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Mexican Ballet Folklórico: The Zapateado (footwork) of Colonialism and Decolonization

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Abstract

Mexican Ballet Folklórico represents cultural and regional forms of expression commonly performed in both Mexico and the United States (US). This paper examines the ways that this art form has become intertwined with both the United States and Mexico's nationalist narratives of the 20th century. Folklórico is commonly used in Mexico to promote a nationalist and unified image. As part of Mexico's post-revolutionary romanticism, some scholars have argued that folklórico enabled Mexico's nation building process through its celebratory and idealized emphasis on Mestizaje and expressions of Indigenismo. Both racial ideologies emerging in the colonial period and eventually evolving and incorporated into the Mexican Republic, served to rationalize first Spain's colonial empire and later Mexico's nationalist rhetoric. In the US, folklórico is drawn upon to promote a multicultural narrative that supports neocolonialism and shapes the ongoing dynamics of US empire. As a cultural performance, folklórico offers regional dance forms that recreate tropes of cultural formation, social integration, and assemblage. Thus folklórico as a transnational expression produces a dissonance by speaking to the depth and complexity of notions of identity, representation, and cultural formation within imperial nation building projects. However, I argue that folklórico's local and regional expressions counter the notion of a unified Mexico and work against historical and contemporary notions of US empire. In this paper, I examine primary and secondary sources on two dances that are commonly performed in folklórico's repertoire. I also integrate my own understanding of contemporary folklórico gained through my role as a past participant and observer of the art form. Using a historical and ethnographic analysis, I situate folklórico within a decolonial framework. I draw upon the work of Nicole Guidotti-Hernandez and Patrick Wolfe combined with research on folklórico through the scholarship of Sydney Hutchinson and Olga Najera-Ramirez. Folklórico continues to be a popular form of cultural expression and representation of identity on both sides of the US/Mexico border. Therefore, scholarship that addresses this subject provides understanding to its significance and cultural value.