mictlantecuhltli.



Figure 4.6 *Danzante* with gauged ears, pierced septum, and various tattoos.

Chicana scholar Laura E. Pérez refers to the healing capabilities of “spirit glyphs,”<sup>35</sup> rooted in pre-Cuauhtemoc art, as an example of how “*la cultura cura*” (culture cures) (30). In defining “spirit glyphs” Laura E. Pérez explains:

The notion of the spiritual with reference to Chicana writing and visual art, derives its inspiration primarily from Mesoamerican, other American Indian, African diasporic, and feminist critiques of traditional religiosities emphasizing

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<sup>35</sup> Although the term “glyph” does not accurately define the symbols and artistic expressions of the Nahuatl people, I am using them here strictly in reference to Laura E. Pérez’s use of the term.

the belief that there exists an essential spiritual nature, and thus and interconnectedness, of all beings, human and nonhuman. (18)

Like the work produced by Chicana artists, *danzantes* derive their inspiration from Mesoamerican art when creating designs for *trajes* and body art. These designs are rooted in the divine and deemed spiritual. The connection to these “spirit glyphs” can be healing for Chicanas and Chicanos.

Art reflecting pre-Cuauhtemoc realities can cure “cultural *susto*” (cultural fright sickness), which is rooted in the post-Cuauhtemoc condition of cultural fragmentation and social indeterminacy (30). As argued by Pérez:

Conjuring and reimagining traditions of spiritual belief, traditions whose cultural differences have been used by discourses of civilization and modernization to justify subjugation and devaluation, are conscious acts of healing the cultural *susto*: that is, the frightening of the spirit from one’s body-mind in the colonial and neocolonial ordeals, the result of the ‘in-between’ state of *nepantla*,<sup>36</sup> the post-conquest condition of cultural fragmentation and social indeterminacy. (21)

Pérez explains that these conscious acts are vital in the process towards decolonization as they work towards reintegrating the psyche, which was fragmented by the internalization of self-hatred and rejection of the native self (21). Thus, embracing our cultural heritage and indigenous past is *cualli pahtli* (good medicine).

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<sup>36</sup> In Nahuatl, the term *nepantlah* means “in the middle of.” Like Gloria Anzaldúa, Laura E. Pérez refers to this term as the “in-between” state Chicanas and Chicanos experience as people living “in-between” borders, cultures, languages, etc.

## CHAPTER FIVE

### RECLAIMING THE BROWN BODY: EMBODIMENT OF INDIGENOUS KNOWLEDGE

It is my hypothesis that one way in which *danzantes* resist assimilation and marginalization is by taking on an indigenous aesthetic. For example, many *danzantes* grow their hair long, often dress with indigenous clothing, tattoo indigenous symbols on their bodies, and even gauge their ears and pierce their noses. The very act of participating in *Danza Azteca*, which was once forbidden and punishable by death, is significant because *danzantes* regain indigenous forms of knowledge specific to their Mesoamerican ancestors.

Forms of indigenous knowledge may include, for example, concepts of art, religion, political and social organization, philosophy, and understanding the natural world and cosmology through the body's senses and through the kinesthetic movements of *Danza Azteca*. *Danzantes* acquire a profound understanding of ancient sacred symbols, which they apply in the design of their *trajes* (regalia), and body art. In this study, I explore how *danzantes* utilize Mesoamerican symbols to reconnect with and express their indigenous identities, and conclude that by doing so they resist assimilation, marginalization and Western misinterpretations of their cultural heritage.

#### **Embodied Recuperations**

The struggle towards liberation and reconnection to one's *indigenismo* can powerfully and effectively be exhibited on one's body. Embracing one's *indigenismo* and displaying it on the body for the world to see, is not only an aesthetic reaffirmation of



one's indigenous roots, but also puts on exhibit the history of subjugation, survival, and reclamation of the brown body. To do this, individuals must dig deep into the historical pages of their people's magnificent and painful past. Peter McLaren argues that, "the body is a site of struggle that carries its own history of oppression, leaving a residue of domination preserved in its tissue (69). Peter McLaren further explains that:

The body is conceived as the interface of the individual and society, as a site of embodied or 'enfleshed' subjectivity, which also reflects the ideological sedimentations of the social structure inscribed into it...The body is 'zoned and inscribed' in ways which have important implications for subjectivity. The issue here is to recognize and redress the discursive conditions under which women, minorities, and other groups are demonized by patriarchy and the social relations of capital so that their presence as racial, cultural, and gendered subjects are effectively struck out of the archives and current narratives of history...We do not simply exist as bodies; we have bodies – not just because we are born in them, but because we learn our bodies, that is, we are taught how to think and experience them...We are not just male or female bodies, but African-American bodies, White bodies, Chicano bodies, Jewish bodies, Italian bodies, Mexican bodies, and so on (69).

Just as subjectivity and repression have been inscribed onto the brown body, it is through the body that we can reject, reimagine, and rewrite our own histories and realities. McLaren makes a strong argument in establishing the notion of using the empowered body to "siege the stage of history:"

I am speaking here about a praxis in which the knowing subject is an acting body/subject, a praxis which can empower us to take responsibility for history and for developing a vision of the world which is not yet. This is not to deny the historicism of praxis but to embrace it more fully with a recognition that even in these postmodern times we are capable of seizing the stage of history in the unity of thinking and doing, and bringing forth a new world at the command of our voices and with the strength of our own hands. The prerequisite for such an enterprise lies in reclaiming the body and in formulating strategies of opposition whose primary referent consists of new ways of thematizing knowledge and subjectivity in relation to the body. (77)

According to McLaren's theory, we have the capability of changing our realities of subjectivity by reclaiming our bodies. In doing so, we must also understand that we can embody knowledge<sup>37</sup> by learning from and through our bodies.

An example of embodied knowledge can be illustrated by *danzantes*' ability to gain knowledge of dance steps and choreography through the body. It may be difficult, for instance, for a *danzante* to recollect or articulate the movements or steps of a *danza* until he or she actually performs the steps, which aids in explaining and teaching them verbally. Also, through the movements of dance steps, *danzantes* come to learn about natural phenomenon and philosophies of Nahuatl cosmology, like the growing of crops or the movement of the cosmos, which are represented by specific dance steps or dance formations.

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<sup>37</sup> Embodied knowledge can be defined as "routines, habits, tasks and information our bodies 'understand' without conscious thought."

Like many other forms of indigenous knowledge, the notion of embodied knowledge has been suppressed and invalidated by Western thought. According to seventeenth century French philosopher René Descartes, who is most famous for his belief “I think, therefore I am,” wrote “my mind, by which I am what I am, is entirely and truly distinct from my body, and may exist without it” (Harris). The idea that the mind and the body are separate has been very influential in Western thought and has helped encourage the notion that knowledge is something that is only in the mind, and therefore, according to Descartes, cannot exist in the body (Harris).



Figure 5.1 Here *danzantes* are marking the four cardinal directions with their feet, as they embody an understanding of the *Nahua* concept of earth and the four sacred directions.



Figure 5.2 The elevated arm and leg movements are representations of the sun and/or sunrays.

Gloria Anzaldúa argues that we have been taught that the body is an “ignorant animal” and that intelligence “dwells only in the head” (*Borderlands* 37). Anzaldúa offers a vivid example to help us understand the importance of listening to our bodies so that we may grow and heal. For instance, Anzaldúa tells us that, although painful, feeling depression is useful because “it signals that you need to make changes in your life, it challenges your tendency to withdraw, it reminds you to take action,” and further argues that “to reclaim your body consciousness *tienes que moverte*; go for walks, *salir a conocer el mundo*, engage with your world,” and I would argue, to dance and to be creative (*This Bridge* 553). It is within our “mindbodysoul” where transformation takes

place, which must be more than just intellectual; it must also come from the body (Anzaldúa, *This Bridge* 553). Anzaldúa illustrates:

Escaping the illusion of isolation, you prod yourself to get out of bed, clean your house, then yourself. You light a *La Virgen de Guadalupe* candle and *copal*, and, with a bundle of *yierbitas* [sic], brush the smoke down your body, sweeping away the pain, grief, and fear of the past that's been stalking you, severing the cords binding you to it. (*This Bridge* 554)

Anzaldúa argues that we are witnessing a major cultural shift in the understanding of what knowledge consists of and how we acquire knowledge, a shift from the kinds of knowledge valued now to the kinds that will be desired in the twenty-first century (*This Bridge* 541). Anzaldúa further adds that this *conocimiento*<sup>38</sup> is skeptical of reason and rationality and questions conventional knowledge's current categories, classifications, and contents (*This Bridge* 541). *Conocimiento* is a form of knowing that is based on intuition, or *la facultad*. In Anzaldúa's words:

What you live through and the knowledge you infer from experience is subjective. Intuitive knowing, unmediated by mental constructs – what inner eye, heart, and gut tell you – is the closest you come to direct knowledge (gnosis)<sup>39</sup> of the world... *Conocimiento* comes from opening all your senses, consciously inhabiting your body and decoding its symptoms... Breaking out of your mental and emotional prison and deepening the range of perception enables you to link the inner reflection and vision – the mental, emotional, instinctive, imaginal,

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<sup>38</sup> *Conocimiento* means consciousness and can also be referred to as a form of knowledge that is based on intuition.

<sup>39</sup> Gnosis is the common Greek noun for knowledge. In the context of the English language, gnosis generally refers to "knowledge" within the spheres of Christian mysticism, mystery religions, and Gnosticism where it signifies "spiritual knowledge."

spiritual, and subtle bodily awareness – with social, political action and lived experiences to generate subversive knowledges. These *conocimientos* challenge official and conventional ways of looking at the world, ways set up by those benefiting from such constructions. (*This Bridge* 542)

Like other alternative ways of knowing, this instinctual knowledge fuels transformation and gives direction to the potential – *neyolmelahualiztli*<sup>40</sup> - within one's being. The internal work of oneself along with the commitment to struggle for social transformation changes your relationship to your body, to other bodies, and to the world (Anzaldúa, *This Bridge* 574). It is this knowing, healing, and transformation through the body that *danza* offers to its participants. Susana Rostas also offers us an understanding of *danza*'s potential to embody transformation:

To a certain extent dance is exercise, in that you develop your body as your very own instrument. The use of the body in the dance is an athletic one, but it's also art. Dancing makes the organism feel good by producing endorphins and a sense of wellbeing. When you dance you feel better in yourself; all is much simpler, you center yourself, you stimulate yourself. Leaving a dance you leave more intelligent, agile and brighter not just energized like when you exercise. The dance is work also in the sense of being efficacious in achieving not only personal wellbeing but also that of the larger community. (137)

As Rostas suggests, *danza* can heal the historical trauma of colonization as *danzantes* gain a sense of wellbeing (137).

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<sup>40</sup> As explained in chapter 2, *neyolmelahualiztli* in its parts is: *liztli*=process, act of, *melahua*=to set straight, give direction to, *yol*=alternate stem of *yollotl* (heart, potential, energy, movement), *ne* is an impersonal prefix. Put together *neyolmelahualiztli* can be interpreted as the act or process of giving direction to one's potential, heart, or energy (Herrera).

According to Elisa D. Huerta, *danzantes* “sensually embody, through physical movements, *trajes*, music, and the ceremonial burning of *copal* and sage, the understanding of indigeneity”<sup>41</sup> (6). In essence, *danzantes* embody their indigeneity through their senses by practicing an indigenous dance form that exposes them to indigenous knowledge. Huerta argues, “movements performed provide a kind of embodied indigenous knowledge for *danzantes* that is based in philosophical, spiritual, and scientific Mesoamerican traditions” (11). These knowledges include Nahuatl conceptions and understandings of the Divine, the natural world, cosmology, calendar systems, and numerical concepts that lead towards the understanding of space and time. For instance, as *danzantes* perform the *danza* “*Ehecatl*” (wind), they come to understand and appreciate the element of wind through an indigenous perspective. One dance step within this *danza* mimics the movements bees make as they pollinate vegetation, reminding *danzantes* that wind plays a vital roll in the process of pollination. This is only one example that illustrates the acquirement of embodied knowledge *danzantes* experience in their learning of Nahuatl philosophies.

Elise D. Huerta argues that when the body’s senses are stimulated by the sounds, smells, and visual aesthetics of *Danza Azteca*, *danzantes* are able to learn and embody knowledge through the kinesthetic movements and senses of the body (11). This embodiment of indigeneity is central to the notion of “knowing through the body,” which is an alternative way of producing and acquiring knowledge (Huerta 12). The body’s senses are vital in the process of knowledge production through the body. To support this argument, Huerta reiterates:

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<sup>41</sup> Indigeneity is derived from “indigenous,” which means born or produced naturally in a land or region. In this case indigeneity is being used to express Chicanos’ recognition of their indigenous roots and configurations of cultural-national sentiments.

Through *danza* practices, Chicanas/os embody their indigeneity and learn through movement in a variety of ways and in multiple physical and philosophical registers. In the first instance, *danzantes*, through preparation and donning of their *trajes*, embody a complicated and at times fraught aesthetic of indigeneity...The visibility, the aesthetic markings of indigeneity employed in *danza*, create powerful possibilities for sensuous identification...*Danza azteca* is not only visually striking, but it is an overall deep sensory experience that evokes all of the senses. Indeed the sounds and smells of *danza azteca* are as distinct as its visual nature. For example, the distinctive sounds of *danza azteca* consists of multilayered percussive rhythms that at any given moment include the deep, resonating sound of the *huehuatl*; the staccato sound of hollowed-out seeds of *chachayotes* hitting against each other as *danzantes* walk, step, jump, turn, and spin; *sonajas*, hand drums; *teponaztli*, and so on. In addition to the sights and smells of *danza* is the ubiquitous smell of copal and sage. (12)

Along with the great majority of *danzantes* that I have come to know, I too have experienced this very “calling” to *Danza Azteca* through the senses. The smell of the *copal*, the sound and vibrations of the drumbeat, the strikingly visual aesthetics of the dancers, can create a strong gravitational pull towards *danza*. In *danza*, we recognize this phenomenon as the awakening of our “genetic memory.” *Danzantes* believe that genetic memory<sup>42</sup> (or ancestral memory) is another form of knowledge that is embedded throughout the body and not just the intellect.

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<sup>42</sup> Genetic memory can be described as the process in which a memory is passed down through the generations without the individual having to experience first-had the topic of the memory.





Figure 5.3 The spinning movement represents the wind - *Ehecatl*.



Figure 5.4 This movement represents the motion bees make with their hind legs, representing pollination.



Figure 5.5 *Caracoleros* sounding the conch shell at the start of a ceremony.



Figure 5.6 *Copaleras* keeping the fire and sweet aroma of *copal* going throughout the ceremony.





Figure 5.7 Huehueteros drumming during Cuauhtemoc Ceremony in Maywood, 2012.

### Indigenous Body Art

To better understand the colonization of the brown body, it is important to recognize that the European invasion and control over indigenous peoples included the obliteration of traditional and ritualistic decorating of the body. Tattoo historian Maarten Hesselt van Dinter explains:

At the time of the early voyages of discovery, Europeans, unfamiliar with tattooing, scorned the practice, considering it outlandish... The Catholic missionaries who followed in the wake of the explorers and conquerors considered it their sacred duty to convert the population of the new territories to Christianity and ‘civilize’ them... [Like other indigenous customs] tattooing was regarded as ‘barbaric and heathen.’ (10)

Following the invasion and colonization of indigenous lands, tattooing quickly declined as a result of Christian missionaries labeling the decorative tattoo as body mutilation and prohibiting it (Dinter 24). These missionaries were ruthless in their crusade against tattooing, and other customs they considered to be “heathen practices” (215).

Spanish missionaries referred to Maya and other indigenous people’s tattoos as images of their “heathen culture” (Dinter 216). The crusade to do away with tattoos, according to Dinter’s studies, was led by Francisco Diego de Landa who traveled through Mesoamerica during the mid 1500s. As Dinter shares:

[Francisco Diego de Landa] was infuriated to learn that even after the conversion to Catholicism, some locals continued tattooing themselves. He requested, and was granted, permission from the Spanish king to conduct an inquisition.

Wherever he went, he forbade tattooing and ordered the destruction of anything related to heathen beliefs. Figurines, shrines, and manuscripts were all burned, as were those who refused to renounce their religion (216).

Similarly, Steve Gilbert, also a tattoo historian, explains that:

When Cortez and his conquistadors arrived on the coast of Mexico in 1519, they were horrified to discover that the natives not only ‘worshipped devils’ in the form of statues and idols, but also had somehow managed to imprint indelible images of these idols on their skin. The Spaniards, who had never heard of tattooing, recognized it at once as ‘the work of Satan.’ (99)

As to be expected, this violent act of “Christianizing” caused tattooing to rapidly disappear throughout Mesoamerica (Gilbert 99; Dinter 10).

According to Mexican anthropologist Zaid Lagunas Rodríguez, the human body was of great significance in the mythical-religious thought of Mesoamerican peoples (42). Among the many practices of indigenous aesthetics, those included were: scarification, tattoo, the application of paint on the body, the perforation of the ear lobe, nasal septum and of the lower lip, cranial deformation, and dental encrustation (Rodríguez 42). Surviving pre-colonial records of body modification are found on sculptures and masks, and in various *amoxhti* (codices). Some sculptures and clay figurines depict tattoos, which are represented by engraved lines on bodies of human figures.



Figure 5.8 Glyph from Chiapas illustrating person with tattooed leg.



Figure 5.9 Discovered in 1969 in the Arroyo Pesquero, Veracruz, Mexico region. It is made from a solid block of white gray jadeite jade that dates from 900 to 300 B.C. Discovered along with a vast amount of Olmec pieces, it shows tattoos and ornaments on the face that represented religious or political attributes or to identify its lineage. (*Casa de Jade*)



Figure 5.10 Olmec figurine with engraved patterns representing tattoos.



Figure 5.11 Aztec mask with gauged ears.

In *Aztec Thought and Culture*, Miguel León-Portilla includes a Nahuatl passage that speaks of body adornments as works an artist might create:

Perhaps a neighbor with a pendant hanging from his nose, his nostrils pierced, and a dart in his cheek, his body tattooed with little obsidian knives; thus the charcoal was fashioned, was carved and polished... whatever an artist makes is an image of reality; he seeks its true appearance (*Aztec Thought* 174).

The Nahua believed that only those who came under the “divine influence which scatters flowers and songs among men is able to speak of truth on earth” (León-Portilla, *Aztec Thought* 169). If we consider the Nahua’s notion of art as being a representation of truth and the divine, then it must follow that body art was also considered to be divine.



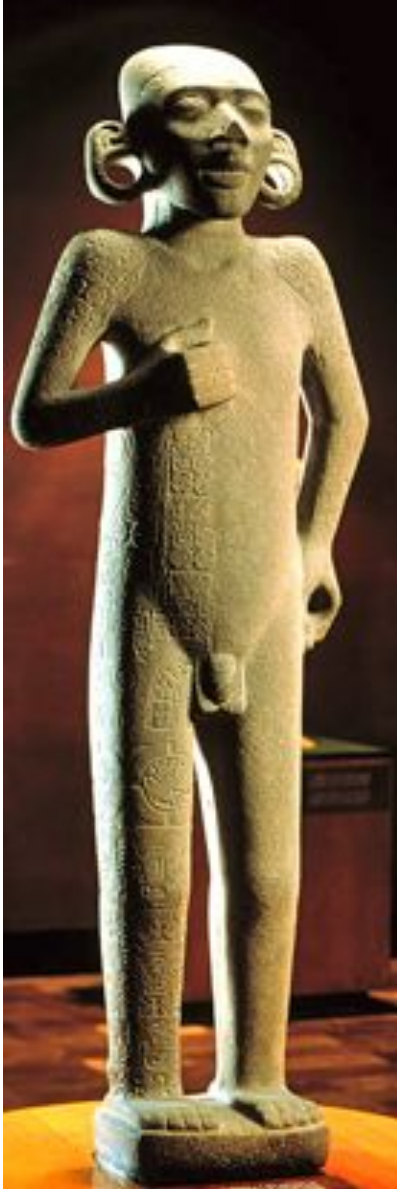


Figure 5.12 Post-classic Huasteco figure depicting a person with gauged ears and tattoos.



Figure 5.13 Olmec mask with tattoo patterns.

Steve Gilbert offers us a description of how tattoos were inscribed onto the skin as he refers to writings by Franciscan Diego de Landa who wrote:

They tattooed their bodies, and the more they did this the more courageous and brave they were considered to be, because tattooing was great torment. It was done in the following way: the tattooist marked out the place that had been chosen with ink and then delicately cut in the pictures, and thus these marks remained on the body in blood and ink...The Mayan women pierced their noses through

cartilage, which divides the nostrils down the middle, and placed in the hole a piece of amber, and this was considered adornment. They pierced their ears in order to wear earrings after the same fashions as their husbands. They tattooed their bodies from the waist up, but they left the breasts free, so as to be able to give suck, in designs more delicate and beautiful than those of the men. (qtd. in Gilbert 101)

Similarly, Steve Gilbert refers to the writings of Diego Lopez de Cogulludo who reported that warriors were tattooed to commemorate their achievements in battle, “so the bodies of old heroes were completely covered with hieroglyphics” (99). Dinter adds that, among the Maya and other indigenous Mexican peoples, it was customary for tattoos to be applied as decorations for bravery in war (215). According to Diego de Landa, tattoos were commonly placed on the chest and thighs representing “glyphs and stylized apes, tigers, snakes, eagles, and other birds” (Dinter 215).

Historically and for the great majority of indigenous peoples and artists of the world, the body has always been the template of the spirit (Davis qtd. in Rainier14). The human body was seen as yet another feature of the landscape upon where artistic expressions of the soul were etched upon (Davis qtd. in Rainier14). In reference to indigenous forms of body art, Wade Davis states:

The designs sketched upon skin expressed not only the values of a particular culture, but also fidelity to them and, thus, stood as expression of solidarity. The motifs became definitions of culture, symbols of inclusion, iconic representations that carried not only discrete meanings, but multiple meanings, deep connotations that could only be understood and recognized by those born to a particular



cultural reality the forms celebrated...To endure the excruciating ordeal inherent in the decorative techniques was not only to pass in initiation from innocence to experience and from childhood to maturity, but also to establish an explicit connection between the individual and the realm of the spirits. To be tattooed or decoratively scarred was to be human, and to be human was to know the gods (qtd. in Rainier 15).

What we see here is how the body was used as a conduit to emphasize a renewed commitment to one's spiritual beliefs and connection to the Divine. Chris Rainier argues that for many of the "ancients" body markings forged a connection to one's ancestors while substantiating one's own identity in the present (182), similar to what contemporary *danzantes* do today.

In addition to body modification, the *Azteca-Mexica* people also donned beautifully designed garments that reflected their individual identities. In analyzing the *Codex Nuttall*, Arthur G. Miller points out that the *tlahcuilohs* (scribes) of the past painted images of people with garments that demonstrated unique symbols and colors representative of specific individuals. Miller explains, "Costume ornaments and other objects of dress were associated with a figure shown in detail so that the person can be clearly identified as to his rank and function" (xxii). This speaks to the importance of dress and body adornment in establishing one's identity in Mesoamerican society.



Figure 5.14 Nose piercing ceremony (Nuttall 52).



Figure 5.15 Woman with nose pierced (Nuttall 26).

Miller also refers to a black-clad figure on page fifty-two of *Codex Nuttall* who is undergoing the Mixtec ritual of having his nose pierced, a mark of distinction (xii). In *Dances of Anáhuac*, Kurath and Martí include an excerpt from the *Codex Florentine* describing various types of body adornments:

And the brave warriors, those who had straw-like plugs, they had white net cloaks with shells set in fish patterns. And all men, whether leaders of youths, or youths, had only black net cloaks, all with eyelets on the border, and all had turquoise earplugs. And those who led had only bell-shaped earplugs. And those who had bell-shaped earplugs, also had lip plugs. Some were like lizards, some like dogs, some like a broad-leafed water plant, some rectangular. And the youths who already wore their hair long (in token of war exploits) had lip plugs which were rounded. And all the others who were only youths had only circular lip plugs, which they set in place. (44)

In honor of their ancestors' tradition of adorning their bodies, contemporary Aztec Dancers similarly display their identities through the use of their *trajes* as well as their

body art. In doing so, they not only honor their past, but also resist assimilation and the marginalization of their historical roots.



Figure 5.16 *Danzante* Eddie Garcia with tattoos, piercings, and gauged ears.



Figure 5.17 *Danzantes* from Los Angeles area with tattoos, piercings, and gauged ears.

### Embodiment of Indigenismo

Taking on an indigenous aesthetic, *danzantes* are dressing in ways that reject unjust social conformities, and do away with stereotypes of expected behaviors. *Danza* helps one understand the Nahuatl notion of *in ixtli in yollotl*, face/body and heart/soul. This concept is based on the belief that you are the shaper of your flesh as well as your soul (Anzaldúa qtd. in L. Pérez 258). Anzaldúa proclaims that we no longer need to be ashamed of our indigenous roots and brown skin. Now we grow our hair long, don

*huipillis*, fashion ourselves with indigenous ornamentation, and inscribe our bodies with Mesoamerican art (qtd. in L. Pérez 258). Now we are shapers of our own faces and our own hearts. Now we have come to understand the true meaning of *in ixtli in yollotl* as we work towards aligning our bodies with our spirits.

The way that we perceive ourselves internally can be displayed to the public as a way to mark one's identity. Laura E. Pérez writes:

Whether they attempt to appear natural within a given culture or to create a spectacle of difference within it, clothing and body decoration signal the nature of membership within a given culture, be it normal, privileged, marginal, in opposition, or ambiguous. In themselves, dressing and other forms of decorating the body (cosmetics and other forms of body painting, tattooing, piercing, and scarification) are cultural practices that produce, reproduce, interrupt, or hybridize (and thus produce new) cultural values. The use or representation of dress and body ornamentation in visual, installation, or performative art practices is, similarly, both symbolic and productive. (50)

Laura Pérez explains that, within the metaphor of the social body as text, dress and body ornamentation are writings on the body and about it (L. Pérez 51). The social body allows others to “read” and discern information about who a person is, and what they represent. Regrettably, there is little information written about how Chicanas and Chicanos use tattoos and body ornamentation as forms of resistance and empowerment. The few resources I found having to do with Chicana/o tattoos highlight the negative stereotypes of gang and prison tattoos. For example, in my search for information on Chicanos and tattoos, what I found was an abundance of data about “gang affiliated” tattoos and their



use as initiation rituals to gain membership in gangs (Vigil 2). Although this phenomenon also takes place as a form of resistance against imposed social constructs, it is important to consider that Chicanas and Chicanos also embrace more positive and indigenous-based representations of body art. I offer this thesis in an effort to debunk negative stereotypes of tattoos and other forms of body modifications, and introduce the notion of indigenous body art as a positive way to resist marginalization and celebrate one's indigenous heritage.



Figure 5.18 *Danzante* with jaguar patterns tattooed on upper chest and shoulders.



Figure 5.19 *Danzante* with her birth symbol, *Ozomahitli* (monkey) on her foot.

Though work in this area for the Chicana/o has not previously been explored in depth, we can find similarities of this phenomenon among the Maori, indigenous peoples of New Zealand. In *Sensible Objects: Colonialism, Museums and Material Culture*,

authors Elizabeth Edwards, Chris Gosden, and Ruth Phillips give insight as to how the Maori people are resisting the affects of colonization and marginalization in their native New Zealand. They share the story of one among the first wave of Maori men, Herbie King, who took up his facial tattoo work in the late 1980s on arriving in the city where it was evident that the urban setting and affects of globalization were causing more erasure of the Maori culture (134). King told the world who he was in this way: “I looked for my people and I couldn’t find them, I couldn’t identify them. I felt a need to have something to show I am Maori, and the idea came to me that I should get a *moko*”<sup>43</sup> (134). The authors share:

As a Maori collective proclaims in its editorial, ‘The resurgence of *ta moko* among Maori is a direct means of asserting our *tino rangatiratanga* (absolute sovereignty). It is in defiance of past and present political agendas, laws and regulations that continually deny us access to our lands, language, customs and beliefs...Wearers of the art of *ta moko* ensure that this tradition continues into the new millennium. It is a political act, an exercise of will, and a declaration of resistance. It is an active defiance of mainstream middle-class White New Zealand’s aesthetic sensibility so often agitated by media distortion. (134)

Another Maori with *moko* tattoo confides, “Taking *moko* is a serious commitment. It inscribes your soul, it uplifts your senses, and it changes you forever. It is the ultimate engagement of oneself with one’s body, because it cannot be removed” (Edwards, Gosden, and Phillips 135). The rejuvenation of various indigenous cultures has led to a

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<sup>43</sup> *Ta moko* is the permanent body and face marking by Maori, the indigenous people of New Zealand. Traditionally it is distinct from tattoo and *tatau* in that the skin was carved by *uhi* (chisels) rather than punctured. This left the skin with grooves, rather than a smooth surface.

revival of “old tattooing cultures,” especially among the Maori, the Ivan in Borneo, the Tahitians (Dinter 19), the Hawaiians, as well as Chicanas/os in the United States.



Figure 5.20 Maori man with *ta moko*.



Figure 5.21 Maori woman with *ta moko*.

Like the Maori, *danzantes* and other Chicanas/os are displaying ancient sacred symbols, which, by doing so, are in defiance of past and present political agendas that attempt to keep indigenous realities suppressed. Laura E. Pérez argues that the use of indigenous symbols is a decolonizing struggle at the epistemological level,<sup>44</sup> where being, existence, meaning, and knowledge are defined and validated (4). Although Pérez is referring to Chicana art in her work, it holds true that *danza* and body art are also “a site where the disembodied – divine, emotional, or social- was and is acknowledged, invoked, mediated upon, and released as a shared offering” (6). Pérez argues that the use of Mesoamerican symbols is a way to map pathways beyond alienation and disempowerment of today’s cultural and geographical deterritorializations” (22). Furthermore, she claims that:

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<sup>44</sup> Here, epistemology is used to explain how indigenous ways of acquiring knowledge through the use of indigenous symbols by artists, *danzantes*, and Chicanas/os are used a decolonizing strategies.

*Tlamatinis'* decipherment [of art] takes into account the space and occasion, as well as the knowledge specifically coded in the pictographs or ideograms. Glyphs rooted in Mesoamerican worldviews point to that which is outside the verbal and visual language, to the realm of the spiritual or to culturally different ideas of non-European cultures...“Codex<sup>45</sup> Makers” are therefore *tlahcuilohs*, whose task is to remember, envision, and inscribe their readings of the meaning of the cultural signs of their day in illuminating and transformative ways. (35)

*Danzantes* become *tlamatinis* as they learn to decipher the symbols inscribed on various forms of Mesoamerican art, as well as the metaphorical images illustrated within the *amoxtli* (books/codices). *Danzantes* also become “codex makers” or “*amoxtli* makers” as they reinterpret and reformulate Mesoamerican art and symbols onto their bodies in the form of *trajes* and body art. In essence, *danzantes* embody visual representations of Nahuatl metaphorical symbols as they transform themselves into contemporary “dancing codices” or “dancing *amoxtli*,” infused with the spirit of their ancestors and a resistance against the marginalization of their indigenous heritage.

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<sup>45</sup> Although Laura Pérez uses the term “codex” to describe Mesoamerican manuscripts, it is important to note that the word codex is a Roman word. The Nahua referred to their books as *amoxtli*.





Figure 5.22 *Danzante* with wings and Aztec calendar tattoos.



Figure 5.23 Female *danzante* with gauged ears.



Figure 5.24 *Danzante* with various tattoos on chest, arms and back.

## CHAPTER SIX

### BODY ART TESTIMONIOS

My data collection is based on the oral histories of four *danzantes*, in addition to a world-renowned Mexican tattoo artist, Goethe Silva. The first *danzante*, Joe Ix Pelayo, lives in Highland Park and also happens to be a tattoo artist. Joe and his wife own and operate “Shaman’s Vision Sacred Art Center” where various healing-arts practices, like yoga and meditation, are offered to the public. The Sacred Arts Center is also where Joe practices the art of tattoo.

The other three *danzantes* are grounded in the teachings of the traditional and political Aztec dance group, *Danza Mexica Cuauhtemoc*. The first two, Eddie García and Fernando Medina, live in the Los Angeles area. Karen Hernández lives in Ventura, California. Eddie, Fernando and Karen share how *danza* has influenced their lives and why they decided to modify their bodies through the use of tattoos and piercings.

The last *testimonio* offers a glimpse into the work of Mexican tattoo artist Goethe Silva, who has received countless recognitions and has appeared in numerous magazines, newspapers, and documentaries including *Marked*, a documentary shown on The History Channel. Goethe began his tattoo career in his native Durango, Mexico eighteen years ago. He moved to California eight years ago where he continues to work as a dedicated tattoo artist who’s work is sought after by many tattoo enthusiasts. His style is distinctive as he uses shades of black and grey to create magnificent images depicting pre-Cuauhtemoc Mesoamerican deities. Silva’s goal is to help others understand his vision of the “prehispanic” world through his perspective as a descendant of the *Mexica* people. Included with his *testimonio* are several images of his work.

## Danzante 1: Joe Ix Pelayo, Aztec Dancer and Tattoo Artist



Figure 6.1 Pelayo's tattoo on arm.



Figure 6.2 Pelayo's artistry on tattoo client.

### 1. How did you become interested in the Aztec and Mayan cultures?

I have always been interested in my culture. My mom is from Michoacán, México from an area that was never conquered by the Spaniards. My mom grew up learning Purépecha songs. In fact, many communities in Michoacán still do not speak Spanish.

### 2. How did you become interested in the arts?

I remember when my mom took me to Placita Olvera in the heart of Los Angeles, where I saw *danzantes* for the first time. I was always attracted to the arts and I was talented as a kid, but had no direction. I only saw gangs and graffiti so I knew I had to go elsewhere to expand and grow artistically.

### 3. How did you become interested in the healing arts?

I was born with a spinal deformity that never really hurt or held me back until I grew up and started working. I used to do a lot of hard labor and one time I fell off a twenty-foot ladder. I continued to work but only injured myself more until I just could not function anymore. Doctors could not help me and I was losing hope. My wife learned of a place that offered alternative healing where they taught me how to breathe and not resist pain but let it flow. I started to study alternative ways of healing. After three years of being disabled and losing sleep, I was finally able to make a big change in my healing through alternative healing techniques.

### 4. How did you become a *danzante*?

After I regained my strength, we moved to Highland Park because I liked the murals with all the Aztec art. That is when I met Lázaro who was one of Florencio Yescas's first students. Lázaro saw my artwork and my interest in *cultura* and invited me to *danza*, but I could not participate because of my physical disabilities. I continued to meditate and practice yoga, and my body continued to heal until I was finally able to dance. The style and focus of my art changed because of the knowledge I gained of my ancestors' history.

5. How did establishing "Shaman's Vision Sacred Art Center" come about?

I kept learning alternative forms of healing from India, Egypt, and Native America and eventually got certified in alternative healing. My wife became certified in yoga. We came across an opportunity to open a space where we could practice alternative healing, art, and yoga and established the "Sacred Art Center" where I also specialize in giving sacred tattoos using natural inks. We started using artwork and began gaining a better understanding of colors and symbols. Our center has a message of doing good now to have a good life and to reach higher levels of consciousness.

When we first opened the center, I started studying how to tattoo and began learning about rites of passage ceremonies. I started looking into other nations that have not been conquered or colonized and found that many tattoo traditions were very similar. For example, Thailand was never conquered and there you can go to a Buddhist temple and get a tattoo from a monk as a rite of passage. The process of getting a tattoo helps one learn how to separate the spirit from the body so that you do not feel pain while getting tattooed. Some Native American cultures say that if you did not experience some type of rite of passage ceremony where you have to practice separating spirit from body to get through pain, like experiencing sweat lodge or body modification, then when one passes away it would be harder to cross over to the afterlife because you never practiced separation.

6. Tell me about your experiences as a tattoo artist.

When people want to get a tattoo, some come in already knowing the meaning of symbols and others need help with creating a design based on their Aztec or Mayan birth symbols. Learning about one's birth symbols helps people learn a lot about themselves. For example, I learned that I was born on the day of the jaguar, which is a creature that travels through all realms of life and is considered to be a healer. Knowing that helped me heal and learn about myself and my inner strengths.

When I tattoo a person, it can consist of just tattooing, but often times, because this is a rite of passage, we will go through a whole ceremony. With clients I have done sunrise ceremony, I smudge them with copal, we meditate, pray, breath, use essential oils, and then we start to tattoo but do not stop the other parts of ceremony. We continue to burn copal, meditate, pray, breath, etc. The person being tattooed and the artist (myself) concentrate on our breath, our spirit and the translation of spirit and manifestation of nothing to something.

We decided to call our space “Sacred Arts Center” because every art is sacred since you are creating and being a creator. The person who sees art is someone who is receiving sunlight through *danza*, song, culinary arts, visual arts, tattoo, and so on. Life over all, is an art of living and creating and manifesting. Life is like a dream, and if you can control your dreams, then you can control your life. Everything we do is a manifestation. Artists get inspiration from the womb of creation, nowhere, the void, their dreams. I think about how our ancestors looked at nature and found ways to translate it and explain the invisible like the wind. Our ancestors felt that all art was beautiful and sacred, and for their art to still be here even after the attempt of its total destruction is powerful. It is also powerful for us to have the ability to continue to learn and create.

7. What role has *danza* played in your life?

When I was first introduced to *danza*, I was disabled, but my *danza* teacher helped me learn that I could also use *danza* to heal, like by using feathers to gather more of the sun’s healing sunrays and copal. When I first started dancing it was very difficult because my back would crack, and I could not get back up after doing a squat. Sometimes I would cry because I could not do it and saw elders who could. I kept trying and I eventually got better.

I knew that *danza*, like art, would help me heal. As opposed to regular exercise, you are dancing, and studies show that more endorphins are produced when dancing, but it is also spiritual like yoga. It is a spiritual exercise making us stronger. It is a warrior dance to fight off bad spirits and inner demons.

The attire that we wear sends a message. We learn about the power behind the clothes that we wear. Power behind our regalia and other things we wear or carry. We want to reflect our indigenous power through jewelry, feathers, symbols on our clothes, symbols we tattoo on our bodies and wear for the rest of our lives. We want to raise our own consciousness and the consciousness of others around us. We keep nature with us by wearing feathers and other natural elements.

8. What do you know about pre-Cuauhtemoc tattoos?

I know that tattoos have existed among our people for millennia. I have seen images of Olmec stone figures with tattoos carved onto the whole left side of the torso and right leg. The Olmecs did not leave behind a writing system so there isn’t much information on this topic. Tattoos have also been found on Incan and Peruvian mummies. The maguey tip was used for tattooing, piercing and acupuncture. Most world traditions used charcoal ashes and natural oils as ink.

I use all natural inks. I want the process to be as natural as possible. In studying ancient tattoos I learned that receiving a tattoo and blood letting was an offering to the ancestors because blood represents our ancestry and blood lineage. For example, as depicted on Mayan sculptures, the Maya would let blood onto paper with hieroglyphics representing ancestors and they would burn it to create a smoke serpent that provided visions.

Colonization has taken our knowledge of our blood and made us dependant on their services. We lost our ancestral knowledge and now when people are working on tattoos, art, or music without knowledge of where it came from, then they seem lost with no direction and no meaning. This has given a bad representation of tattoos.

9. How has Christianity affected the tradition of tattoo?

My mom was raised practicing indigenous celebrations but within the church. She was raised as a traditional Catholic, but hybrid with indigenous elements. She grew up thinking tattoos were bad because the body is a “temple” and one should not desecrate it. But I saw the church as a sacred temple that had sacred images all over it, giving people enlightenment. So I figured that if the body is a temple and our ancestors decorated temples with sacred images, then I felt it would be OK to get a tattoo.

10. How old were you when you got your first tattoo?

I was eighteen when I got my first tattoo, but I still feared my parents when I got it because of our Catholic tradition. My mom was upset and told me to take off my tattoo. I had not yet been introduced to the practice of meditation when I got my first tattoo so it hurt a lot. Then when I got my second tattoo, after having learned meditation and breathing techniques, I did not feel pain. The first was a tattoo of my last name. My second tattoo, after being exposed to our ancestors’ history and beliefs, depicts an image that represents my Mayan name “Ix” meaning “jaguar.” The image of the jaguar shows the jaguar giving his heart to an eagle who flies up and takes the heart to the heavens representing that he is giving himself to creator.

This time my mother did not get upset because she knew that I was learning a lot about myself as a jaguar spirit. She knew that my being able to dance was powerful because she saw me heal. She still told me not to get any more tattoos, and she also told me to stop tattooing others because I am marking their souls. I explained to her that I was decorating their temples in a sacred way that helped them learn about themselves. Now my mom promotes my tattoo work and gives my business cards to other mothers. She tells other moms that their kids may end up getting tattoos that mean nothing, but that her son is a professional tattoo artist who practices natural sacred arts.

11. Why you do all of this?

This is a way for me to resist what the conquest did to keep us from knowing ourselves and how to heal. I feel like I, and others around me, have awakened and we want to resist ways that distract us from our culture.

12. What kind of clients do you service?

I would say about half my clients are already on the path of consciousness and the other half want to get on that path and look at this as a way to begin. Getting a tattoo is a new beginning for many. Some clients are Aztec dancers, teachers, counselors, and elders.

Sometimes people want to honor loved ones who have passed away, or to celebrate sacred unions (marriages), or their parents or kids. All of my clients have asked for tattoos that represent them or their families.

13. What do know about other forms of indigenous body art, like piercings?

Many *danzantes* I know have gauged ears and other types of piercings. There is a power in replicating ways our ancestors decorated their bodies. Kings used to put heavy piercings on their ears to help them hear better. They pierced their nose to stretch their nostrils so they can breath better. When people learn this, they want to experience it and represent it. Our ancestors used jade, turquoise, and obsidian for jewelry.

14. Do you know other *danzantes* with tattoos?

My dance teacher, Lazaro, has a Quetzalcoatl (feathered serpent) wrapped around his arm tattooed by someone who also works in a similar fashion as I do, using sacred and natural elements and practices.

15. What do you think about others who use but do not understand Aztec tattoo designs?

I went to the L.A. Tattoo Expo where most tattoos styles were gang related. Our symbols have been used by gangs as another form of resistance. Rites of passages are important, especially for young men who seek initiation. If these rites of passage and initiations are not available through the ways of our ancestors, then they will seek them elsewhere.



## Danzante 2: Eddie García, Danzante, Dance Regalia Designer



Figure 6.3 García's tattoo of *Mexica* warrior.



Figure 6.4 Tattoo of *Tlaloc*.

1. How many tattoos and/or piercings do you have?

I have over twenty tattoos and two piercings.

2. What do your tattoos consist of?

Mainly *Azteca* symbols. I have four *Ozomatlis* (monkeys) representing the four directions, *Mictlan* (death) on my back, *mono* (monkey) on my stomach, a *danzante* on my chest, *Tlaloc* on my head, a rose on my hand, a skull on my other hand, and a lot more.

3. What do they represent for you?

They represent everything that I am, and everything that I have been through.

4. Where are your piercings?

I have my ears stretched to 44mms almost, two inches.

5. Do you feel that they are also indigenous in style?

They all are. We have adapted them with time and added our own flavor.

6. Why did you get these particular tattoos/piercings (indigenous vs. mainstream)?

What do they mean to you as a *danzante*?



Everything happens for a reason. Even tattoos have a way of guiding and showing you your path.

7. How long have you been dancing?

Fourteen years.

8. Did you get most or all of your body art after becoming a *danzante*?

Yes, I got most of them after I became a *danzante*.

9. How did being a *danzante* lead to you getting this kind of body art?

It is not just being a *danzante*, it is knowing there is more to life than a foreign religion, than a flashy car, and buying stuff you do not need.

10. How has *danza* developed your identity as an indigenous person?

I have come to understand that life is a ceremony. What we do, what I do, is for my dancers, my people.

11. Does being a *danzante* give you a feeling of empowerment? How/why?

Yes, but not only *danza*, because if my legs were to be taken from me, my ceremony would not be over, dancing is only one part, but not all.

12. What message are you trying to send (or think others perceive) from your body art?

My path has led me to understand that if what you are doing is not driven by passion and directed by love and instilled with pride, then it is not worth doing. Some of us were meant to be the speakers others the soldiers. When you see me at first glance you may see my body work and think I am a criminal, based on what people have labeled us as. From *Tlaloc* (rain) on my head to the blue roses on my hands, my tattoos tell you what I defend and what I will bleed for. It starts with *Tlaloc* reminding me that there are certain things that water cannot wash away. I live a warrior's path that has marked himself for life to tell a story only to those that have EARNED the right to be part of it.

13. Do you see yourself as an agent for social justice? How?

Where one shall fall, one hundred more shall rise. My job is to make sure we have people in training, so when their number is called to teach our history and to represent the *Mexica* people, they will be ready.

14. What do others comment about your body art?

Sadly we live in an era of MTV, flashy lights and materialism. People only see the surfaces of images and they do not stop and think about what it means. When people outside of *danza* see me, they create stereotypical images of what they think I am. They see my tattoos and think I am a gang member. Sometimes, they will actually ask me what my tattoo represents and they are surprised when I tell them the deep and ancient significance a particular tattoo has.

15. Do you feel that you are resisting oppression, marginalization, and assimilation by being a *danzante*?

I feel that *danza* is where my heart is. We walk in the dark not knowing the way, or if the light we follow is even the correct one. In the end all that matters is that we keep moving and that we keep searching for what is and what is not, and that we do not cut each other's throat for taking a different light's path.

16. Do you feel that your resistance towards assimilation is stronger by permanently marking your body with indigenous symbols?

I am not sure. Maybe I just do it because that is all I know, like an instinct. In the jungle a gorilla will flare up and challenge you to show his strength, his true colors, to let you know that you are on his land, his *tierra*. A bird might spread his wings to catch a female's attention, to show his colors. I may take off my shirt and show my colors too. Like the gorilla, I will flare up to protect my lands, and like the bird, I will spread my wings to remind you that behind these shades of blue and red, lies a *Mexica* warrior.

### Danzante 3: Fernando J. Medina, Danzante



Figure 6.5 Aztec eagle warrior tattoo.



Figure 6.6 Fire serpent tattoo.

1. How many tattoos and/or body piercings do you have?

I have two tattoos and one piercing.

2. What do your tattoos depict?

I have a tattoo on my back of an Aztec eagle warrior with quetzal feathers running down his back. I also have a tattoo on my right leg of two Aztec fire serpents that wrap from the bottom of my leg to the back of my knee.

3. What do they represent and mean to you?

The tattoo on my back represents the soul of an Aztec warrior, and the sun as it rises. The Aztecs believed that the souls of warriors that died in battle carried the sun every morning to rise. This has a very special meaning to me as I am very connected to my roots and consider my self to be following the path of the "*Mexicayotl*" or Mexican essence, which is taught through cultural, traditional, and spiritual beliefs. The second tattoo on my leg is kind of a balance mark upon my body. By balance I mean in the positive and negative sense. One of the serpents represents life and the other death. One represents the cosmos, and the other the micro cosmos, and so on and so forth. It is kind of a Mexican version of the Chinese yin-yang symbol, but with much more meaning to me.

4. Where are your piercings?

I have the labret piercing, under the lower lip.

5. Do you feel they it is also indigenous in style?

I do feel that my piercing is indigenous in style. It is known that the Aztecs wore the labret and the septum piercing, among others.

6. Why did you get these particular tattoos and piercings? What do they mean to you as a *danzante*?

I got my tattoos because I felt the symbols really represented something to me. I knew I would never regret getting them. I got them with a “*danzante* state of mind” and not a mainstream ideal. I was not getting something I thought would look cool or would impress people. I got my tattoos as personal symbols. I also got my septum piercing with an indigenous ideal behind it. My labret was more mainstream type. I got it more because of my life style. I listen to rock music a lot and felt like it identified more with those ideals. I later learned about labret piercing in indigenous cultures, and now wear it with those ideals behind it. As a *danzante*, they help create a sense of identity for me.

7. How long have you been dancing?

I have been dancing for thirteen years.

8. Did you get most or all of your body art after becoming a *danzante*?

I got all my body art and piercings after becoming a *danzante*.

9. How did being a *danzante* lead to you getting this kind of body art?

Because I am a *danzante*, I chose my tattoos and my septum piercing. By reading about the indigenous culture, learning from elders, and through *danza*, I became familiar with the meaning of the symbols I chose to tattoo on myself.

10. How has *danza* developed your identity as an indigenous person?

*Danza* has become a big part of developing my identity. I have learned more about my culture, my ancestors, and my self through what I have learned from being a *danzante*.

11. Does being a *danzante* give you a feeling of empowerment? How/Why?

It does give me a feeling of empowerment. It does so by making me aware of my self and making me a more knowledgeable person. I hate to use the old adage, but I think it is very true that knowledge is power. I have learned a lot about my people, my roots and my

culture. Learning this has amplified in me a sense of identity that makes me feel like a more complete person.

12. What message are you trying to send (or think people perceive) through your body art?

I want people to know that I am very proud of who I am, where I come from, and who my ancestors were.

13. Do you see yourself as an agent for social justice? How?

I do see myself as an agent of social justice. I have done a lot of work with my community through *danza*, and feel that by introducing the community to the dance they can also become more aware of their cultural identity and become a stronger community. That is something that is very important to me. As a part of the immigrant community, I feel that if we stand together on social issues, the immigrant community can live better in this country.

14. What do others comment about your body art?

I have had many positive comments on my body art by people of my own race, but it seems to me that people of other races do not really get my tattoos.

15. Do you feel that you are resisting oppression, marginalization, and assimilation by being a *danzante*?

I definitely feel that I am resisting oppression, marginalization, and forced assimilation by being a *danzante*. I have become very deeply rooted to my identity and have made it a way of life.

16. Do you feel that your resistance towards assimilation is stronger by marking your body with indigenous symbols?

I do feel that permanently marking your body with indigenous symbols is a way of stronger resistance towards assimilation.

#### Danzante 4: Karen Hernández, Danzante



Figure 6.7 Karen with nephew at *Xilonen* ceremony.



Figure 6.8 Ozomahtli birth symbol tattoo.

1. How many tattoos and/or piercings do you have?

I have thirteen tattoos and four piercings.

2. What do your tattoos consist of?

I have two tattoos of my birth symbol *Ozomahtli* (monkey), two butterflies, one sparrow, two *día de los muertos calacas* (day of the dead skulls), three cherry blossoms, the word "*Tecpatl*" (obsidian knife), which is another one of my birth symbols, a heart, and the words "love" and "faith" as tattoos.

3. What do they represent and mean to you?

Each one represents something different. My two *Ozomahtli's* are a part of me, they represent who I am, because *Ozomahtli* is one of my three birth symbols. My *calacas* (skulls) are part of my body art because I love the beauty in the skulls. They remind me of *día de los muertos*, an ancient Aztec ceremonial tradition. My flowers were something I did spontaneously.

4. Where are your piercings?

My septum, belly button, ears, and the back of my neck.

5. Do you feel that they are also indigenous in style?

Yes, the piercings on my septum and ears.

6. Why did you get these particular tattoos/piercings (indigenous vs. mainstream)?

My Aztec symbols represent who I am. They represent my roots and where I come from. My piercing was done because I admire the style and look of the indigenous people.

7. How long have you been dancing?

Six years.

8. Did you get most or all of your body art after becoming a *danzante*?

I received all of my Aztec symbols after I became a *danzante*.

9. How did being a *danzante* lead to you getting this kind of body art?

I learned a lot about myself through *danza*. I learned about my family and my *cultura*. My body art is a description of myself, it reflects who I am and what I represent.

10. How has *danza* developed your identity as an indigenous person?

I have learned to be humble and to respect my surroundings. *Danza* has been a huge influence in my life. I appreciate things in a greater form, and I am proud of who I am as well as my culture.

11. Does being a *danzante* give you a feeling of empowerment? How/why?

The only way I do feel some type of empowerment is the fact that I have some knowledge of my roots that goes beyond textbook material.

12. What message are you trying to send (or think others perceive) from your body art?

I do like it when people ask, because that leads me to give an explanation of what the art work means and how I came to know this. It is something that I am proud of.

13. Do you see yourself as an agent for social justice? How?

When I do *danza* I feel like I am making a difference to help inform people that our *cultura* has not been lost.

14. What do others comment about your body art?

People are impressed by my tattoos. I get a lot of compliments. People are usually

curious to know what the art work means.

15. Do you feel that you are resisting oppression, marginalization, and assimilation by being a *danzante*?

Yes I do, because I am not forgetting where I came from, and I refuse to assimilate to this mainstream society that we have and to the type of attitude most young adults have about life.

16. Do you feel that your resistance towards assimilation is stronger by marking your body with indigenous symbols?

In a way yes, because this isn't just any type of body art. I feel like my symbols represent something ancient that was a part of my ancestors and it connects me to them. I feel that by tattooing my body, I am making a life-long commitment to myself and to upholding the traditions of my ancestors.

## Analysis

The data in these oral histories give light to several important points. First, the way in which these *danzantes* altered their bodies with the intent to “tell a story” is a remarkable testament of their dedication to keeping their indigenous heritage alive.

Furthermore, their shared stories demonstrate that they are very knowledgeable about the symbols that were tattooed on their bodies. This evidence supports the notion that *danza* plays a significant role in the learning of sacred symbols, and moreover, has put them in a position to share their knowledge with others when asked what their body art represents. I argue that tattooed *danzantes* have become modern day walking *amoxtli* (codices, books), telling stories and explaining the significance of sacred symbols as people “read” their bodies.

All four *danzantes* strongly feel that they are resisting oppression, marginalization, and assimilation by being *danzantes* and permanently altering their bodies with indigenous body art. *Danza* has given these individuals a strong sense of



identity and empowerment. In essence, *danza* has made an everlasting impact on the way they live their lives and how they see themselves in relation to the society in which they live. The significant attachment to the teachings of *danza* and sacred symbols highly influenced their determination to permanently mark their bodies with representations of their cultural heritage. They have intentionally made themselves look indigenous rather than assimilate and “blend in” to mainstream society. They also live in a more indigenous fashion by learning Nahuatl, Mesoamerican cosmology, pre-Cuauhtemoc dances, eating native foods, being cognizant of each day’s energies according to the *tonallapohuali* (calendar), taking on Nahuatl names, and reviving ceremonies and rituals marking important transitions in life like baptisms, naming ceremonies, and marriages. These actions ensure the survival of their heritage and the strengthening their inner self. As evident by their *testimonios*, these *danzantes* have been able to resist and overcome marginalization and the oppressive ideologies of assimilation.

The next section highlights the work of tattoo artist, Goethe Silva. In addition to his *testimonio*, which gives us an insightful look into his experiences and perspective as a tattoo artist whose work primarily focuses on Mesoamerican deities, I have also included several photographs that exemplify diverse images derived from his Mesoamerican cultural heritage.

## Tattoo Artist: Goethe Silva



Figure 6.9 Goethe Silva.

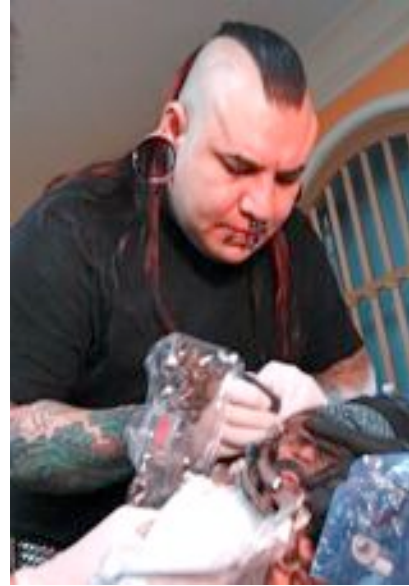


Figure 6.10 Silva working on a client.

1. What are the demographics of the clients you serve who ask for pre-Cuauhtemoc style tattoos?

Most of my clients are males, between the age of 20 and 40 years old. Ninety percent are of Mexican descent, and ten percent are White.

2. About what percentage of your clients are *danzantes*?

I have been tattooing *danzantes* from the Los Angeles area and Mexico for years. Actually, in Mexico, I was told that some *danzantes* are using my designs as inspiration to create their *trajes*.

4. For those clients who are not *danzantes*, do you get the impression that they are trying to bring back native traditions or reconnect with their indigenous roots in some way?

For sure! People are trying to reconnect with their roots that, in some way, they lost.

3. Why do you think your clients want these kinds of tattoos?

They are trying to learn about a culture that they lost, and are trying to reconnect with their past, with where they come from.

4. Why have Mesoamerican style tattoos become your focus? What message are you trying to send with your work?

The “Pre-hispanic”<sup>46</sup> culture is very rich in beauty and mystery. It is based in duality (life and death), which is one of the metaphysical concepts of greater transcendancy in “Pre-hispanic” art. The world of opposites appears not only in the “Gods” but also in the internal aspects of man. Everything is dual: men and “Gods,” heaven and earth, life and death. The “Pre-hispanic” man believed that they had to maintain the balance of the universe, and they did so through the means of various rituals. My inspiration is grounded in the “Pre-hispanic” concepts of the universe, and my tattoo work depicts the “Gods,” rituals and religious traditions of the Mesoamerican people. I put into my art my own visions and interpretations.

Goethe Silva is exposed to and works with Mesoamerican symbols and deities on a regular basis through his professional work as a tattoo artist. He shares his talents and his knowledge of Mesoamerican philosophies and concepts with his clients, who are mostly Mexican and Chicano. That fact that he works with *danzantes* on a regular basis is significant because both tattoo artist and client already have a foundational base of knowledge, or *conocimiento*, of their Mesoamerican roots. To illustrate the extent of Goethe’s talent, as well as his clients’ desire to express their indigenous roots, below I offer various photographs of his work.



Figure 6.11 Silva’s client with several pre-Cuauhtemoc images.

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<sup>46</sup> Goethe’s use of terms and concepts reflect western or European perspectives in relation to Mesoamerican history or concepts. I use quotation marks to emphasize his personal choice of words out of respect of his own interpretations and familiarity of terms.



Figure 6.12 Goethe Silva tattoo design, Aztec Calendar Sunrays.



Figure 6.13 Goethe Silva tattoo design, Quetzalcoatl.





Figure 6.14 Goethe Silva tattoo design, Coatlicue necklace.

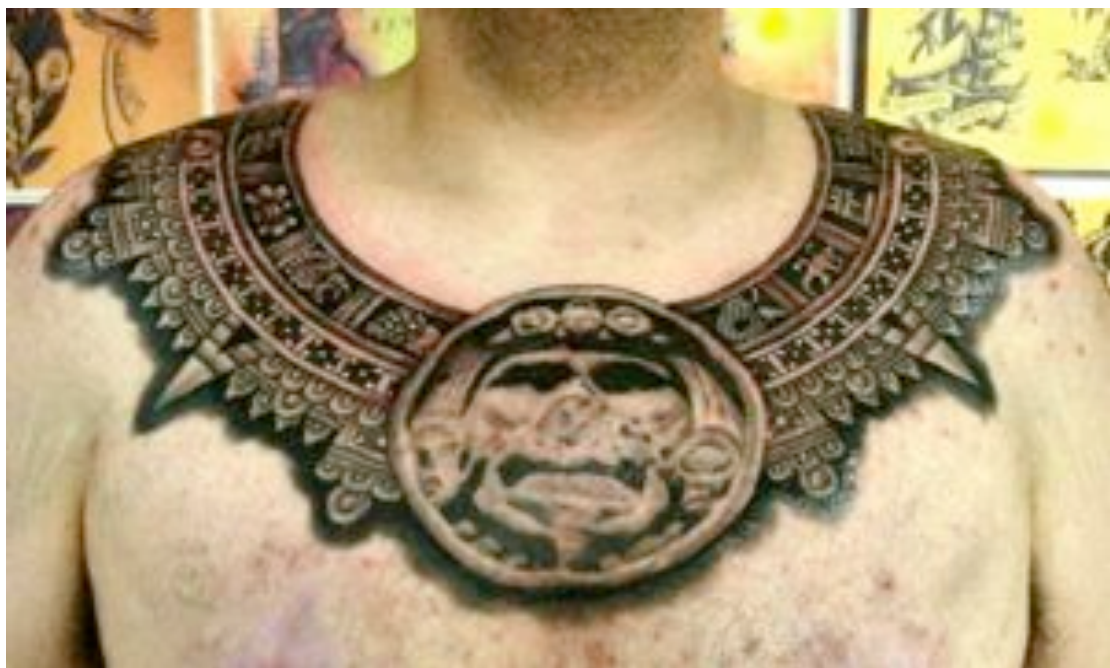


Figure 6.15 Goethe Silva tattoo design, Aztec calendar necklace.



Figure 6.16 Goethe Silva tattoo design, Olmec head.



Figure 6.17 Goethe Silva tattoo design, Mayan Gods.



Figure 6.18 Goethe Silva tattoo design, Mayan.



Figure 6.19 Goethe Silva tattoo design, Coatlicue.





Figure 6.20 Goethe Silva tattoo design, Miclantecuhltli and Tlaloc sleeve.



Figure 6.21 Goethe Silva tattoo design, Miclantecuchtlí sleeve.





Figure 6.22 Goethe Silva tattoo design, Olin sleeve.



Figure 6.23 Goethe Silva tattoo design, Xochipilli sleeve.



Figure 6.24 Goethe Silva tattoo design,  
Maize God.



Figure 6.25 Goethe Silva tattoo design,  
Xochipilli.



Figure 6.26 Goethe Silva tattoo design, Coyolxauhqui.



## My Body Art: Personal Testimonio



Figure 6.27 Veronica Valadez, tattoo (2009). Photography.

This picture illustrates the tattoo I have on my back (see figure 9). My self-discovery through *danza* has definitely led to the unique way in which I choose to express myself. My decision to get a tattoo came after many years of developing my identity as a *danzante*. Being a visual artist and having a good understanding of *Mexica* philosophies and symbols, it was important for me to design my own tattoo. I did not want to use just any symbol and put it on my skin without it having a profound meaning to me. It had to be unique and expressive of who I am and what I represent. The design of my tattoo was influenced by the style of art used in Aztec codices. My tattoo depicts a woman dancing, representing me as a *danzante*. The regalia and symbols surrounding this

particular image were chosen to represent my husband and my children. Because I will forever be a *danzante* and will always love my family, I felt that I could live with this permanent adornment for the rest of my life.

I would not have been able to design this tattoo if I were not a *danzante*. My strong attachment to *danza* has changed my life in many ways. It has become an outlet for the frustration I have felt living as a woman of color in an oppressive society. It has given me the opportunity to identify myself as an indigenous person who comes from a beautiful and fascinating ancestral heritage. Additionally, I have been able to fight against social injustices as a member of *Danza Mexica Cuauhtemoc*. *Danza* has given me a sense of empowerment along with a strong sense of cultural pride. I am not afraid to show my true self within the dominant culture, and I know that my fellow *danzantes* and *elders* would defend my political activism at any given moment. I know my history and have the knowledge to take a stand against racism, oppression, and discrimination. *Danza* has become a way of life for me and has provided a way for me to regain my history and ancestral heritage. It has also given me the tools to raise my children with the values and morals I have acquired as a person who lives her life with dignity.

In my opinion, being a *danzante* in a politically active *danza* group can produce dramatic change in one's life. To dance is to resist oppression and to embrace and nurture the inner self. It is a privilege and honor to reclaim my body and break the chains of oppression by dancing ancient dances that our ancestors performed under the threat of persecution. Getting tattooed was a ritualistic experience for me because it was another way to connect to my roots by doing something that my ancestors used to do to their own bodies. I made a political statement by getting tattooed because I reclaimed my body and

broke dominant social norms of how one should look like in this society. The very style and significance of my tattoo is my way of stating that I am indigenous and that I am proud of who I am. My tattoo gives me an opportunity to publicly share my identity and my cultural pride. As a descendant of Tlahtoani Cuauhtemoc, I pledge to do what I can in my lifetime to help keep my ancestors' heritage and traditions alive. *Mexica tiauhui, aic polihuiz in mexihcayotl!*<sup>47</sup>

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<sup>47</sup> This sentence translates to “Mexicans moving forward, the Mexican essence will never perish!” (Herrera)

## CHAPTER 7

### NONEMILIZ (MY LIFE)

#### PERSONAL NARRATIVE



Figure 7.1 Verónica Valadez. Photo by Marie Gregorio-Oviedo.

## Introduction

I offer this section as a *testimonio* of my life to document my *vivencias* in an effort to counteract the historical exclusion of our stories and realities from the books of history. My goal is to share my experiences as a woman of color, a woman who came from poverty, a woman who beat the odds, and a woman who found herself of the black and red path of her ancestors. I also offer this personal narrative as a way to pay tribute to my family's history and to the many life lessons Creator has put on my path towards consciousness.

## Prologue

Within the Nahuatl concept of space and time, the fundamental idea of the four cardinal directions and the central direction, which makes the fifth or central region, is found in all the religious manifestations of the Nahuatl people. Colors, deities, animals, trees, days, and people, according to the day on which they were born, belong to one of the four regions of the world. In traditional *Azteca/Mexica danza* ceremonies, it is customary to begin by asking permission to dance, pray, and conduct ceremonies from the five directions, our ancestors, and living beings that surround us. Once the opening ceremony and asking of permission is complete, specific dances are offered to each direction. We begin with the eastern direction, followed by the western, northern, southern, and finally the central direction. As a *danzante*, I have come to understand these fundamental principles and apply them to my own life, which in turn, have helped me understand, accept, celebrate, and cope with whatever comes my way.

My personal narrative explores the various ways in which the five cardinal



directions and their elements can be applied to my life story. The first section, dedicated to my father, begins in the east, where the sun rises and a new day begins. The second section, devoted to my mother, follows the sun into the sunset, where the female energy is honored. I pay tribute to my elders in section three, represented by the northern direction. The fourth section reflects the natural elements associated with the southern direction and my relationship with children. The conclusion, and central direction, is dedicated to the essence of my inner self in relation to my hopes for the future.

## Section One: East, Water, Acatl, Male Energy

When it rains, I think of my father, the water and fertilizer that brought me into this world. I was born on April 29, 1974 to struggling immigrant parents in Santa Maria, California. My parents were farm workers and we lived in government housing where poverty reigned. I was the fifth born of six children. My mother, a beautiful and loving woman, married my father in their native Mexico. They immigrated to California in the early 1960s, where they raised us.

My father was a very interesting man, to say the least. He was very hard working and tried his best to provide for his family. However, he was also an alcoholic. He suffered from a horrid addiction that he could not overcome. I remember life being very difficult and stressful as a young child. My father's addiction to alcohol, the most destructive of all *waters*, was the root cause of his abusive behavior towards my mother. What I remember most are the violent storms of alcohol binging. Whenever my father came home drunk and began his ranting, he would wake the whole family just to pick a fight my mother. My mother used to say "*que se le metía el diablo*" when he drank. He became a different person, with anger, hatred, and evil in his eyes. I could not stand to see him like that.

My father's personality reflected the characteristics associated with *acatl* (the reed). *Acatl* grows near water, and the way I see it, my father's water was alcohol. He could not live without it. This of course did not allow him to grow in a good way. As he grew, he became a sick individual, controlled by dangerous waters. Typically, the *acatl* gathers its strength from its flexibility. If the reed becomes too rigid, strong winds could break it. My father was constantly in the process of creating his own perfect storm.

I don't remember him being affectionate towards my mother or siblings. That is not to say that he never was, I just don't remember it happening. What I do remember, very clearly, is how affectionate and loving he was towards my younger sister and I, showing his ability to express a less rigid and more flexible, compassionate personality. We were his *consentidas*, his "*Negra Noche*" and his "*Güerra Musiquera*". I'm not exactly sure why that was. Maybe it was because we were too young to contest his actions or tell him what to do. We were young, innocent, naïve, and playful little girls, happy to spend every minute with our *papi*. I knew that he loved us, all of us, very much. He used to tell me every chance he got.

My sister and I spent a lot of time with our father. As a matter of fact, I have more memories spending quality time with our father than with our mother as little girl. He loved being around water and used to take us fishing, to the beach, or to the duck pond at the park quite often. He took us just about everywhere with him. As soon as I got home from school, I'd rush to get my homework done so I could spend the rest of the day with my dad. I remember him telling me wonderful and imaginative stories. He used to tell me what a beautiful and perfect paradise heaven is and that God loved us very much. He also used to tell me how very much he loved my mother. It seemed he wanted me to believe him so badly when he'd ask, "*Si me crees, ¿verdad mi'ja?*" I wanted to ask him why he treated her the way he did, but I just couldn't do it. I just listened and hoped things would get better, recognizing the potential he had to be a more flexible and kind *acatl*.

When I was eight years old, there was an incident that made me have to stand up to my father in defense of my mother. I remember playing right outside our front door on a sunny afternoon. My parents were inside the house when I suddenly heard my mother

yelling my name as loud as she could. I knew something was wrong. I ran inside and saw them standing face to face, with fear in my mother's eyes and pure fire in my father's. With *acatl*, the potency of igniting fire is always there. I saw this potentially dangerous fire in my father that day. I put a chair in between my parents, stood on it and looked at my father square in the eyes as I firmly told him, "*¡No papi! ¡Déjala en paz!*" He seemed to have snapped out of his ignited state of being. Then he looked at me with sadness in his eyes and walked away. He went to his room and I didn't see him come out for the rest of the day. It broke my heart to have to scold him. I felt as if our relationship had been tainted. I also felt like I was being forced to deal with the truth of who my father really was: an alcoholic, too sick to control the storm of his addiction.

I remember the last day I saw my father as a young girl. My mother received a phone call from one of my father's relatives in Mexico to notify us that his brother had passed away. I accompanied my mother when she went to give him the news. He told us that he had premonition about his brother dying the night before. Then he told us that would be making arrangements to go to Mexico immediately. We said our goodbyes and he was gone.

About a month or so went by when I received a letter from him telling me how much he loved and missed me. Soon after, he sent my younger sister and me a pair of gold earrings with our birthstones. He attempted to stay in touch with us at first, but that soon became a thing of the past.

So many years went by without having him in our lives. He didn't see us grow into adulthood. He missed our weddings and never came to know his grandchildren. Needless to say, his absence affected me throughout the years causing me to suffer from

depression for a long time. I didn't hear from him or see him again until I was in my mid twenties. I had moved away from home to attend school at UC Santa Barbara when my mother called to tell me she received news that my father was very ill.

The storm that had been brewing over the years, fueled by alcohol and fire, was finally causing the *acatl* within my father's being to break. He was dying from pancreatic cancer and had from a month to three months to live. Within a couple of days, we booked flights to Mexico to see our father for the last time. It was one of the strangest experiences of my life, knowing that I would soon see my father again after so many years. I wondered what it would be like to see him again. I wondered if he was still mentally alert, and if he would recognize me. Would he be happy to see us? Would he push us away and deny us? The day finally came for me to find out.

Walking into that old house we used to live in every summer as children, instantly brought tears to my eyes. My sisters and I walked in and saw him lying on his bed. He looked so fragile and old. His thick black shiny hair that I remembered had turned white and dull. He could hardly move from the pain. At first we were a bit timid and unsure how he would react. Once he realized who we were, he expressed his gratitude to us for being by his side.

My eldest sister was the first to speak to him on our behalf as she said, "*Apá, aquí estamos. También está 'La Negra Noche' y 'La Güerra Musiquera'.*" She showed him a pamphlet from UCSB with my artwork on the cover, and told him that I was a talented artist and was studying at a university. She told him that his hard work and sacrifices helped get me there. He started to cry and it was then that I went to him and gave him a hug. As I hugged him he said, "*Mirame, ya me estoy muriendo mi'ja, mi Güerra*"

*Musiquera*,” as if to express his regret for not having fixed things between us before his time on earth came to an end. It all felt so surreal.

We were only able to stay a few days before having to return to our responsibilities back home. On our last evening there, we sang him all his favorite songs. After saying our final goodbyes, knowing that I would never see my father again, I tried my best to let go of all the anger and resentment I had towards him for making our lives so hard. I recognized that an end was coming to a storm that, although violent at times, sustained us with the water and fertilizer necessary to make our existence possible. The storm had passed and the waters were calm. I wanted him to die in peace, knowing that I still loved him and that I would always be his “*Güerra Musiquera*”. May he rest in peace in that wonderful and beautiful heaven he used to describe to me when I was a little girl.



Figure 7.2 My father, my younger sister, and me. (1979)

## Section Two: West, Earth, Calli, Female Energy

In the west, the earth's horizon plunges the sun into darkness representing death and regeneration of the sun for a new day. The west corresponds to the land of the night and the dead. This region is referred to as *Cihuatlampa*, meaning the "place of the women," where the *Cihuateteo* (deified women who have died in childbirth) escort the sun each evening after its journey across the sky. *Calli* (house) is a symbol for femininity. *Calli* represents a structure that protects its inside matter; like a skull, a home, a pelvis or a uterus protects the matter that is within, for example. The cardinal direction of the west is represented by the color white and ruled by Quetzalcoatl, Venus, and wisdom. I offer this prayer to my mother, Angelita Miranda Valadez, for being a strong, wise, and loving mother.

My mother was the first born of twelve children in Jalisco, Mexico where she met and married my father at the age of twenty-six. Her family lived a very humble and simple life in a small rural *pueblo* called, Jesus María. She was taught to be a devout Catholic and followed all the acceptable social norms associated with being a good Christian and decent *señorita*. My father, who was a widower with six children, pursued and romanced my mother until she finally accepted his marriage proposal.

According to my mother, he was very affectionate and catered to her every need, until their wedding night that is. After professing his love and promising to honor and respect his new bride in front of the whole *pueblo* and God, his true colors were revealed following an evening of celebrating and drinking. Rather than experiencing a magical night of love and romance, my mother faced the harsh reality of her new life when my father forcefully showed her that she belonged to him and would have to obey his every command from that day forward. Coming from a Catholic family, she was reminded by

her parents that she couldn't leave her husband because that wouldn't be the Christian thing to do. She was told that marriage was a sacred vow and that she would have to endure whatever her marriage had in store for her.

My mother stuck it out and developed tough skin over the years. They decided to move to California where my father landed a job overlooking a large farm. My mother gave him four beautiful children during that time, and helped bring his other six children to the States to live with them. She endured many hardships having to deal with his drinking problem and his bipolar-like personality. My mother had no one to run to being so far away from her family. My father eventually drank away his cushy job and was fired. That is when they moved to Santa Maria, where they found jobs as migrant fieldworkers. By then, my mother was discovering how to survive in this country and managed to find our family a home in a government-housing complex. Meanwhile, my father's older children, who were grown by then, found their own place to live nearby.

My father continued drinking and beating my mother until she finally had enough and made him leave. He went to live with his older children, and soon after, my mother found out she was pregnant with me. She tried forgiving him and gave him several opportunities to get himself sober. I was born during a time when my father was lost in his world of alcoholism. My mother hadn't heard from him for days and it took a while before he received the news that I had been born.

Growing up I remember my mother doing everything in her power to make sure we were well taken care of. Although my father was a hardworking man and tried to provide for us financially, his alcoholism limited his ability to function and work as well as he could. My mother had to swallow her pride many times when she applied for



government assistance to supplement the meager income they earned as farm workers. She also knew that she couldn't always depend on my father, so she learned to look for resources that would help her support her family.

My mother also tapped herself into great support systems, which included becoming a very involved parishioner of our local Catholic church. She joined the church choir and helped coordinate many of the church fundraisers and festivities. My mother quickly developed strong leadership skills and was soon one of the most involved and knowledgeable members of her parish. She also began building strong friendships with her fellow parishioners who are still very much a part of her life.

I admire many things about my mother, but her religious faith has by far impressed me the most. After all the hardships she has encountered, she never lost faith. Not once did I see her lash out or blame God for her misfortunes. Not once did she turn her back on her church. The strong bond and loving relationship she has with God has been her salvation. The interesting thing about her Catholic faith is that she didn't allow it to make her submissive. She found strength in her faith and learned to stand up for herself and for others. She found her voice and wasn't afraid to take a stand.

My mother, Angela Miranda Valadez, taught me to stand for justice, not so much by telling me how, but through example. She was involved with several grass roots organizations including the CRLA (California Rural Legal Assistance) and the UFW (United Farm Workers Union) as she joined the struggle to attain humane treatment for field workers. She became very savvy and knew her rights. She knew how to defend her children and wasn't afraid to take on any teacher, principal, school counselor, or school

board for that matter, when it came to making sure we weren't being denied access to any educational opportunities.

My mother also learned how to stand up to my father and called the police any time he threatened her. After my father moved back to Mexico, our lives seemed to become calmer and happier, for a while at least. The many years of my father's abuse and neglect left emotional scars on all of us, and those scars began to manifest within us in obvious ways. My siblings were in middle school and high school, and my younger sister and I were in elementary school when my father left. We all got into trouble for fighting or threatening others at school. I don't think we were mean children, we just needed an outlet for the emotional baggage we were carrying, and the only we knew how to express ourselves was through anger.

This violent behavior eventually led to one of the saddest days in our family's history. One of my brothers was walking home from school one day when he was confronted by some "homies" from another "hood." They jumped him and beat him unconscious. My mother nursed him for days and wouldn't let us see him for about a week as he healed from his wounds. At first we thought he was in shock when he just sat there staring at the ceiling day after day, but after a while my mother suspected there was something seriously wrong with him. She took him to several specialists to find out what was the matter. After many tests, the doctors diagnosed him with schizophrenia. He was so handsome, smart, and funny, but we knew that he would never be the same again. The brother that I knew and adored was gone forever.

My mother suffered a deep depression as she tried to cope with my brother's sickness as a single mother on welfare. He soon became very violent, and it came to the

point where my mother could no longer take care of him. He was taken to a mental health hospital where he lived for several years. It was during this time that my other siblings also left home. My eldest brother one of my sisters both married and moved out to start their own families. My eldest sister joined the air force and was stationed in San Antonio, Texas where she still lives today.

I felt like everyone was abandoning me. I felt alone, confused, lonely, depressed, and afraid. I was upset that life was so hard and I was tired of seeing my mother struggle emotionally and financially. Eventually I felt angry and that anger took over. The more I tried to stay on the right path, the more out of control I became. Everything became too much to deal with. I felt lost and didn't care about my future. I became a rebellious teenager and my mother's worse nightmare. I was failing school and hung out with the wrong crowd. To make matters worse I got pregnant. Looking back, I realize that I was trying to fill an empty void in all the wrong ways. I was a mess!

After becoming pregnant and realizing that I was going to have to raise my son on my own, everything changed for me. I knew I had to make drastic changes in my life and was determined to do well in school. I brought my grades up, worked full time, and even started dreaming about going to college. It took a while before I relearned how to interact with my mother again. We had different ways of looking at the world and had many disagreements. However, my mother was always there for me when I needed her.

I was ashamed of being a teenage mother and felt like I had to stand on my own two feet to redeem myself. I didn't want to burden my mother with my situation, so I eventually moved out and was resolute on raising my son on my own as I worked full time and went to college. I decided to apply to UCSB and was accepted, making me the

first in my family to attend a four-year university. My mother was very proud of me, but broken hearted to see my son and I leave. Although I had overcome many adversities, she wasn't sure that I could do it all on my own. She offered to take care of my son while I was away at school, but I was determined to make it on my own and took him with me anyway. I missed my family and visited home often. My mother's love, and my determination to be a good mother, got me through my years at UCSB.

In our *calli* (house), the wisdom of my mother ruled, and still does even if we all live in different houses now. Her strength, love, and endurance carried us through the darkest times and into a new era filled with light and endless possibilities. She protected us from our father's violent addiction to alcohol and from discrimination the best that she could. My mother is a strong woman, the strongest I have ever known. Her spirit and faith are to be admired. She has been my greatest teacher; my Quetzalcoatl, my Venus, and I will cherish her always. I owe everything to my mother and vow to honor her by living my life in a dignified manner. In this way, I can pay tribute to the many sacrifices she underwent to protect us, ensuring that we'd thrive as adults against all odds.



Figure 7.3 My mother, siblings, and me. (1978)

### Section Three: North, Wind, Tecpatl, Elders

The wisdom of my elders has pierced through me like obsidian; full of reflection, giving meaning to the constellations within my internal being. To face north is to reflect upon experiences and elderly advice. The dark shiny obsidian blade, *Tecpatl*, reflects images and symbolizes internal reflection and awareness. The northern region, *Mictlampa* (place of the dead), is ruled by *Tezcatlipoca*, lord of fate, destiny, and night. The north is also associated with the element of wind, *Ehecatl*, which represents breath and spirit. This section is dedicated to my elders for the guidance and knowledge they have handed down to me.

My mother was my first elder, and leaving the security of her *calli* forced me to face life on my own as I began my new endeavor as a Chicano Studies major at UCSB. A whole new world was beginning to open up for me full of new challenges and great opportunities to grow. Transitioning into this new lifestyle was extremely difficult. The stress of being a single mother and trying to do the best for my four-year-old son was the most challenging. I knew that my son was lonely being away from our family. He had to undergo major changes getting used to a new environment while simultaneously beginning preschool. It took a while before he could settle into our new life.

Meanwhile, I was also trying to get accustomed to my new role as a student and a single mother away from home. At times I doubted myself and wondered if I was doing more harm than good by putting us through this. I broke down many times and felt as if I was spiraling downward. The workload was tremendous, especially since I had to provide a home-cooked meal for my son and spend time with him to ease his emotions before putting him to bed. I couldn't start my homework until he was asleep, which caused me

to stay up late every night to finish my workload. It was exhausting, and I found myself crying and doubting myself more and more.

Luckily, I came across a *compañera* at school who I saw dancing “*Danza Azteca*” at a cultural event on campus. I was in awe as I witnessed my ancestors come back to life. The heartbeat rhythm of the drum and the sweet aroma of copal awakened my senses as well as my genetic memory. This incited a fire within me that made me want to connect with my inner spirit, my *Ehecatl*, which allowed me to have a deeper understanding of myself and my purpose on earth. Somehow I knew that this would strengthen me and be the medicine I needed to heal and survive my difficult situation.

I began attending the Aztec dance classes, and although the workout was intense and my body ached for weeks, I felt uplifted and motivated. This *círculo* of *danzantes* provided us with the support that we needed. My son became friends with the other children and I developed friendships with the women in the group. It was during this time that I fell in love with the man who is now my husband. He was sincere, loving, and very supportive of my dreams. He took in my son and treated him as his own, loving him without limits. We began to build a life together and he helped me raise my son as I finished school. *Danza* and the love of my husband gave us the security and foundation we needed to continue on the path towards consciousness.

The elders within the tradition of *danza* were especially welcoming and reassuring. They gave me a lot of good advice and opened my eyes to new perspectives and ways of dealing with life. They taught me how to look into the smoked mirror, *Tezcatlipoca*, by providing me with the means I needed to see who I was. At first, my self-reflection was distorted. My challenge would be to not let myself be cheated or

fooled by this distorted image, but to see past the smoke so I could see my true self. I realized that I could not go on living without developing a healthier and well-balanced sense of identity, composed of all that I was and all that I was capable of becoming. I knew that I had to challenge *Tezcatlipoca* rather than try to escape from it or be defeated by it. This was my spiritual initiation – a challenge and test of my courage. My elders explained to me that dealing with my own distorted reflection would not be an easy task, but overcoming this test would prepare me for the biggest challenges yet to come.

From that point on, I felt that my ancestors were with me at all times. I felt connected to everything and everyone and was ready to face the obstacles that were awaiting me. This empowerment was essential in helping me become accustomed to being a student, and also gave my son the opportunity to be at peace with his new life. I began doing well in school and was enjoying my learning experiences.

The Chicano Studies professors, whom I also saw as revered elders, planted fruitful seeds into my consciousness as I began to understand the true history and present conditions of my people. This further aided my attempt to look through the smoke in the mirror as I searched for truth. I was hungry for knowledge and enjoyed spending time with my elders, both *danzantes* and professors. I developed a profound appreciation for those with grey hair, understanding that each smoky colored strand represented an enormous amount of *sabiduría*.

As life would have it, I was faced with other hardships along the way that would once again test my courage as I came to understand the essence of *Ehecatl*, the element represented by the northern direction. *Ehecatl* can be translated into “wind,” but can also have a more spiritual meaning including “Great Spirit,” or “God,” the giver of life. Since



life is physically sustained through breathing, it can be understood that the physical and spiritual manifestation of life happens through the air that we breathe, and its main features are its presence everywhere and its fluidity, like spirits. This understanding helped me cope with the passing of several loved ones during this stage of my life.

Besides my father passing away and having to say goodbye to him after not seeing him for so many years, I also experienced the loss of my maternal grandparents. They were loving and wonderful grandparents, and very special to me. The passing of my grandmother, Trinidad Hernández de Miranda, was especially hard on me. She was my most cherished elder. Abuelita Trini was kind, loving, and had such beautiful energy. When my mother told me she had suffered a stroke, I immediately made arrangements to see my Abuelita so I could tell her how much I loved her before she was gone.

My mother, younger sister, and I finally made it to Mexico and were able to see my grandmother before she passed away. *Pobrecita*, she couldn't speak and could barely see or hear us. Somehow, she knew we were there as she gathered every bit of strength she could to mumble our names. She reached out for us and held us tight. She cried profoundly and wouldn't let go. I sat on her bed and she gave me her fragile hand. She slowly lifted her hand to feel my face, since she couldn't see too well. Abuelita Trini then put her hand on my heart and she pressed as hard as she could for a very long time. I think she was trying to feel her blood and her breath, her *Ehecatl*, running through my heart. At that moment, I began to sing a Nahuatl song I learned through *danza*. It was my way of letting her know *que no me hice pocha y que nunca olvidaré mis raíces, mis abuelos, ni mis antepasados*.

Losing my loved ones forced me to find healthy ways to heal. I was able to do that by staying focused on my son, my studies, and my newfound spirituality in *danza*. Losing them made me appreciate those who were still around me. I had also come to understand that my loved ones weren't really gone and that, in actuality, they were closer to me in death than they were in life. They had become the spirits and the air that surrounded me, sustaining the breath that continued to give me life, as they became my spirit guides. I know now that they are always with me.

A few years went by, and the time came for me to actualize my dream of earning a Bachelor's Degree in Chicano Studies from a four-year university. My mother couldn't have been prouder of me. The whole family, even extended family, came to my graduation. I opted to graduate through the Chicano/Latino graduation ceremony. Consequently, the Chicano/Latino graduation committee asked the *danza* group I had become a part of to open the ceremony with a traditional Aztec blessing. On that beautiful sunny day, I was given the honor by my *jefa* to dance with the Mexican flag. I had come full circle, dressed in traditional indigenous clothing, standing tall and proud as I escorted the flag of my people, my parents, and grandparents, throughout the dance ceremony. The graduation became even more significant when I was surprisingly honored with the "Si Se Puede Award." At that moment, I knew that I had succeeded in sweeping away the smoke that distorted the image of who I really was, a strong and courageous woman, just like my mother. I had conquered *Tezcatlipoca*!

As the years went by, I came to know many other elders who have all played a vital role in my development as a *danzante de conciencia*. I have had many opportunities to experience sweat lodge and other native ceremonies under their guidance. For years I

have worked along their side in the struggle for social justice in our communities. Not long ago, a very cherished elder, Josie “Tenache Turtle Woman” Salinas, passed away and traveled to the “long life.” Although there are many elders who deserve to be mentioned here, I want to share the importance of my relationship with Josie. More importantly, I want to pay homage to her dedication and contributions to our communities.

Josie came to me in my time of need, during a very dark time of my life. She prayed for me and with me, and helped me heal with the use of many sacred medicines. Josie was a healer, and worked with people in many ways using the ancient medicines of our people. She was a respected and cherished elder. When Josie found out she was dying from cancer, she asked me to pay her a visit. I made every effort to answer her call immediately. When I saw her, she was still full of energy and seemed very eager to talk to me about our traditions and ancestral medicines. She wanted to pass down the sacred medicines she had accumulated over the years before her time on earth came to an end. She began to hand me one after another as she explained what they were and how to use them.

I became overwhelmed with emotion. Not only because I knew that we were losing a very precious elder, but also because she was handing down her most precious medicines to me. It was so surreal and even scary knowing that I would have to take on such an enormous responsibility. Before sending me on my way, she sat with me and told me what she had learned from me in life. She gave me a native name, Comalatzi meaning Corn Mother in the Yaqui language. This was also the name that was given to her by her Yaqui family. Josie requested of me to bless her funeral and her departure with

*danza*. After going home with all the sacred medicines she handed down to me, I cried deeply for a very long time. I understood what a huge loss not having an elder like Josie around would be. I didn't feel as if I deserved these items or as if I were ready to take on such a responsibility. In time, I came to understand that Josie would not have handed these items down to me if she didn't think I was ready, for she was a wise woman, and I came to respect and feel honored by her decision.

I am thankful for all of the elders that have come and gone, and for those that are still with me. It is from them that I have received the very best education I could ever hope for. I truly appreciate the elders and circles of *danza* that I continue to work with today, as well as the professors whom I am honored to work with at Cal State University Northridge, where I am working towards the next level of consciousness in my life.



Figure 7.4 Chicana/o Graduation, UCSB, 1998.



Figure 7.5 Abuelita Trini in her garden in Guadalajara, Mexico.

#### Section Four: South, Fire, Tochtli, Children

In this southern section, I pay homage to the light and energy children have brought into my life, like the brilliance of sunrays after a storm. They have given me reason to struggle for a world where social justice reigns and children are treasured. The southern symbol is *Tochtli* (rabbit), a symbol of fertility pertaining not only to having children, but also to producing ideas and emotions. The south is represented by the element of fire, which is related to the sun, warmth, great energy, new beginnings, and enlightenment. Within the Mesoamerican framework of cosmology, children are said to pertain these same qualities.

As explained to me by my elders, children are also referred to as seeds in the *Mexica* tradition, because they need to be cared for and nurtured in order to grow strong and healthy, and to ensure the survival of humanity, like a healthy crop of maize. Corn is considered the sacred food of our people that, according to the story of creation, was used by *Ometeotl* to mold and create humans. Seeds, both children and agricultural, were the treasures our ancestors protected from colonization and genocide, not gold. That *conocimiento* has fueled the fire within me that has developed my dedication to working with children.

Being a mother of two, a godmother of eight, a schoolteacher, and a *maestra* in the tradition of *danza*, are what characterize this period of my life best. About a year after graduating from UCSB, I was blessed with *Tochtli*'s power of fertility when my daughter Liana Xochitl Rodríguez was born. When I set my eyes on her for the first time, her big brown eyes and full ruby lips melted my heart. She was precious and beautiful right from the start. I danced for as long as I could during my pregnancy, and when I couldn't dance

anymore I drummed, in hopes of infusing the rhythm of the dances and heartbeat of the drum into my daughter's genetic memory. My daughter, who is now twelve, has been dancing since the day she could walk.

Following the traditions and religious beliefs of our parents, my husband and I baptized our daughter through the Catholic Church. After mass, we celebrated Liana's Christening at a park in the mountains of Santa Barbara, where we could feel connected to Mother Earth. We then performed a traditional Aztec corn ceremony and baptized Liana with corn to celebrate and validate her indigenous roots. One of our beloved elders, Dr. Yolanda Broyles-Gonzalez, conducted the ceremony, and about a dozen *danzantes*, including my son David, came to honor this ancient tradition by offering *danzas* to supplement the ceremony.

These ceremonies were the catalysts for a new beginning and integration of two worlds by merging our traditional Catholic beliefs and our newfound indigenous spirituality together as one. Our daughter was the light that illuminated the path towards understanding and accepting both spiritual beliefs. Like *Tochtli's* characteristics, the day was beaming with many new ideas and emotions as it pertained to our daughter; a child born into a family whose *mestizaje* of religious and spiritual beliefs would feed her fire from that day forward.

Besides being fortunate enough to have become a schoolteacher, another enlightening path for me was becoming a *cabeza* or *maestra* in the tradition of *danza*. Because children are seen as our greatest treasure with the potential to become anything they desire, beginners in *danza* are honored and treasured very much. I have had the extraordinary gift of working with several families as a *cabeza*. Often, parents bring their

children to learn *danza* without the intent of doing it themselves. Eventually however, being unable to resist the rhythm of the drum, parents usually begin dancing alongside their children. Seeing parents and children enjoy *danza* and connect to their indigenous roots **together** has been like seeing the light at the end of a long tunnel. I feel as if *danza* offers a sacred bridge that connects generations among families. It is too often that our youth become disconnected or even ashamed of their parents and grandparents, and *danza* is a way to overcome the negative impact mainstream society has on our families and youth. *Danza* can be good medicine, a vaccine against social distortion.

After years of developing relationships with children in a formal school setting and within our own dance circle, I was given the honor of being asked to baptize children in traditional Aztec corn ceremonies. To become a *madrina* to a child within the tradition of *danza* is one of the most honored *cargos* a *danzante* could have. It is also a fundamental step in a *danzante*'s journey towards becoming a respected elder.

Every summer a ceremony known as "*Xilonen*" takes place, also referred to as "*Ceremonia del Maíz*." In our modern practice, the focus of this ceremony has been the continuance of our traditions and teachings with the children of our community. The intent is to "plant" seeds of our indigenous heritage within their consciousness with the hope that they will "grow" with this knowledge, and ensure the survival of our traditions for the future. The corn is, of course, the most important plant of the Americas, so its use is of great significance in this ceremony. It is emblematic of our relationship to this land and is a symbol of our people. As *danzantes*, we hold close to our hearts the notion "*NOSOTROS SOMOS MAIZ*," meaning "We are corn."

I remember the first time I baptized a child with corn. My closest friend and



fellow *danzante* asked me to be her daughter's *madrina*, who is now twelve years old. It was a privilege to be asked by someone who understood and appreciated the *Mexica* dance traditions. It made me feel good to know that she felt I was capable of helping to raise her daughter within the tradition of *danza*. In preparation for the ceremony, we learned which birth symbols from the Aztec calendar pertained to my soon-to-be-goddaughter. From these symbols we were able to design her *traje*. I also created a drawing that included her birth symbols as an offering to my goddaughter. On the day of the ceremony, we bought plenty of flowers and corn to arrange around the perimeter of the dance circle, marking the sacred space where the ceremony would take place. Each *danzante* offered a dance as we acknowledged this young seed as part of our growing circle. The dance ceremony ended with food and celebration.

Although both my daughter and goddaughter had private baptismal corn and naming ceremonies, we also had them baptized at *Danza Mexica Cuauhtemoc's* annual *Xilonen* ceremony, so that they could be recognized by a much larger community of *danzantes*. We took several bouquets of flowers and ears of corn to offer the circle. The *Xilonen* ceremony is a beautiful ceremony because it is an expression of our commitment to our children and to our future.

Upon arriving, we set up camp and began getting dressed and ready to enter this sacred ceremony. At least a couple hundred *danzantes* were there all dressed in their best regalia with feathers of every color and exquisite attire. Representing several groups, roughly twenty drummers were lined up around the edge of the sacred circle that was marked with ears of corn and colorful flowers. Additionally, *copaleras* (women in charge of keeping the fire and *copal* burning throughout the ceremony) blessed all of the

flowers, corn, drums, dancers, and even the ground that were to become part of the ceremony. The fusion of *copal*, drumbeats, dancers, and energy within the circle created a sacred and powerful space that became an *ofrenda* used to welcome newborn babies into the circle. So much work and creativity went into the preparations for this significant ritual. The power and essence of *Tochtli*'s creative force was evident.

There were many rituals that took place during the ceremony, but the most significant was when the mothers and *madrinas* bathed the entire body of their children with corn and water. The children received a blessing that welcomed them as new members of our community, *gente de maíz*. The women baptized the children in the very center of the circle (*el ombligo*). Meanwhile, the men ran around the perimeter of the area where the women were bathing the children with corn. This part of the ceremony lasted about an hour, throughout which the men kept running to show their strength and endurance, representing the protection they would provide to the new and fragile "crop."

After the children had all been blessed with corn, they were handed to the *padrinos* who stood tall and strong like *guerreros*, along the inner perimeter of the outer circle. Our *jefe*, *maestro*, and most esteemed elder, asked each *padrino* what the child's new Nahuatl name was to be. Wearing a simple white *traje* and a long grey hair, he held each child up to the sun and yelled his or her Nahuatl name four times to honor the four directions. Because it is understood that children possess the qualities of the sun (warmth, great energy, and tremendous light) he "presented" each child to the sun and to the community as we all shouted in unison, "*Mexica Tiahui!*" (May our people move forward). It was a powerful and inspiring ceremony that offered a sense of belonging to a community of people who treasured children.

I have had the honor of being asked to baptize five children within the tradition of *danza*. I love them deeply, as I do my own children. The honor and responsibility bestowed upon me to play a significant role *en el desarrollamiento de conciencia* of these children has made me realize that my actions have allowed others to see how vested I am in ensuring that children are treated with respect, and seen as our greatest treasure.



Figure 7.6 Me and my godchildren at *Xilonen* corn ceremony, 2006.

## Section Five: Center, Father Sun, Mother Earth, Yollotl

A long time ago, the pathway to bring forth our inner essence was revealed by the elders of Teotihuacan in their sacred book *Huehuetlatolli*, as they wrote, “*And this is how you will become a whole person: by cultivating the habit and getting used to consulting everything with your own heart.*” Creator has put many challenges and blessings along my path that have opened my eyes to the profound essence I carry within myself, and my *yollotl* (heart). Although life has been very difficult at times, I cherish the relationships I have cultivated with my loved ones, with the natural world, and with my inner self. When I wake up in the morning, I thank Father Sun for shedding his light upon me and letting me see another day. I thank Mother Earth for her loving and nurturing embrace that gives me the sustenance I need to keep moving forward. I thank Creator for giving my *yollotl* the force to keep beating.

The central direction pays tribute to Father Sun and Mother Earth, the sacred couple that gives life to all the living beings on our planet. Having paid respects to the four cardinal directions that precede this final section, this last and central direction is dedicated to my *yollotl*. As I continue to walk on my path, my hope is to pay tribute to the life changing lessons I have learned from Father Sky, Mother Earth, my family, my elders, my children, my *compañeros de danza*, and all those who came before me.

The sun’s most remarkable feature is its capacity to give light. In spiritual terms, the light of the sun represents life, warmth, clarity, enthusiasm, joy, and understanding. As *danzantes*, we are taught to remember that whoever you are, in any moment and any place, Father Sun is always with you, making an effort to bring out a new day within each individual. More importantly, in order to accomplish all the visions, realizations, and

tasks that one hopes to fulfill, we must fully acknowledge our own luminous nature as children of *Tonatiuh* (the sun). We are taught that, like *Tonatiuh*, our task is to bring light into the darkness, whether it is our own darkness or that of others. I am reminded of this every time the sun's warmhearted light touches my face, like a father's embraces.

*Tonatiuh*, has taught me how to walk on this earth in a good way. I have learned that within me I carry a life-giving radiance that should be used to bring light to those whose suns are eclipsed by sorrow and darkness. When my children are upset, it is my job to help them understand the twists and turns of the winding road we call life. As a teacher, it is my responsibility to help my students realize that they are all capable of accomplishing any task, and that they are beautiful indigenous children who come from a dignified ancestral heritage. As a *maestra de danza*, my *cargo* is to enlighten my *danzantes* with the knowledge and traditions of our ancestors, and to help them find their inner light. I humbly accept that I still have much to learn, and can only offer the bit of knowledge I have been blessed with so far.

Within traditional teachings of our *Mexica* ancestors, earth is considered to be our mother in the same sense that the sun is our father. It is understood that all life comes from her and to her all life will return. Mother Earth is recognized as the ultimate teacher of unconditional love. She does not speak of love the way we do, but rather shows us in a much more effective manner. She is our home, she provides our sustenance, she gives us a body to touch and be touched, and a heart to feel. She gives us other people to make families with. She nurtures us in every possible way. That is how she loves us, and she never stops. It does not matter that we take parts of her body to make weapons. She insists on taking the matter of our physical bodies to make more flowers, rivers, and

animals. Her capacity to be on our side, always supporting us, makes her the greatest teacher we could ever have for learning the mysteries of love. My relationship with Mother Earth has helped me understand that the power of love resides not in how much love I receive, but in how much love I can give.

Looking back, I realize the darkest moments of my life were fed by my mistaken approach of expecting others to fulfill my desires and my need to be loved. I now understand that having such expectations was unrealistic and unhealthy, because no one can control how much love they are given. Even when I was loved, I never felt as if it was enough. I never felt completely loved. The strong need of being loved more or differently, together with the fact that there was no way to control how much love I was given, caused me to become bitter and closed throughout my youth.

Like my mother, Mother Earth has shown me unconditional love, and from that example I have come to understand that the mystery of love has revealed my path towards ultimate freedom. This freedom lies not in how much I can be loved, but in the fact that there are no limits to how much I can love others. This freedom has been my key to happiness. It has allowed me to unlock the chains that have weighed me down for so many years. It has allowed me to forgive those who have hurt me, including myself. It has allowed me to look at myself, and everyone around me, in a different light. It has allowed me to be a good wife, mother, daughter, sister, friend, student, teacher and *compañera* in the struggle for social justice.

These values ingrained deep within my *yollotl* have given my life direction and meaning like colorful expressions painted onto an endless canvas. For years, I have dedicated myself to my community by helping establish a strong and vibrant community

art center in the heart of Ventura's *barrio*. There, children enjoy afterschool art classes where they can express themselves in creative and colorful ways. They have learned how to draw, paint, build, act, sing, and dance. Children and adults come together to learn *folklórico* and *Danza Azteca*, tapping into their rich cultural heritage. Additionally, I have curated countless Chicana/o art exhibitions and cultural events where community building and celebration of life have taken place. In this way, I have kept my sun and my heart shining brightly.

My efforts haven't gone unnoticed. As to be expected, my elders kept a close on me and appreciated the work I was doing. When they saw there was a need to be fulfilled, they came to me because they knew I had the heart to see it through. In time, I was awarded several recognitions by government and nonprofit agencies, and became a known and respected artist, dancer, and cultural activist throughout the County of Ventura. I have been asked to sit on several boards of directors and even the City of Ventura's Cultural Affairs Commission. The most humbling recognition I have been honored with, however, was being asked to participate in a very special calendar photo shoot. The calendar was to commemorate the 100<sup>th</sup> year anniversary of the Mexican Revolution by including pictures of local "revolutionaries" or "*guerrilleros de la comunidad*" dressed in typical Mexican attire of the early 1900s.

I didn't know what to expect the day of the photo shoot or who else was asked to participate in this very special project. I was nervous, yet excited, when I arrived to Olivas Adobe, a preserved *hacienda* founded by a Mexican family during the 1800s. I gathered my thoughts as I focused on *Tonatiuh*'s light descending from the bright blue sky onto Mother Earth's emerald green tapestry of grass that embraced the hills up to the

old *hacienda*. Walking towards the gathering area, I began to recognize several *guerilleros* I have had the pleasure of working with. I was greeted with *abrazos* and *besos* and a feeling of pure joy and pride hummed through the air.

We were treated like celebrities. Make-up artists and hairdressers worked their magic making us feel extra special. There was even a caterer on sight serving scrumptious hors d'oeuvres and decadent deserts. Once we were all looking our best, the photo shoot began. At first, we were all a bit nervous and camera shy. *Para calmar los nervios*, the musicians began to play their *guitarras y arpas* while the bartender served shots of tequila. Dressed in our *faldas*, *rebozos*, *sombreros* and bullet belts, we all started dancing and enjoying this *fiesta* and celebration of our lives' work. Needless to say, the calendar turned out to be a powerful and beautiful statement of our community activism.

Months after the calendar was published, the Chicano Studies Department at California State University Channel Islands, hosted a reception exhibiting the photos from the calendar. That evening, the photographer explained why she thought it was important to immortalize our local *guerilleros*, and was happy to share some unexpected news with us. She told us her husband sent a few copies of the calendar to his mother in Mexico. Her mother-in-law was so inspired by what she saw, that she took a copy to *la capital*, México D.F. The Mexican officials also admired and appreciated the concept of the calendar. In fact, they loved it so much that they formally submitted the calendar into the Mexican government's archives. Astounded by the fact that we became immortalized in Mexico's historical archives, we all jumped up from our seats as we cheered and joyfully hugged each other. I couldn't wait to tell my mother!



I am truly grateful for the life that I have before me, and for the teachings that I have been so fortunate to inherit. As a *danzante*, I am eternally thankful for being able to learn a traditional and ceremonial art form that wasn't meant to survive colonization. Traditions that were once hidden from us have been revealed to me by the power and light of *Tonatiuh*. *Danza* has become a way of life for me, one that has strengthened my relationship with the essence of life. The blood that my *yollotl* propels carries within it all that has been seen, felt, and experienced by those who came before me. I could not be the person I am today without the struggles, sacrifices, misery, happiness, and love that my parents, *abuelitos* and ancestors lived. They are me, and I am them. They lived their lives in a way that would ensure my existence, without ever knowing who I would become. Accordingly, I not only live my life to honor those who came before me, but also to nurture the lives of those yet to come.

I can feel Creator and the spirits of my ancestors all around me. I feel life in the gentle breeze and embrace of *Ehecatl* as it blows away the pollution that distorts our view of Mother Earth's magnificent beauty. I appreciate the cleansing and medicinal powers of the rain that nourishes our life-sustaining crops. I am thankful for the exquisite and beautiful *calli* Mother Earth provides us; reaffirming my belief in a Creator whose imagination leaves me in awe. I see the power in the fire and light that our father *Tonatiuh* sheds upon us so that we can see the splendor of our true selves. I see the light and potential that everyone carries within. I see, hear, and feel life all around me.

This is more than I could have ever imagined feeling as a young, confused, and frightened child. I have overcome so much, and although I know life will always be full of ups and downs, the teachings I have inherited will help me continue on my path. With

the help of my loved ones, the light I carry within, and the force of my ancestors, I know that I will accomplish my goals and realize my hopes and dreams. My wish is to continue contributing to my community as I work with others towards creating a better tomorrow for future generations. I plan on accomplishing this goal by abiding to be a teacher, *maestra de danza* and a visual artist, producing socially conscience art. My ultimate goal after receiving my Master's Degree is to become a professor of Chicano Studies so that I can plant seeds of consciousness in those who will lead us into tomorrow.

I will end by sharing a powerful statement an elder shared with me years ago, “May your sun always shine brightly.” This elder, with a head full of long grey hair and a wrinkled face with expressions of eternal wisdom, told me I must never forget that I am made of dust and light; a smaller version of *Tonatiuh*. He further explained that I have a responsibility to live my life understanding the profound meaning of this statement so that I can overcome darkness and bring about a new day. With much love and light, I end my prayer with eternal gratitude for the life I have been blessed with, and I pray that your sun, along with my sun, may always shine brightly. *Tlazohcamati Ometeotl*.



Figure 7.7 My son and I.



Figure 7.8 Myself, my husband, and daughter.

## CHAPTER EIGHT

### SUMMARY OF CREATIVE PROJECT

My work is a reflection of my identity as a Chicana and descendant of the *Mexica* people. My goal as an artist is to invoke the spirit of my ancestors and exemplify the sacred symbols and metaphors that were embedded and cultivated within the cultural heritage of my people. My paintings convey and visually narrate the history I carry within my very being, inclusive of those who came before me, those with me in the present, and those yet to come. I feel a profound connection to the spirit world, my ancestors, the land and its four sacred directions, to the sun, and to Ometeotl when I paint. It is through the act of painting that I am able to converse with my heart in my quest towards becoming a true *toltecatl* (artist), with a heart grounded in truth, a *yolteotl*.

Through my work I am able to reconnect to and validate my indigenous roots. I create art out of the need to express the beauty of my ancestral heritage. By creating art that reflects the deep appreciation and admiration I have of Mesoamerican cultures, I am able to do my part in ensuring that our ancestral traditions, arts, rituals, and philosophies are revived, preserved, and honored. In this way, I am not only helping to reverse the negative affects of marginalization, oppression, and discrimination, which stems from the residual aftermath of the colonization of the Americas, but I am also paying homage to my family lineage, my ancestors, and to the *Mexicoehuani* community (those that have risen, or come out of Mexico).

Coming to the table as a life-long artist and traditional *Azteca-Mexica* dancer well versed in Nahuatl philosophy, I felt it was important to research and document the various components included in this thesis. Aside from the research I have completed

through the writing this thesis, literature that delves into the depths of contemporary *Azteca-Mexica* dance traditions has yet to be written. This empowering and visually striking dance tradition has captivated tens of thousands of Mexicans and Chicanos on both sides of the border for centuries. Its revival in recent decades has given our communities a platform to grow spiritually, to learn about and embrace our indigenous roots, to become politicized and resist the marginalization of our histories and cultural traditions, and has provided a medium to express our *indigenismo*.

I also felt it was important to include the Nahuatl concept of art, including body art, so that we may gain insight into the philosophical grounding from which grew the artistic and spiritual endeavors of our ancestors. More importantly, however, is analyzing our history and indigenous roots in order to understand how and why it plays such a vital role in contemporary Chicana/o communities. The resurgence of our ancestral traditions and art forms has empowered the Chicana/o community in its efforts to obtaining justice in an oppressive society that has neglected and marginalized the true history of our people. For me, looking into my past helps me understand my existence in a profound and multifaceted manner. Knowing where I came from gives me direction and a sense of purpose in life. It gives me the strength and determination to struggle for social justice.

The following pages include images of the numerous paintings that complete this creative thesis. These visual expressions of my identity and passions are paired with short descriptions of each piece in relation to pre-Cuauhtemoc Mesoamerican cultures, as well as to contemporary reinterpretations of several Aztec symbols and metaphors as they pertain to today's lived realities of traditional Aztec dancers.



Figure 8.1 *Yo Soy Maíz*, 2012. Acrylic on canvas, 30 x 48 inches.

*Yo Soy Maíz* (Fig. 8.1) is a self-portrait inclusive of several elements reflecting the essence of my being. The bottom half of this painting is back dropped with an earthy shade of red, indicative of the color of the soil found in my parents' homeland of Jesús María, Jalisco. The inclusion of the land in this painting also honors our Mother Earth, *Tonantzin*. Growing from this rich soil are plants of corn, which have provided the most important source of sustenance in Native America for millennia. There is also a maguey plant, which was revered as a highly medicinal plant for the Nahuas. A brilliant sun, *Tonatiuh*, rises from the horizon as a reminder that each day brings new possibilities of *conocimiento* and vision. The top half of the painting includes symbols that represent the birth dates of my husband (*miquiztli*/death), my daughter (*cuetzpalin*/lizard), my son (*akatl*/reed), and Mayahuel who is the guardian of the maguey plant and spirit companion

of those born on the day of *tochtli* (rabbit), as I am. The butterflies represent the spirits of departed loved ones. Superimposed on this multilayered background is an image of me dancing in full regalia. On my arm is inscribed a symbol of *xochitl* (flower), also one of my birth symbols. In creating this self-portrait, I wanted to convey the most important elements that encompass who I am; a daughter, wife, mother, *danzante*, artist, and proud descendant of the *Mexica* people.

The second painting shown, *Itzpapalotl* (Fig. 8.2), is an image I designed per request from a friend, Gloria Sánchez-Arreola. She requested that I create a tattoo design based on her Aztec birth symbols, which include her day sign *mahtlactli-omei cuauhtli* (thirteen eagle), her *trecena* (thirteen-day period) *calli* (house), and the symbol representing the year she was born, *chicuei calli* (eight house). Also included is Itzpapalotl (Obsidian Butterfly), which is the central figure on the canvas. Itzpapalotl is the spirit guide of those born during the *trecena* of *calli*. Gloria was born during the month of Quecholli. During this month, ceremonial hunts would take place in honor of Mixcoatl, or Cloud Serpent, depicted in light blue behind Itzpapalotl. Because Mixcoatl is also identified with the morning star (Venus), I included a symbol of Venus coming out of his mouth.

The most significant experience in the creation of this painting was the learning opportunities it lent itself for both Gloria and I. Not only was I able to practice reading and decoding the Aztec Sunstone, but Gloria was exposed to a large amount of information pertaining to the qualities she carries based on Nahuatl cosmological philosophies. She was exposed to the teachings of her ancestors in a very direct and



meaningful way. Gloria also gained knowledge about Nahuatl symbolism and metaphors that provided a pathway for connecting herself with her indigenous roots.



Figure 8.2 *Itzpapalotl* 2011. Acrylic on canvas, 38 x 38 inches.

*Mexica Warrior* (Fig. 8.3) illustrates a painting of a *danzante* (Aztec dancer) from pre-Cuauhtemoc times. I derived this image from a tattoo (Fig. 8.4) adorned on *danzante* Eddie García's chest, whose *testimonio* is shared in chapter 6. I chose to paint this image to honor the choice García made of acknowledging and expressing his ancestral roots by permanently inscribing this image onto his skin. I felt this tattoo was particularly

important to my creative project because it illustrates various elements of body adornment including gauged ears, labret piercing, and face paint. As discussed in previous chapters, contemporary *danzantes* are reviving ancient forms of indigenous body art as a way to affirm and express their *indigenismo*. In doing so, *danzantes* are reclaiming body modification rituals that were nearly lost during the colonization of Mesoamerica.

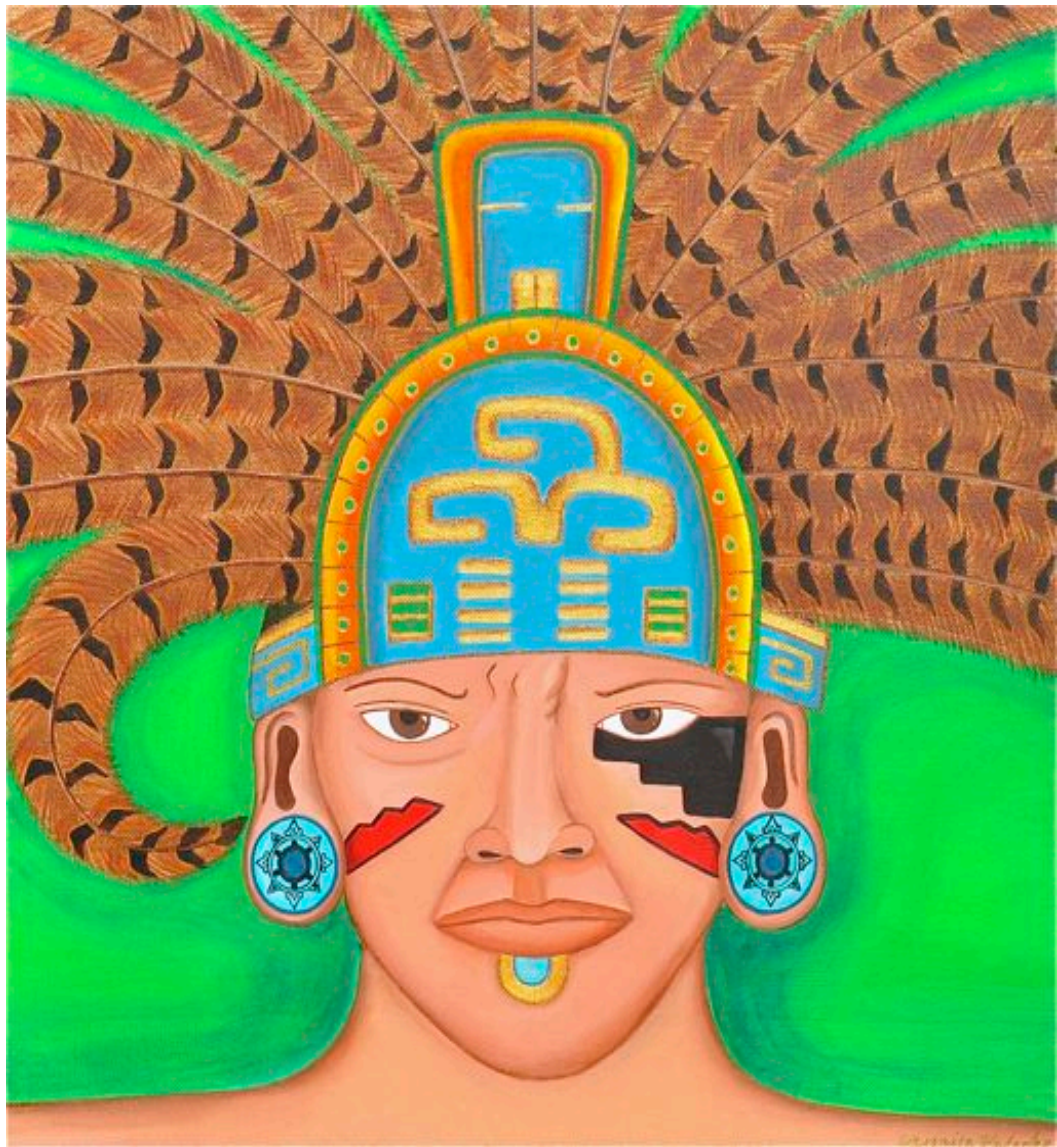


Figure 8.3 *Mexica Warrior*, 2012. Acrylic on canvas, 20 x 20 inches.





Figure 8.4 Photograph of Eddie García's tattoo of a *Mexica* warrior.

The painting entitled *Miquiztli* (Fig. 8.6) started out as a tattoo design that I created for my husband. The central figure represents his *tonalli* (symbol representing the day he was born), *miquiztli* (death/rejuvenation). The stone pedestal that he stands on includes the birth symbols of our two children, *ozomahtli* (monkey) and *ocelotl* (jaguar), and myself represented by an image of *xochitl* (flower). The eagle flying away represents the spirit of our stillborn son, Cuauhtli (Eagle). The symbol on the eagle's back, *akatl*

(reed), represents the year Cuauhtli was born. This image is tattooed on my husband's arm as shown below (Fig. 8.5), followed by a photograph of the painted version (Fig. 8.6).



Figure 8.5 *Miquiztli* tattooed on Luis Rodríguez.



Figure 8.6 *Miquiztli*, 2009. Acrylic on canvas, 40 x 30 inches.



I created the following piece, *Siempre Conmigo* (Fig. 8.7), using a combination of images derived from Nahuatl *amoxltli* (codices) along with my own reinterpretation of Nahuatl symbols to represent my family and myself. The central image represents me in my dance regalia. The skull on my regalia stands for my husband, whose *tonalli*, or Aztec birth date symbol, is *miquiztli* (death/rejuvenation). The two flowers underneath the skull symbolize our two children. The yellow conch shell represents my spirit guide, *Quetzalcoatl*. The three butterflies are a representation of spirits of past loved ones. Below (Fig. 8.7) is a photograph of this image tattooed on my back. The following page illustrates the painting of this tattoo design.



Figure 8.7 *Siempre Conmigo* tattooed on my back.



Figure 8.8 *Siempre Conmigo*, 2009. Acrylic on canvas, 40 x 30 inches.

I painted *Children of Mother Earth* (Fig. 8.9) in response to the political climate surrounding issues affecting the Mexican and Chicana/o community in the United States, in particular to Arizona's controversial passing of discriminating legislation that infringes on the human rights of the immigrant community. My frustration and discontent at the way in which politicians and the media criminalize "immigrants" inspired me to create a piece that expresses the fact that my people are not "immigrants," but rather, native to the Americas. The image in the background is *Coatlicue*, which represents Mother Earth to the *Mexica* people. The young *Mexica* woman, wearing traditional indigenous clothing, is holding planet Earth with a frontal view of the Americas. The combination of these images is meant to remind us, and inform others, that we are indigenous people, native to these lands.

Figure 8.10, entitled *Itzel*, illustrates a painting I created in honor of one of my nieces, Jessica Itzel Gómez, whom my husband and I baptized within a traditional Aztec corn ceremony. In a traditional Aztec baptism, the children are bathed with corn and then presented to the sun and to the people as new members (new crop) of their community. The woman on the pedestal is *Xilonen*, the corn maiden. The pot that she holds has two tender ears of maize of which she presents to the sun. Inscribed on the pedestal are Jessica's three birth symbols representing the day, week, and year she was born according to the Aztec *tonalpohualli* (calendar).

*Temachtiani* (teacher) (Fig. 8.11) is a portrait of Arturo "Pastel" Mireles, *jefe* of *Danza Mexica Cuauhtemoc*. After being given permission by Don Salvador Rodríguez, a direct descendant of Cuauhtemoc, that last *tlahtoani* (spokesperson/leader) of the *Mexica* people, he established *Danza Mexica Cuauhtemoc* in the Los Angeles area during the





Figure 8.9 *Children of Mother Earth*, 2010. Acrylic on canvas, 40 x 30 inches.



Figure 8.10 *Itzel*, 2006. Acrylic on canvas, 36 x 18 inches.



1980s. Under *temachtiani* Pastel's direction, *Danza Mexica Cuauhtemoc* has worked towards building unity, understanding, mutual respect, and harmony amongst all nations in the struggle for political, economic, environmental, social and cultural justice. As a *cabeza* working under *temachtiani* Pastel's *palabra*, I painted this portrait of him as tribute to his life-long work and dedication in defending his people's rights and civil liberties.



Figure 8.11 *Temachtiani*, 2010. Watercolor on paper, 28 x 22 inches.

The following painting, *Dando Luz* (Fig. 8.12), is an image of a woman and her newborn infant. Inspired by the artistic style found in Mesoamerican *amoxtli*, I painted this piece in honor of the great power inherent in the woman's ability to bring forth new life. *Dando Luz*, or giving birth, represents the "light" women produce when giving birth. The sun at the bottom depicts how this light is created through physical and biological manifestations (egg being fertilized). The feathered serpent also represents enlightenment, knowledge, duality, and the power of creation.



Figure 8.12 *Dando Luz*, 2005. Acrylic on canvas, 38 x38 inches.

*Tlahtohqueh de Tenochtitlan* (Fig. 8.13) pays homage to the twelve *tlahtohqueh* (revered speakers/spokespersons) of the *Azteca/Mexica* people. The central image represents a *Mexica* warrior, defender of his people, with half his face depicted as a skull, reflecting the passing of the *Mexicas'* past *tlahtohqueh*. The head is emerging from a serpent's mouth with its tongue hanging down like an unrolled scroll, inscribed with a poem composed by ruler of Tezcoco and poet, *Nezalhualcoyotl*, that speaks of death and the afterlife. Along the bottom half of the canvas are symbols representing the twelve *tlahtohqueh* of the *Mexica* people.

The painting entitled *Quetzalcoatl* (Fig. 8.14) expresses the core of the *Mexica* spiritual goal; the understanding and integration of opposites, or duality, in one's being and throughout the natural world. This fusion between what flies (the quetzal) and what crawls (the serpent) is the basis for the *Mexica's* concept of spiritual evolution. *Quetzalcoatl* is also representative of knowledge and the cardinal direction of the west, which honors women. Quetzalcoatl is associated with the energies of wind, Venus, the dawn, and of merchants, art, crafts and knowledge.

I created *Xilonen* (Fig. 8.15) as a momentum of my goddaughter's traditional *Mexica* baptismal ceremony. This ritual incorporates the ancient tradition of baptizing children with corn. In our modern practice, the focus has been the continuance of our traditions and teachings with the children of our community. We hope to "plant" the seeds of *conocimiento* of our indigenous heritage with the hope that they will "grow" within the traditions of our ancestors. The corn is, of course, the most important plant of Mesoamerica and represents who we are as a people, so it is the focus of our ceremony. It



is also symbolic of our relationship to the land and is serves as a reminder of our ancestral roots - NOSOTROS SOMOS MAIZ.

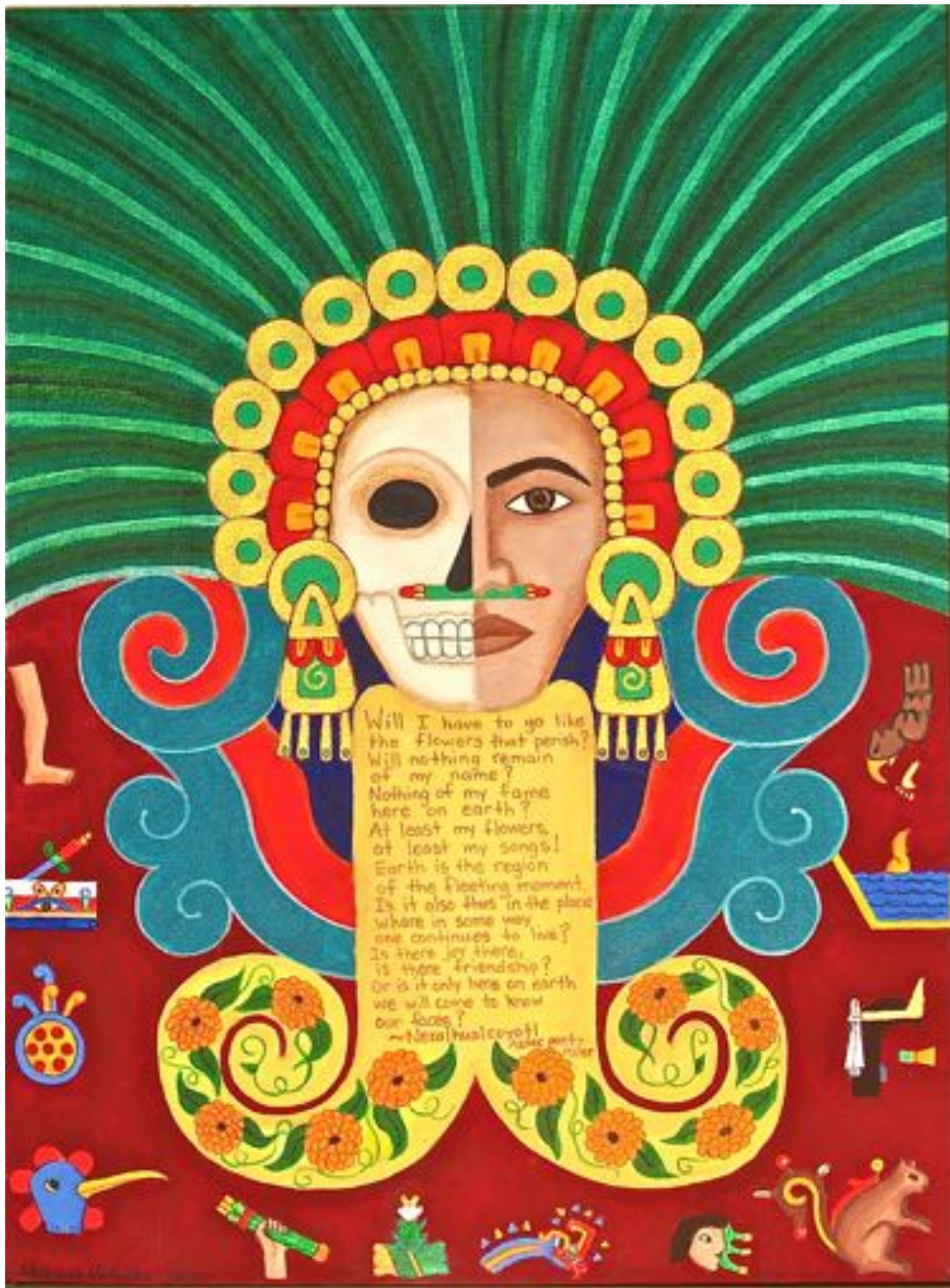


Figure 8.13 Tlahtohaueh de Tenochtitlan, 2004. Acrylic on canvas, 30 x 24 inches.



Figure 8.14 *Quetzalcoatl*, 2006. Acrylic on canvas, 48 x 37 inches.





Figure 8.15 *Xilonen*, 2002. Colored pencil and pastel on paper, 17 x 15 inches.

*El Zarape* (Fig. 8.16) depicts an adolescent girl from Chiapas. She represents the women and children who fight alongside the Zapatista's (EZLN) who are struggling to defend their indigenous communities against military, paramilitary, and corporate incursions in Chiapas, which threaten their very existence. The EZLN aligns itself with

the wider anti-globalization, anti-neoliberal social movement seeking indigenous control over their local resources, especially land. As a member of *Danza Mexico Cuauhtemoc*, it is my duty to be aware of the political struggles indigenous communities are faced with, and to bring awareness of these issues in an effort to bring justice to indigenous peoples. The piercing look in the eyes of this young indigenous *cihuatl* (woman) reflects the daily struggles of survival she faces as an indigenous person in a globalized world of profit and power over humanity.



Figure 8.16 *El Zarape*, 1997. Colored pencil on paper, 12 x 14 inches.

The following image, *Miquiztli Atl-tlachinolli* (Fig. 8.17), is an image of a stylized skull representing death (*miquiztli*) with the symbol of water and fire (duality)



coming out of its mouth. On its head is a symbol representing a smoking mirror. I chose to paint this image to honor the *Mexica* traditional ceremonies and rituals that take place during *miccailhuit* (day of the dead) an indigenous-based tradition that honors the memories of past loved ones. This ancient tradition continues to be observed today in many forms, and is a ceremony that Aztec dance groups carry out every year. Many *danzantes* have beautifully adorned skulls tattooed on their bodies to pay homage to their past loved ones as well as to this ancestral tradition.



Figure 8.17 Miquiztli Atl-tlachinolli, 2011. Acrylic on canvas, 8 x 10 inches.

*Ozomahtli* (Fig. 8.18), meaning “monkey,” is one of the twenty day signs of the Aztec Sunstone, and is the birth symbol of Eddie García and Karen Hernández who both



have Ozomahtli tattooed on them, and whose *testimonios* are shared in chapter 6. It is also the birth symbol of *danzante* Selene Ramón, who has this image tattooed on her foot (Fig. 5.19). The energy of Ozomahtli is considered to be the companion spirit of Xochipilli (divine manifestation of dance and music). Ozomahtli is associated with the arts and games. This painting also includes “ghost image” of a flowered sound scroll emerging from Ozomahtli’s mouth, representing *in xochitl in cuicatl* (flor y canto, or flower and song), which is a metaphor for poetry and art. There is also a ghost image of a *copalero* from which smoke of copal rises as used during rituals and dance ceremonies.

The last painting shown is entitled *Mictlancihuatl* (Fig. 8.19), who is the female counterpart of Mictlantecuhтли, Lord of *Mictlan*, the northern region of the dead. Together they watch over the bones of the dead. Like the painting of *Miquiztli Atl-tlachinolli* (8.17) I painted this in honor of the indigenous-based tradition of the Day of the Dead. Also because it is an image that has been popular among tattoo enthusiasts.

In essence, my goal as an artist is to create art that captures the admiration I have of my ancestral lineage while engaging others in critical and meaningful dialogue pertaining to culture, history, and social justice issues affecting indigenous communities. Painting these images is also a form of resistance against the attempted cultural genocide of my ancestral lineage. Lastly, I would like to express the importance of how the arts can be used as a powerful and influential platform to formulate positive and empowering images of oneself and of a people, as well as their lived realities. –Ometeotl



Figure 8.18 *Ozomahtli*, 2012. Acrylic on canvas, 16 x 20 inches.



Figure 8.19 *Mictlancihuatl*, 2011. Acrylic on canvas, 8 x 10 inches

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