

THE TRADITIONAL AND THE CONTEMPORARY: EMBODIED RESEARCH ON THE FOLK DANCES OF NORTHERN NEW MEXICO

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Abstract

In this paper, I will share the preliminary findings of choreographic and embodied research on the *nuevomexicanx* folk dances of Northern New Mexico that began in January and peaked at a weeklong research trip April 2-10, 2019 in Santa Fe, Alcalde, and Albuquerque, New Mexico.^{1,2} Due to the recency of the research, this paper will be presented as a choreographer's field notes rather than an academic paper.

Keywords:

Nuevomexicanx, contemporary movement aesthetics, New Mexico, practice-as-research, dancemaking.

Resumen

En este artículo, compartiré los hallazgos preliminares de la investigación coreográfica y personificada sobre las danzas folclóricas *nuevomexican@s* del norte de Nuevo México que comenzaron en enero y alcanzaron su punto máximo en un viaje de investigación de una semana del 2 al 10 de abril de 2019 en Santa Fe, Alcalde y Albuquerque. Nuevo

¹ *Nuevomexicanx* is the term I am using to identify descendants of Spanish-speaking peoples who have been living in Northern New Mexico since the Spanish colonial period. I am using the gender neutral "x" in *nuevomexicanx*, rather than *nuevomexicano*, specifically because the dancer who accompanied me during this research trip, Elisa Radcliffie, is non-binary gender. For more information regarding Spanish-speaking peoples of New Mexico, please see Sarah Deutsch, *No Separate Refuge: Culture, Class, and Gender on the Anglo-Hispanic Frontier in the American Southwest, 1880-1940* (New York: Penguin Press, 1987). Also see Hal K. Rothman, *On Rims and Ridges: The Los Alamos Area Since 1880* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1992), and Charles Montgomery, *The Spanish Redemption: Heritage, Power, and Loss on New Mexico's Upper Rio Grande* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002).

² For the purpose of this paper, I am using the historic spelling of the city of Albuquerque, New Mexico which is spelled Albuquerque with an additional R.

Mexico. Debido al hecho de que la investigación fue tan reciente, este artículo se presentará como notas de trabajo de campo de una coreógrafa en lugar de un artículo académico.

Palabras Clave:

Nuevomexican@, estética del movimiento contemporáneo, Nuevo México, práctica-como-investigación, danza.

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THE INSPIRATION

The inspiration for this research came from two experiences, the first being my participation in the Decolonial Epistemologies: Dance Lab (DE:DL). I am an original member of DE:DL an initiative spearheaded by Fabiola Torralba in the spring of 2017. DE:DL is a small collective of U.S.-based Latinx and Latin American choreographers, dancers and dance scholars. Members engage in both choreographic and academic research that focuses on whiteness in contemporary dance, coloniality in contemporary dance, and how Latinx and Latin American dancemakers, who are living embodiments of both colonizer and the colonized, can engage in a decolonial processes. DE:DL has presented choreography at University of Michigan, academic papers at *El Mundo Zurdo: The Society for the Study of Gloria Anzaldúa* conference, and conducted two focus groups at the inaugural *Dance in the Desert: A Gathering of Latinx Dancemakers*.³ Ongoing DE:DL discussions sparked inquiry into my own embodied practices and processes. Having retired from dance in 2017, I was struggling with how to heal my body from years of training in a modern Graham-based technique, a technique I viewed as an embodied indoctrination and literal internalization of an U.S. American white dance aesthetics. I began to question how I could heal my body. I also began to question how my contemporary *nuevomexicana* body would move had the second and third colonizations of New Mexico not taken place.⁴

³ *Dance in the Desert* was conceived and organized by the author in 2018. The gathering occurred in 2018 and 2019. *Dance in the Desert* centers the expertise of local Latinx dancemakers while connecting artists to their regional and national peers. The gathering also provides a space to redresses geographic isolation and centers the infinite expressions and multiplicities of U.S. *Latinidad(es)*.

The second source of inspiration came from my attendance of the October 2018 “Querencia Interrupted: Hispano and Native American Experiences of the Manhattan Project” Conference at Northern New Mexico College in Española, NM. The opening reception at the Northern Río Grande National Heritage Area featured a senior citizen dance group who performed the folk dances of New Mexico. I felt pure delight and joy watching *gente de la tercera edad*, or seniors, dance. I also recognized one of the dances, the *Varsoviana*, as having danced it as a child at family reunions. At the conference, I inquired for additional information about the group and learned that they are *La Sociedad Colonial Española de Santa Fe*.⁵ *La Sociedad* was founded in 1948 by Santa Fe and Pecos, New Mexico residents whose goal is “to preserve the *nuevomexicano* folk dances of the region.”⁶ I estimate the current average age of group membership is 80 years old with members participating in the group for decades.

As a result of these two experiences, I began to ponder the question: What are the contemporary movement aesthetics of *nuevomexicanxs* and other U.S.-based Latinx people who have been living in Northern New Mexico for centuries? Can these folk forms inspire contemporary ways of movement creating a new vocabulary that is truer to the region? What could I learn from these elders?

THE RESEARCH

Searching for opportunities to return home to New Mexico to work on choreography, I applied for the Keshet Makerspace Experience in Albuquerque, NM. I was accepted to the program and was offered a 10-day creative residency to incubate new work in April 2019. I saw that this was the moment to (re)enter my home community, connect with *La Sociedad*, engage in embodied research, and begin cultivating ideas for how these folk forms may inspire contemporary movement. As a choreographer, I wanted to approach this work from an embodied and practice-as-research perspective shying away from written source material about *La Sociedad* and their dance practice, preferring to embody the knowledge of these forms.

⁴ Myrriah Gómez “The Nuclear Option: Perpetuating the Myth of New Mexico as Wasteland.” Filmed December 2018 at La Canoa lecture series presented by the University of New Mexico’s Center for Regional Studies and the National Hispanic Cultural Center, Albuquerque, NM. Video 2:10-4:20, <https://youtu.be/zadJqY7zCgk>

⁵ *La Sociedad Colonial Español de Santa Fe* refer to themselves as “*Los coloniales*.” Given the problematics of this term and its complex relationship to *nuevomexicanxs* recent Spanish ethnogenesis as a resistance to US colonization and Americanization programs, which is beyond the scope of this paper, I will refer to the group as “*La Sociedad*.”

⁶ *La Sociedad Colonial Española de Santa Fe*, membership form, April 6, 2019.

GEOGRAPHY, *PERSONALISMO*, AND *SIMPATÍA*

Given the geographical distance between Tucson and Santa Fe, which is 512 miles or almost an eight-hour drive, I understood the challenges posed to the process of relationship building. *Personalismo* is “the capacity to appreciate and build on personal relationships to establish meaningful bonds of communication and trust.” *Simpatía* refers to kindness and centers warmth, generosity, and reciprocity. *Respeto* is deference to authorities and elders.⁷ The challenge would be incubating these relationships and developing them in meaningful ways while living in diaspora. I began reaching out to La Sociedad in early January. My initial point of contact, Dr. Patricia Trujillo of Northern New Mexico College was on sabbatical and unavailable to make a connection. Additionally, *La Sociedad* has little to no internet or social media presence. The only information I could find online was the obituary of the long-standing president of the dance group who had recently passed away. At a loss, and hundreds of miles away, I emailed all the professional artist contacts I had in New Mexico, including the National Hispanic Cultural Center. One contact shared a member’s email with me, but there was no response. During a brief trip to Albuquerque in early February, I met with Dr. Myrriah Gomez of UNM who had a student whose grandmother was a member of the dance group. Through this student, I was able to make connection with *La Sociedad*’s longest standing member Delfina Romero.⁸ I had a few phone calls with Romero in late February and confirmed my attendance for the meeting and practice in April. Then, in late March, Leo Kahn, *La Sociedad* member whom I had emailed months previous, reached out to me via phone to discuss my participation in the meeting. At this point, communication became muddled with Kahn and Romero providing conflicting information regarding when to attend the practices and meetings. Confused and uncertain, I opted to attend the April 2nd practice as originally planned.

IN SANTA FE: MEETINGS WITH *LA SOCIEDAD*

On Tuesday, April 2, 2019, I attended the practice for *La Sociedad* with Elisa Radcliffe, a dancer with whom I had previously worked. Radcliffe is a Phoenix-based *nuevomexicanx* contemporary dancer who is originally from Albuquerque. My goal was to learn some of the folk dances with Radcliffe and use them as source material for contemporary movement during rehearsals at the residency in Albuquerque. Upon arrival, the elder dancers were warm and welcoming despite the frenetic rehearsal. During this practice, however, *La Sociedad* was rehearsing for a performance at the *Nuestra Música* concert, a performance of traditional New Mexican folk music, that would take place later that week at the Lensic Theater in Santa Fe. As a result, rehearsal was tense and the dancers only rehearsed three of

⁷ Pg. 170 *Mexican Americans and Health ¡Sana! ¡Sana!* by Adela de la Torre, Antonio Estrada (2001).

⁸ Leo Kahn, personal phone call with author, March 29, 2019.

their ten dances: *la Paña*, *la Cuna* and *la Varsoviana*. I was invited to participate in *la Cuna* and Radcliffe and I were invited to participate in *la Varsoviana*. However, it was made clear that they were not able to teach us the remainder of the 10 traditional dances. Given the nature of this rehearsal, I did not move enough to begin embodied research of the form. Regarding *nuevomexicanx* cultural values informing the relationships-building process, however, Radcliffe and I received a warm welcome from members of the group and reciprocated their *simpatía* and *personalismo* with *respeto*.

On April 9, 2019, I attended *La Sociedad's* monthly business meeting and potluck in Santa Fe alone. Once again, I was received with *simpatía* and *personalismo* which I reciprocated with *respeto*. This meeting was much more insightful than the first in that it introduced me to how ingrained *nuevomexicanx* cultural values are in this dance practice. To begin, it was made clear to me that *La Sociedad* is a collective, a community. For example, members vote on every aspect of the dance group including when and where they perform, what dances they perform, how the choreography is staged, what the costumes look like, what gets posted on social media, the days and times of rehearsals, and so on. In order to join the group, a *pareja* must have a *padrino* sponsor them and the larger group must vote them in. Additionally, committee members volunteer for tasks such as sending out birthday, anniversary, get well cards or organizing mass for ailing members. Coming from a concert dance background, this was the first time I saw equity to this degree in the decision-making process in a dance setting. The collectivism of *La Sociedad* makes sense in a cultural context. *La Sociedad's* *nuevomexicanx* dancers are land-based people whose ancestral communities were *ejido* or shared communal lands. This approach to communally shared resources and decision making was reflected in this dance groups core values. Additionally, *nuevomexicanx* culture is traditionally a collectivistic culture although assimilation and acculturation to US mainstream/dominant culture results in younger generations, like me, leaning more towards individualistic cultural values and approaches. The structure of the dance company reflects a culture of collectivism. The organization of *La Sociedad* as a collective harkens back to the communal nature of the peoples and their dances. I thought perhaps this is the process-based practice-as-research that I might engage in with my community of practice of Latinx dancemakers that can lead to more equitable practices. To adapt this approach would mean a deepening of the use of my *nuevomexicanx* cultural values in my own choreographic practice.

In addition to the aforementioned cultural values, *La Sociedad* engaged in additional *nuevomexicanx* cultural practices during their group meeting. For example, there was a strong presence of Catholicism at *La Sociedad's* meeting. Both the potluck and the meeting began with Catholic prayers said in Spanish. As previously mentioned, there is a committee member who schedules masses specifically for ailing members of the group. As a non-religious person who is descended from New Mexico's Sephardic crypto-Jews, I felt

uncomfortable with that portion of the proceedings.⁹ However, I do recognize Catholicism as an important cultural institution that creates and supports community and identity amongst many *nuevomexicanxs*. Regarding language, the meeting of *La Sociedad* was conducted mostly in Spanish. I was expected to introduce myself to membership in Spanish or “Spanglish” and to follow proceedings accordingly. I was particularly interested in this aspect of the meeting as I interpreted this linguistic choice to be in direct resistance to the U.S. Americanization programs that took place in New Mexico in the 1940s that used corporal punishment on elementary school aged kids to discourage the speaking of Spanish and encourage use of the English language.¹⁰ Essentially, this generation had Spanish beaten out of them. Being in their 80s, the majority of *la Sociedad*’s members would have been in elementary school at this time and experienced this form of state abuse.

Regarding cultural construction of gender and gender roles, *La Sociedad* upheld values of traditional *nuevomexicanx* culture. In *La Sociedad*’s meeting, power, roles, and responsibilities were divided clearly along a gender binary as women were expected to set up and tear down the potluck while the leadership was exclusively male. Delfina Romero informed me that she was the only woman president and vice president in *La Sociedad*’s history and that before her time as president, women were not invited to participate on the organization’s committees. In the parking lot after the meeting, Romero stated that she “didn’t like the potluck” due to the division of labor along gender lines and that “the men should help because nowadays they cook.”¹¹ Similarly, dancers can only join *La Sociedad* in pairs. It has not been exclusively stated that pairs are required to be male/female, however given the older generation of membership, the centering of Catholicism in their practice, the embracing of *nuevomexicanx* traditional values, and the lack of same and/or different non-binary gendered couples, this might be the case. As a self-identified *Xicana* feminist, I continually struggle with the traditional construction of gender and gender roles in *nuevomexicanx* culture and foresee that this may be a barrier to my long-term participation. On the other hand, I look forward to opportunities to subvert my culture’s gendered hierarchies.

ORAL TRADITIONS AND DANCE

After our first meeting with *La Sociedad*, Radcliffe and I spent a day in Santa Fe researching the folk dances of Northern New Mexico. I was looking for any source

⁹ Stanely Hordes. *To the End of the Earth: A History of the Crypto-Jews of New Mexico* (New York: Colombia University Press, 2005).

¹⁰ Yvonne Marie Montoya “‘ASINA NOS CRIARON’: Contesting the Narratives and Claiming Place in the Atomic Age:1912-1955.” (Master’s thesis, University of Arizona, 2005), 62-74. Also, Sarah Deutsch. *No Separate Refuge: Culture, Class, and Gender on an Anglo-Hispanic Frontier in the American Southwest, 1880-1940*. (University of New Mexico Press, 1994).

¹¹ Delfina Romero, personal conversation with author, April 9, 2019.

material, including photos, videos, costumes, oral histories from previous generations of dancers. I came into the project certain that we would find something. I called the Fry Angelico Chavez History Library and they had no information. Additionally, we visited the Museum of Spanish Colonial Art, the Museum of International Folk Art, El Museo Cultural de Santa Fe in Santa Fe and the Northern Rio Grande Heritage Area in Alcalde, NM. None of these institutions had any information that could be used as source material to inspire contemporary work other than CDs and books.

This process was fruitful, however, because in meeting with museum staff, particularly María Martínez of *El Museo Cultural de Santa Fe*, Radcliffe and I were reminded of *nuevomexicanx*'s rich oral tradition. Historically, in New Mexico knowledge is shared via storytelling. Thus, the knowledge of these dances may exist both in the embodied memories of the dancers as well as in oral traditions of the peoples who practice(d) them. Given this new realization, Radcliffe and I arranged to interview Debbie Garcia Radcliffe, Elisa Radcliffe's mother who grew up practicing *nuevomexicanx* folk dances in school. However, this interview, plus a brief conversation with an elder, led to more confusion about the origin of the dances as none of the interviewees know where the dances came from or how they arrived in New Mexico.

Some of these questions about the origins of the dances were answered when Radcliffe and I attended *Nuestra Música* an evening of *nuevomexicanx* music and dance in Santa Fe on April 6, 2019. Before each of the dances that *La Sociedad* performed, the emcee shared a brief history of the dances including "*La Paña* originated in sixteenth-century Spain... *la Cuna* was a social dance performed at weddings and baptisms that was popular until the 1950s...*la Varsoviana* arrived in New Mexico in 1850..."¹² Upon hearing the short histories of these dances shared on stage at *Nuestra Musica*, I theorized that the histories of the dances might be shared via *nuevomexicanx* oral traditions among members of *La Sociedad*. That theory proved true at the April 9th meeting. As *La Sociedad* will be included in the Santa Fe Museum of International Folk Art's "Música Buena: Hispano Folk Music of New Mexico" exhibit that will open on October 6, 2019, the museum needs written information regarding *La Sociedad*, written information that does not exist. The woman organizing the event on behalf of *La Sociedad* asked for elders to provide information about the dances which subsequently led to the creation of an advisory board so that the history of the dances can be collected and shared for the exhibit. *Nuevomexicanx* folk dance history lives in the invisible and intangible oral traditions. Delfina Romero informed me that the information "is written down in a book somewhere, but I don't know where."¹³ My theory is that this knowledge is shared after reciprocal relationships of trust/*confianza* are built.

¹² *Nuestra Música 2019*, emcee. Lensic Performing Arts Center, Santa Fe, April 6, 2019.

¹³ Delfina Romero, personal conversation with author, April 9, 2019.

AN ATTEMPT AT THE CONTEMPORARY

While my ongoing research question is: what are the contemporary movement aesthetics of U.S.-based Latinx people who have been living in Northern New Mexico for centuries? In my recent studio practice, I chose to focus on the question: can *nuevomexicanx* folk forms inspire contemporary ways of movement creating a new vocabulary that is truer to the region? Engaging in practice-as-research, I entered my residency at Keshet eager to explore the possibilities of fusing or informing *nuevomexicanx* folk dance practices with *nuevomexicana* contemporary dance. However, sans sufficient embodied knowledge of the folk dances due to the inability to dance with *La Sociedad* at their rehearsal and the lack of non-written source material, the first attempt at creating contemporary work informed and inspired by the *nuevomexicanx* folk dance aesthetics and practices proved to be challenging. Uninspired by the windowless dance studio and armed with the knowledge that most traditional dance in Central and Northern New Mexico occurs outside, Radcliffe and I rehearsed outside in the *bosque* along the Río Grande. Despite the beautiful setting, I was unable to facilitate the creation of any material of merit. External factors such as my personal anxiety and triggers surrounding my first trip home as a working artist professional as well as the lack of chemistry between dancers also played a role.

Disappointment with my initial attempt at creating work inspired by *nuevomexicanx* folk forms, I realized that I had not considered the cultural value of time. Time is a cultural construct and it moves slower in New Mexico, especially in the rural areas in the northern part of the state. Even as a process-based dancemaker, I was frustrated by the slower pace in which the embodied research is occurring. However, it is more important to work within the cultural context of *nuevomexicanidad* than to produce choreography.

Nevertheless, there seems to be some potential in material inspired by the dance *La Paña* and there may be an opportunity to explore how the handkerchief, as a *nuevomexicanx* cultural symbol, has evolved over time. Another choreographic possibility I foresee lies in the fundamental differences in how *nuevomexicanx* folk dance and contemporary dance engage audiences. *Nuevomexicanx* folk dances are danced and performed for the dancers, meaning that they are not presentational, or audience oriented. Staying true to the *nuevomexicanx* culture of collectivism, folk dances are about bringing people in for a shared experience. As such, dances are performed in a counterclockwise circle or in groups of 2s, 3s, or 4s facing inward. Capturing the essence of the group energy *nuevomexicanx* folk dances evoke in contemporary choreography, which is mostly presentational and performed outward for an audience, will be an interesting choreographic challenge.

CONCLUSION

Overall, I believe that the preliminary research has been successful. I was able to (re)enter my ancestral community of Santa Fe and lay the foundation to build long-term reciprocal relationships grounded in *nuevomexicanx* cultural traditions and practices. My goal is to continue to train with *La Sociedad* for the next two years to learn the dances via an embodied practice and learn the histories of the dances by oral tradition. I will continue to explore the if and how *nuevomexicanx* folk forms can inspire *nuevomexicanx* contemporary dance practices. The biggest challenge will be time, resources, and geography. However, I believe in the importance of this work and look forward to engaging in it for the long term.

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