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"*AH, YOU'RE ONE OF THOSE*"
ETHNIC BOUNDARIES IN URBAN POWWOWS

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Abstract:
The inclusion of Aztec dancing as an assertion of a Native identity within the space of North American Indian gatherings called powwows is often contested for not meeting expectations of criteria such as official tribal recognition.

Keywords: contested identity formation, Aztec dancing, American Indian powwows

1. Introduction

Galvanized by Jose Vasconcelos's (1925) articulation of *indigenismo*, a significant number of Mexican public intellectuals and government officials have over the past century exhorted the honoring of Native, particularly Aztec or *Mexika*, roots as the basis of a national mestizo identity. Not surprisingly, young Chicanos of the turbulent 1960s protest era in the United States incorporated *indigenismo* into their ideology of resistance to Anglo-Saxon racial, cultural, and linguistic hegemony. Instead of inheritors of Spanish culture, many Chicanos began to regard themselves primarily as Natives of the greater North American continent who had more of a right to their geographic spaces than the descendants of Northern European colonizers. Some even regarded themselves as rightfully reclaiming the mythical *Mexika* homeland, *Aztlán*, which, according to oral tradition, lay "somewhere" in the north and which, in Chicano activist discourse, became synonymous with the Southwestern United States, the area lost as a result of the Mexican American War. Additionally, in seeking to assert their sense of indigeneity, many Chicanos have attempted to reach out to members of American Indian tribes north of the border. One of the more conspicuous settings of such interactions occurs during the performance of the Aztec dance, or *Danza*, as a part of intertribal powwows in urban areas such as Southern California.

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2. *Danza* in the Powwow Space

Chicanos who participate in *Danza* follow the time-honored tradition of syncretic Catholicism which encourages the celebration of saints' days with Native dances in front of churches. The blowing of a conch-shell trumpet at the beginning and the end of the performance gave the practitioners in Mexico the appellation *Concheros*, whose pedigrees claim to reach into the colonial period. Among Chicano enthusiasts in the United States, the term *Danza* is preferred, which also seems to signal a departure from vestiges of Catholicism and European-influenced instruments such as the armadillo-shell lute toward the reconstruction of purely pre-hispanic elements. Thus, in addition to the conch-shell, only aboriginal instruments such as the upright tubular drum called *huehuetl*, and the slit drum referred to as *teponaztli* are percussed (Rostas 2009). Forming concentric circles, dancers donning pheasant-feathered head dresses and clad in regalia patterned after drawings from ancient Aztec codices move rhythmically in unison at varying tempos without vocalization. This somewhat choreographed execution does nevertheless allow for individual expression in that some of the younger participants might engage in more athletic leaps than the conventional steps of the rest of the group.

Although *Danza* can be witnessed as an event in its own right, primarily in Mexican American neighborhoods, it is frequently embedded in intertribal gatherings of North American Indians called powwows. These one or two-day events provide the predominant frame for the (re)-construction of ever-evolving identity schemata of indigeneity. In far-reaching implications, the powwow has become a meaningful expression of a generalized North American Indian ethnicity in a cosmopolitan setting, where maintaining a separate tribal identity is particularly challenging. Thus, rather than just a mere dance performance for entertainment, the urban powwow contains a subtext which is dedicated to the emblematic resolution of the enormous psychological predicament of coming to terms with what Bourdieu (1987) has characterized as the symbolic violence perpetrated by the hegemony.

Held in a public park, a school gymnasium, or an athletic field, these gatherings are defined by the iconic traditions of the Great Plains, even though many participants do not hail from that cultural province. Choruses of five to ten men huddled around large rawhide base drums strike a steady beat and chant in piercing falsetto, while dancers in spectacular regalia of fringed buckskin, bright cloth, and feathers delight the spectator with a feast of rhythmic colors. Often referred to as war dances, ethnologists and ethnomusicologists have traced them to the Grass, Scalp, Calumet, and Stomp dances of the Great Plains and the Great Lakes (Howard 1955, 16; Young 1981, 103; Browner 2000).

Into this sacred space, *Danza* groups are invited to participate as an extra or special performance since their dance style, drums and regalia contrast sharply with those of the Great Plains. Although so-called "specials," such as honorings or presentations of traditions from cultural provinces outside of the Great Plains, are interspersed throughout the powwow, the arena director and the emcee must ensure that these interruptions are relatively short in duration and thus do not impede the momentum of the general event. Since a *Danza* session can last up to an hour, the constraints of a

powwow's pace usually make available as the only practical time slot the dinner break between afternoon and evening dance competitions.

3. Contested Identities

The invited presence of *Danza* in the powwow space would appear as an unequivocal attempt to broaden the definition of North American indigeneity to include those Chicanos who choose to identify with their Native bloodlines. In fact, one of the past powwows held in the Cornfield Historic Park near downtown Los Angeles, themed "Northern and Southern Winds," was ostensibly dedicated to an appeal to coalition-building between Natives of both hemispheres. Yet, Chicano Nativeness is not as tangible of an identity marker as that of members of federally recognized tribes such as the Lakota, Kiowa or Navajo, who have been assigned official tribal enrollment numbers and identification cards for the drawing of governmental benefits. Many, if not most, Chicanos possess only fragmentary family information regarding the Mexican Indian civilization from which they might descend. Thus, in following the ideology of *indigenismo,* many, especially those involved in *Danza,* have embraced a constructed form of *Mexika* selfhood.

However, that presentation of self, as reported by Ruben Arellano, a seasoned *Danza* participant as well as a veteran singer with a Southern Plains drum, can be bluntly derailed by those who regard themselves as the "real" Indians and who look with suspicion on unverifiable claims of indigeneity.

> *"[D]uring a break at that particular powwow, as I made my way to get refreshments, I was approached by a dancer who was curious as to what tribe I belonged to.*
> *'I'm a Mexika,' I replied instinctively.*
> *'Oh, and where are they from?' he asked.*
> *'We're from Mexico,' I said.*
> *'Ah, you're one of those,' he mumbled as he walked off."* (Arelano, 2017)

Regarding this encounter, Arellano laments with some bitterness that his sense of indigeneity was not just called into question but was, in his opinion, dismissed altogether. Claiming that this was not an isolated incident in his experience, he is convinced that the seeming pan-indigenous unity hinted at in some powwow discourses is tenuous at best.

A similar interaction rattled Jessica Gutierrez, a Chicana graduate student in ethnomusicology who involved herself as a volunteer for the annual University of California at Riverside powwow.

> *"I treated my friends Will Madrigal (Cahuilla) and Joshua Little (Lakota) for helping me with my lecture on Native American musics. Somewhere in the conversations, I said something about Aztlán as homeland for Xicanx peoples. Suddenly, Will's tone changed and I could tell he was skeptical, calling Aztlán bogus, and the people who try to claim*

> *Aztlán just as bad as settlers. Josh chuckled and nodded in agreement as he continued to sip on his drink. I admit, that stung, though it taught me a lot."* (Masini 2018, 48)

Gutierrez was left wondering if *Danza* when performed within the powwow circle is truly an intercultural collaboration or merely a challenged citation of *Aztlán*. Nevertheless, her extensive ethnographic field research, which took her to powwows on several campuses of the University of California, concludes that these spaces are fertile ground for the coexistence, if not reconciliation, of different Native peoples of the Americas.

4. From Citation to Collaboration and Beyond

Though a general, predictable structure recurs in urban powwows, each event has a unique dynamic shaped largely by the personalities of the arena director and the emcee. The impromptu scheduling of various events, such as dance contests, honorings, and special presentations, is in the hands of the arena director. In addition, he is in charge of order, etiquette, and dance protocols, all of which should ideally be administered by a man of good temperament and good humor. Unfortunately, he must also bear the brunt of complaints.

One of the complaints from *Danza* participants concerns their resentment of having their performances relegated to the dinner break, even though the length of their sessions does not permit convenient insertion at any other time. Nevertheless, Ruben Arellano is seemingly offended by that inflexibility.

> *"As a proud danzante, I had long grown tired of danza being disrespected as if it were merely a low-budget traveling circus act solely there for the purpose of entertainment while the crowds' brake for the frybread and 'Indian Taco' stands."* (Arellano 2017)

Exasperated arena directors point out that the Gourd Dance, which also lasts at least an hour, is scheduled separately as well, always before the start of the main powwow event and certainly before most spectators arrive. However, the feeling of marginalization is not shared by Gourd Dancers since their prestigious society, dedicated to veterans, originates from ancient warrior sodalities of the Southern Plains and is always robustly represented at any urban powwow.

The emcee's charms, or lack thereof, are no doubt the most determining factor in establishing the vibe for any event. Sensitivity is certainly more important than clever articulation or audience response to gratuitous jokes. Though gentle joking is expected, controversial political or social topics are generally considered off-limits. More than any other personality, the emcee sets the tone and oils the waters of welcome. Typically, emcees address their audiences in very specific terms and often in a deliberate order. In intertribal powwow contexts, the term "friends" is usually employed for non-Indian ethnicities, mostly Anglo-American and Hispanic spectators, who quite often comprise the majority in sheer numbers. They are acknowledged, welcomed, and encouraged to

patronize the numerous vendors hawking Native crafts, whose station fees help finance the event. But otherwise, this ever-present large segment is rarely addressed and is thus suppressed to the interactional margin. Regardless of tribal affiliation, Indians are addressed either as "my relations," derived from Lakota *Mitakuye Oyasin*, or as "brothers and sisters." Thus, an emcee engaged in a discourse of integration is likely to announce the *Danza* by embracing them as "our brothers and sisters from the south." On the other hand, an emcee employing a rhetoric of exclusion might refer to the Danza participants as "our friends from the south."

At a powwow in Pasadena, the emcee, who was known for delivering ethnic jokes which tested the boundaries of appropriateness, introduced the *Danza* session by trumpeting, "you people go ahead and dance now while my people rest in the shade" (Bartelt n.d.). Yet, the powwow planning committee, which had invited the *Danza* group, must not have shared his exclusionary attitude. Nevertheless, the alienation expressed by some *Danza* participants such as Cuauhtemoc is understandable.

> *"They don't see us as a necessary part of the powwow...Um, and they don't feed us and they don't pay us and that's always a blessing when they do..."* (Masini 2018, 54)

Cuauhtemoc's reliance on the third person plural pronoun clearly projects a distancing, perhaps even a dissociation, on his part (Nook et al 2017, 338). Yet, he appears cautiously optimistic about a future rapprochement.

> *"The powwow provides this space where we can try things out. I think Danza Azteca is about trying to integrate Mexico and United States and indigenous people together. Whether it's been successful or not is up to people to answer. I don't think so. Not yet. But I think that we who are Aztec Dancers will still try. And I think that's good."* (Masini 2018, 54)

More subtle attempts at inclusion can be observed when arena directors invite *Danza* groups to join the Grand Entry, usually reserved for dancers in powwow regalia. The details of the order are determined by the arena director; however, generally elders emerge before youths and men before women, each in their category of dance style, such as Northern Traditional, Southern Straight, Grass, Cloth, Buckskin, Jingle, and Fancy. Since *Danza* is a group performance instead of the individual expression of Great Plains traditions, it does not fit into any of the powwow dance categories, and thus arena directors have no choice but to place the Aztec contingent at the end of the queue following the children. On occasion, that directive has been considered an unintended slight, prompting some *Danza* groups to purposely arrive late in order to indirectly decline the offer of participating in the Grand Entry.

Another potential irritant during the Grand Entry is the consistent refusal to carry in the Mexican flag next to the American and Canadian colors, which are then posted at the emcee stand for the duration of the event. The presence of the Canadian banner serves as a courtesy to the many dancers who hail from north of the 49th parallel and is always

born by a citizen of the Dominion. The absence of the same courtesy to Natives of the south is at times perceived as a snub, especially since the emblem on the Mexican flag, an eagle devouring a snake, is, ironically, a mythic icon among Native peoples on both sides of the southern border.

During open dance episodes called "intertribals", the head man and head woman dancers invite everyone with or without regalia, though women should at least have their shoulders covered with a shawl, to come into the arena and move with the beat of the drum. Some *Danza* participants make attempts to integrate themselves by following that call. Since Aztec drumming is quite different from its Plains Indian counterpart, *Danza* steps also contrast significantly with powwow dance motion. The degree of willingness to assimilate can be gauged by observing *Danza* members attempting to imitate the powwow steps as opposed to those who insist on displaying their "Mexikaness" with their own dance movements, which are invariably out of synchronization with the powwow drum.

5. Conclusion

Influenced by the Mexican ideology of *indigenismo,* which was especially espoused during the protest era of the 1960s, many Chicanos choose to identify as Natives of the greater North American continent. Participating in *Danza* is an assertion of that identity in social as well aesthetic terms, and performing it as a special presentation at powwows symbolizes a reaching out to members of American Indian tribes. Though the invited presence of *Danza* in the powwow space appears to broaden the definition of North American indigeneity, ethnographic data seem to indicate that there are opponents who consider such seemingly manufactured "tribes" as *Mexika* an unwelcome crossing of an ethnic boundary. As an identity marker, Chicano Nativeness simply does not meet American Indian expectations of verifiable criteria such as federal recognition and tribal enrollment. Thus, a true intercultural collaboration between *Danza* and powwow is still tenuous but may increase as individuals begin to participate in both practices. Such can already be observed among a few dancers from California Indian bands and rancherias, among whom intermarriage with Hispanics has taken place for many generations and for whom navigating a dual identity is familiar ground.

Conflict of Interest Statement
The author declares no conflicts of interests.

About the Author
Guillermo Bartelt is a sociolinguist who has focused his ethnographic and linguistic research on American Indian communities.

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