LATINX BELONGING

Community Building and Resilience in the United States

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CHAPTER 9

Dance in the Desert

Latinx Bodies in Movement Beyond Borders

MICHELLE TÉLLEZ AND YVONNE MONTOYA

> No, you don't belong . . . you don't look like us, you aren't like us.
>
> —Lydia, dancer and dance scholar[1]

> The first memory of dance is dancing to Gloria Trevi at the age of three. I had really short hair, but I would be like "*me voy a poner el cabello suelto*" and I would always dance.
>
> —Esperanza, dancer, choreographer, educator

> For me dance has always been a way to express my agency, for me to feel comfortable in spaces.
>
> —Laura, dance administrator

In this chapter, we argue that Dance in the Desert (DITD)[2] is a project that helps us understand cultural expression and community formation for Latinx people in a state, and region, that has effectively targeted brown bodies—regardless of citizenship—for years (Gonzalez de Bustamante and Santa Ana 2012).[3] Latinxs are the largest ethnic group in California and New Mexico and the second largest ethnic minority group in Arizona and Nevada (Kaiser Family Foundation 2019). Given the shifting demographics and its proximity to the Mexico/U.S. border, Arizona has become a battleground for social justice and human rights. The incendiary rhetoric in popular media directly impacts the embodied experiences of vulnerable communities, especially Brown and Black (im)migrants (Téllez 2016). Over the course of the last fifteen years, the Arizona legislature has introduced numerous anti-immigrant bills, two of the most widely known are SB 1070 the "show me your papers bill," and HB 2281, "the ethnic studies bill." Moreover, federal policies like 287G have allowed local governments to collude with federal policies on

immigration enforcement, workforce raids, police brutality, and mass detention and incarceration, which, in Maricopa County, became known as former sheriff Joe Arpaio's reign of terror (Téllez 2016). Despite the eventual overturning of most of the draconian measures of the bills (Depenbrock 2017; Duara 2016), the effects of these policies continue to be felt long after their introduction. Arizona has become known as one of the most politically fraught states in the nation.

The arts community has often been at the center of creative and incisive responses to such political conditions and their material consequences. Artists based in Arizona and in the broader southwest region are no different. In this chapter, we look to the framework of cultural citizenship (Flores and Benmayor 1997; Rosaldo 1994) to understand how Dance in the Desert (DITD)—a Southwest regional gathering of Latinx dance makers (dancers, choreographers, arts administrators)—is claiming social space, and the right of belonging, through dance expression.

DITD was born in 2017 as a response to the lack of space for Latinx dance artists to convene either in the Southwest region or nationally.[4] DITD founder Yvonne Montoya notes that there is no Latinx equivalent to the *International Association of Blacks in Dance*, which hosts an annual conference and advocates for Black Dance on the national level. Nor is there an equivalent to the *Indigenous Choreographers at Riverside*, an annual gathering that brings Indigenous dance artists, Indigenous studies scholars, and dance studies scholars to connect, discuss, and share work.

DITD provides opportunities for Latinx dancemakers to come together, incubate new works, and build relationships—in a region where there is little to no foundation or individual philanthropy support for dance in communities. The long-term goal is to create a platform to promote and support Latinx dancemakers while also increasing advocacy, funding, mentorship, opportunities, networking, and scholarship. Not only does DITD work to fill the void that currently exists in the field of dance; it creates an opportunity for community making and building. Though still a nascent project, we thought it important to document and offer an initial analysis of the potential impact of DITD in the state and region. In this chapter, we will introduce the literature on Latinx dance, analyze our interviews with participants of DITD (dancers and choreographers), and end by discussing the long-term possibilities inspired by DITD. We build on the scholarship of Latinx dance and performance (Salinas 2015; Garcia 2013; Rivera-Servera 2012; Rivera-

Servera and Young 2010; Suarez 2011; Romero et. al 2009) yet recognize that robust dance scholarship about or advocacy for the Latinx dance community at large does not exist. This project seeks to further close that gap.

Belonging and Insistence

In the context of the increasing militarization of the U.S.-Mexico border, including mounting deaths of migrant border crossers, violence, subjugation, and family separation—Latinx communities in the United States fight to claim social space and spaces of belonging. Border states are at the center of these struggles where the intersections of gender, race, colonization, and capitalism play out in myriad ways. The cultural implications for the Latinx community are widely felt across experience and place. While the arts, in general, are largely unfunded, they are radically so for Latinx arts organizations and artists themselves. In tracing the development and potential impact of DITD, we draw on the notion of cultural citizenship (Flores and Benmayor 1997; Rosaldo 1994) to understand how this project makes legible the issues that are inherent in Latinx communities for dance artists but who are typically unable to bring them to the public. In sum, we show that grassroots responses, like DITD, to these social conditions are ways of demonstrating belonging.

Cultural citizenship means having a place and a voice in the public, and it asserts that even in contexts of inequality, people "have a right to their distinctive heritage" (Rosaldo 2009). This point is further made in Cepeda's (2010) analysis of the single "*Nuestro Himno*," a Spanish-language paraphrasing of "The Star-Spangled Banner" performed by a cohort of U.S. Latina/o and Latin American recording artists. She argues, "Situated within the context of the ongoing legal, socioeconomic, and political struggles of recent Latino immigrants, both the recording and the demonstrations constituted important symbolic gestures toward the (re)claiming of U.S. public space and the contested meanings of nation and belonging" (28). In other words, cultural citizenship is distinct from legal citizenship because it underscores the practices that give citizenship meaning in everyday interactions and experiences.

In Rivera-Servera's (2012) cultural study of U.S. Latinx dance in theatrical, social, and political contexts, he called these everyday interactions *convivencia diaria*. He analyzes the "quotidian exchanges among Queer Latinas/os of diverse backgrounds in spaces of social and cultural performance" as "potentially transformative events that yield equally powerful notions of commu-

FIGURE 8.1 Dancers performing *Braceros* by Yvonne Montoya inspired by Montoya's father who worked as a Bracero (migrant farmworker) during his early teens picking watermelon and cantaloupe in Yuma, Arizona, in the late 1960s. Photo Courtesy of Yvonne Montoya and Dance in the Desert. Photo by Dominic Arizona Bonuccelli.

nity, resource sharing, and potentially collective political action" (39). Interestingly, one of Rivera-Servera's sites of analysis is in Phoenix, Arizona, at a time that was about a decade before DITD comes to be. While he analyzes public space and cultural exchange in Queer bars, his concept of *convivencia diaria* can be applied to the intentional space created through Dance in the Desert. Cultural citizenship is built through the relationships created in DITD as the artists bring to vision their stories. Cultural citizenship gives us the language to understand how ethnic communities can assert cultural difference as they claim belonging in the United States. Along with belonging, we add the notion of insistence to underscore the continued urgency and salience of this work—and as a way to express the tremendous commitment Latinx dancemakers in the southwest have to staking public space through cultural expression.

We also use this framework of belonging in order to highlight how our documentation makes an intervention in the literature and field of dance theory, particularly in the archives of dance history where Latinx dance is essentially erased. The experience of Latinx dancemakers must also form

part of these narratives. Salinas (2015) similarly noted this absence in his analysis of the 2005 Public Broadcasting Service (PBS) national broadcast of *Visiones: Latino Art and Culture*, where he points out that of the twenty segments that comprise *Visiones*, three episodes are dedicated to U.S. Latinx dance practices. Two of the episodes feature Latinx dancers performing within the Euro-Western informed concert dance traditions of classical ballet and American modern dance, and the third segment focuses on New York street-inspired hip-hop dance culture. As such, Salinas (2015) argues that "the elevation of mainstream institutional 'white' dance forms within the documentary's Latino 'brown' grassroots focus at once devalues and disciplines non-white dance and dancers to subordinate 'othered' or 'ethnic' status, while also dismissing our important creative contributions to the diversity of Latino/a and American expressive cultural heritage" (13). Throughout his dissertation, he shows how Latinx concert dance and the expressive brown body is marginalized and overlooked by mainstream concert dance.

Salinas (2015) further argues that Latinx choreographies construct complex counternarratives that enable community self-definition, empowerment, and the formation of identities through what he calls a borderlands, or *frontera*, worldview. Salinas (2015) shows that grassroots dancemakers and companies, with long service histories in Latinx barrios, or working-class neighborhoods, work from those contexts to create choreographies that center Latinx experience and aesthetic values as counterdiscourse to contemporary American theatrical concert dance, while opening up physical and conceptual spaces for the brown body in traditionally white domains of artistic practice. The concept of cultural citizenship further helps us understand that while citizenship is contested and incomplete, culture is constantly shifting and evolving (Rosaldo 1997).

Figueroa's (2018) analysis of the only Latinx-centered dance troupe in the United States—the Ballet Hispanico of New York City—highlights the "cultural and artistic labor of Latinx artists accessing modern, post-modern, and contemporary dance styles" (vii). She asks, "How does concert dance converse with and serve Latinx publics within the US?" and "How do Latinxs in the US make use of concert dance to construct, revise, and (re)imagine modes of Latinx identity?" Most importantly, she poses the question, "How does dance serve Latinx bodies given the sociopolitical location of Latinxs within the US?" (7). These questions are important as social membership and citizenship for Latinx people are a continued site of confrontation and

conflict. U.S.-based Latinx dance-makers, like the U.S. Latinx population at large, "occupy the liminal spaces of culture, race and citizenship, and their experiences and labor are easily disregarded and undervalued" (8).

Figueroa (2018) asserts that Latinx dance artists are active contributors to the remembrance, formation, and re-formation of Latinx identity and cultural heritage. In her work, Figueroa (2018) bridges dance theory (methodologies and the study of the body) with Latinx Studies (a lens that discerns structures of power and marginalization) by highlighting how the "primacy of the body in dance, as opposed to other art forms, makes it an exceptionally intriguing vehicle for Latinx expression because the process of colonization so often consigns Latinxs to the body through a history of manual labor, skin politic, and for women, sexual and procreative fears/responsibilities" (13–14). One of the major issues Figueroa sees is the lack of access to arts training and education, which is compounded by a larger failure to support and sustain Latinx artists, especially in the realm of dance.

Other work on Latinx dance includes Garcia's (2013) analysis of the everyday practices of salsa dancing in the city of Los Angeles, where she describes how the diverse modes of salsa dancing reproduce notions of Latinidad.[5] Through ethnographic inquiry, Garcia analyzes the social hierarchies of salsa while highlighting how dance can create opportunities for bodies to exist when these are often marked as not belonging. The work of Yvonne Montoya (2019), the founder of DITD, similarly offers a critique on what kinds of bodies are seen as aesthetically fitting but through a focus on contemporary and concert dance. She argues that Xicana bodies are at best exoticized and at worst othered. In her own experience, she redefines her own commitment to a practice that embodies her lived reality and that is suited toward an audience that is reflected in the Xicana identity.[6] In other words, she uses Xicana bodies, stories, and experiences at the center of her contemporary dance practice and performance. Finally, Suarez (2011) helps us understand that Latinx dance-making centers "border consciousness," or an understanding of shared, institutionalized Othering. Suarez (2011) locates Latina/Chicana dance-making within the theories of Chicana writers Gloria Anzaldúa and Cherríe Moraga.

These studies offer a language for and insight into the practices and experiences of Latinx dancemakers in the United States. Our work on DITD builds on these projects as we use cultural citizenship to anchor how we study "the aspirations and perceptions of people who occupy subordinate social positions" in relation to dance and community making (Rosaldo 1997, 38).

Methodology

While DITD is intended as a long-term project, for this chapter we are focusing on the data gathered from its first event held in 2018 at Arizona State University (ASU) in Tempe, Arizona, where Yvonne Montoya was completing a fellowship at the Herberger Institute for Design and Arts.[7] During this first gathering, Montoya organized two focus groups to get a sense of the state of the field for Latinx dancemakers. Focus groups were conducted in both English and Spanish in order to meet the various linguistic needs of the DITD cohort. Two ninety-minute focus groups comprised of dancers and dance administrators participating in DITD were held the morning of the last day of the gathering. Focus Group One had six total participants, and Focus Group Two had seven total participants. Participants ranged in age from sixteen to forty-five years old and included various gender identities, sexual orientations, and immigration statuses. Education and experience levels ranged from high school to terminal graduate degrees and high school to executive-level administrators. There were eight participants from the Phoenix metro area, Tucson and Douglas/Agua Prieta, and five were from out of state. All but one resided in the southwest. Various subgroups of Latinxs were represented, including Mexican American, Mexican immigrant, DACAmented, Colombian American, Puerto Rican, Ecuadorian American, Chicanx, and Nuevomexicanx.

There were three general areas of questions that we used during the focus groups. The first had to do with the dancemakers' relationship to dance, including their journey in the field and its significance to them, but we also asked about the role of mentorship and role models. The second set of questions was about the dance community in which they currently participated and their performance practice, including how they saw their future as a dance artist in terms of long-term sustainability and support. The last set of questions pertained to their experiences of discrimination, race, and culture in the field. We transcribed and pulled the themes from these focus groups for our analysis.

Dance in the Desert

DITD is an initiative that addresses systemic deficits in dance in the southwest by providing a space for creative expression through dance that redresses geographic isolation and centers local expertise. By providing a space for

network building between dancemakers, funders, and administrators in the world of dance performance, DITD builds meaningful relationships among Latinx dancemakers that expand their access to social capital (Yosso 2005). For example, Gina, a Douglas, Arizona–based choreographer and dance studio owner, was personally invited by Montoya to participate in Dance in the Desert. During DITD's closed-door *plática*/discussion between Latinx dancemakers and dance administrators, Gina met the Cultural Participation Manager at ASU's Gammage Performing Arts Center, who announced that an application for the Molly Blank Fund Teaching Artist Program, which trains teaching artists in the Kennedy Center arts integration method, was currently open. Given the limited professional development opportunities for dance teachers in Douglas, Gina was interested in the program. In the end, two dance teachers from Douglas applied—Gina and another teacher in her studio. Both were accepted and are now trained in the Kennedy Center arts integration method, taking the tools they learned back to their dance community in rural Cochise County. Networking can radically change how one gets access to programs and funding, and Gina's participation in the program is the direct result of the relationships built through DITD.

FIGURE 8.2 Dance in the Desert Founder Yvonne Montoya welcoming guests to the community share-out at Arizona State University's Grant Street Studios in April 2018. Photo Courtesy of Yvonne Montoya and Dance in the Desert. Photo by Dominic Arizona Bonuccelli.

DITD comes at a critical point as the Latinx dance community is experiencing a moment of aesthetic innovation. Participants—dancemakers (choreographers, dancers, arts administrators)—build cultural citizenship (Rosaldo 1994) through their artistic expression that is rooted in their community experience (similar to Salinas's [2015] concept of *frontera* worldview) and developed through their relationships (through *conviviencia diaria*) with one another (Rivera-Servera 2012). In addition to building upon the strengths and momentum of the Latinx dance community, bringing together Latinx dancemakers provides an opportunity to address systemic deficits that exist both in the field of dance and in academia that directly impact Latinx and dancemakers of color. These include geographic isolation, disenfranchisement, and a lack of tangible and intangible resources such as few mentors, a lack of inclusion in dance archives, a paucity of dance scholars writing about the work of Latinx dance makers, and minimal resources to support the work in the communities they serve.

The first *Dance in the Desert: A Gathering of Latinx Dancemakers* took place from April 26 to 28, 2018, on the ASU campus. The gathering brought together fourteen Latinx dancemakers and eight Latinx arts administrators, funders, and scholars. Events included dance workshops, choreography sharing and feedback sessions, closed-door dialogues and discussions between dancers and dance administrators, dance performances, focus groups, a community share-out, and a closing *pachanga* (party). In May 2019, the second Dance in the Desert took place in Tucson, Arizona, where Arizona-based Latinx choreographers and dancers were invited to a choreography retreat and professional development series with the intention of supporting the development of new work. The third gathering is planned for the border cities of Douglas/Agua Prieta in May 2022 (postponed from 2020 because of the global COVID-19 pandemic) and will focus on professional development for dancers and a binational exchange between U.S.-based Latinx artists and Mexican dance artists.

Dance in the Desert 2018 began on a hot Arizona afternoon when a group of six dance artists gathered in a small classroom at ASU for an opening circle. Over the course of three days, dancers and choreographers shared experiences, exchanged ideas, and took up institutional space—on a university campus, in well-lit, airy dance studios—places that have never centered Latinx dance artists. Montoya's piece entitled "Bracero" opens the final day—a solo performer moving through stylized gestures as the voice of a man re-

membering his youth picking watermelon in the fields in Yuma comes over the speakers. The voice ends and the sound of a mechanized melody is heard as a line of dancers enters the performance space, as there is no stage, one by one. The dancers perform a series of sharp and controlled mechanized movements, conjuring images of pistons and machines. There is power and strength in the dancer's bodies and they move in and out of the floor. The dance ends abruptly with the dancer running forward and jumping in front of the audience as if to say, "We are here, and we are strong."

Following the dance, the community share-out begins with DITD participants—including some of the dancers who just performed and members of the audience—engaging in an hour and a half dialogue. After the share-out, the crowd moved to the Phoenix Hostel and Cultural Center in downtown Phoenix for a closing *pachanga*. Situated outside in the hostel's beautiful garden area, the gathering began with food and music as DJ Musa, a Latina DJ, plays the DITD community's requested songs. Then unannounced, the music of *Tejana* sensation Selena's "*Si una vez*" begins to blare on the speakers as dancers in several corners of the space begin to perform a choreographed dance in the middle of the mingling guests. Dancers in various parts of the garden move their hips, perform multiple turns, and dance stylized cumbias with each other and with audience members before gathering together for a unison ending. When that dance, entitled "*Veinte*" by Montoya, ends, solo performer Maya takes the mic from the DJ and performs "*Cafe con leche*," dancing to a poem she wrote about her journey coming to love her brown skin. This moment captures the spirit of DITD, where the movement of bodies that are otherwise policed, encaged, separated, and excluded is centered and their ability to freely express themselves is realized.

Dancing with Family, Searching for Space

For some reason, I was never good enough.

—Julia, dancer and choreographer

For the majority of Latinx dancers, dance "training" began at home in the living room with family or, as Esperanza said, in the "*cocina* . . . connecting with my elders, my abuelas, my *tias*, my *tios*, understanding what it meant to be a male Latino." Birthday parties or other family events are where they often saw their parents dance, "you learn *cumbia*, you learn *salsa*, you learn

merengue but you learn all these things from just watching, mirroring, and, of course, emulating those that are your elders." Often, they were first introduced to folkloric traditions such as *folklórico Mexicano*, *Danza Azteca*, and *Flamenco*. However, the family-centered cultural expression was not translatable to the white-dominated dance world where issues of class, race, and immigration status continue to exclude Latinx bodies. Lourdes's story is a clear example of the contradictions faced by Latinx dancers. She explains:

> So then I started going to community college where I trained really hard. I was taking one class at a time, one style at a time. I started ballet, jazz, modern. And so every semester there was a different class that I took because I couldn't afford to take all of them. So you know, the situation. . . . I was undocumented at the time and I don't know if my parents gave me any, much knowledge, about like what to do because we were all like figuring out our place here. So I was taking one class at a time, and I ended up getting a private scholarship. I don't even remember how. I think the dance director at this community college just kind of started offering me things. And I never revealed myself to her. I'm sure she found out somehow, somewhere, so she had me take some classes all day and night and I ended up getting into the dance program there. Then I met a lot of people and she had professional choreographers come in and set work on the students for the professional dance company. One time she was like "Hey, there is an arts school in California that's here and they're doing auditions, you should go to it." And I went. I was much older than all the young kids that were there, they were like high-school seniors and I was older. So I auditioned for the arts school in California, and I got a notice that "oh, you're accepted, you just need to fill out the application to get into the school." So then I applied for that program and got a letter of me being denied because I'm a liability, because I was undocumented, and at that time that door closed for me.

Lourdes was temporarily shielded from the reality of her status with her teacher and classes at her community college. However, that comfort immediately vanished when she tried to pursue her goals beyond this safe space. While Lourdes's immigration status derailed her plans for continued dance schooling, Lydia's story about her audition for a dance program at the University tells a similar experience of exclusion.

Faculty was like "I've never seen anything like . . . wow, you just went there." But this other person, this other gatekeeper held so hard, was like "No, you don't belong. . . . You don't look like us, you aren't like us." And it just . . . and while it was happening, I didn't feel it was racial, I didn't feel it was cultural, which is the reason I bring up the story. When I felt it was afterwards because the person who came to my defense, a woman of color Flamenco instructor, I went to her afterwards, a day or two later and thanked her, and while I was thanking her I like burst into tears and that's when I realized how much the attack was actually . . . had everything to do about my shade, and, you know, perhaps my age, and my *caradura* to be like . . . you know, no, I also deserve and belong, this is a public institution and I deserve and belong and I have the discipline to also have dance education, you know. Just an education, not a starring role, right?

While we are not conflating immigration status with racism, we highlight how Latinx bodies are always seen as not-belonging regardless of citizenship. Dancemakers from all genres reported racism and experienced shaming of their racialized bodies. It was concert and competition dancers, however, who described the most racism directly related to the racialized Latinx body. For example, Gina, the owner of a competition dance school from Douglas, Arizona, recalled a competition experience in Phoenix where dancers did not receive scores or recognition for participation at the awards ceremony of a competition. She shares:

Vinimos a una competencia que nunca habíamos venido de esta compañía y eramos los únicos mexicanos . . . yo se que todas las críticas son diferentes, y realmente no te dicen, "te estamos calificando por tu raza o por como te ves," pero realmente lo hacen . . . al momento de recibir los míos (premios), se acabaron . . . Pero como allá vivimos en una frontera, somos muchos mexicanos, no habíamos tenido una experiencia tan así hasta el momento en que venimos aquí. . . . Que no te dicen realmente, "te estamos calificando por tu raza," pero lo hacen . . . al momento vernos diferente, al momento de que no te veas güerita, que tu color de tu piel sea otro. [We came to a competition that we had never participated in from a company and we were the only Mexicans. . . . I know that all the criteria are different, and they don't really tell you, "We're rating you by your race" or "by how you look" but they really do . . . at the time of receiving mine (awards), they ended. . . . But since we live

on a border there, we are many Mexicans, we had not had such an experience until the moment we came here. . . . What they do not tell you, "We are really rating you by your race," but they do it . . . at the moment we see ourselves differently, the moment you don't look *güerita*, your skin color is different.]

In this testimony, the studio owner draws a link between the different treatment of dancers directly to race/ethnicity and colorism. The use of the words and phrases "*güerita*"[8] and "*color de tu piel sea otro*" demonstrates that the studio owner is cognizant of the conscious and subconscious racial biases in concert and competition dance that upholds young, white, thin, long bodies as the aesthetic ideal.[9] Brown-skinned Latinx dancers were judged, or in this instance not judged, as unworthy because their bodies did not adhere to mainstream dance's white Western Euro-centric aesthetic ideals. This exclusionary behavior on behalf of dance's gatekeepers serves to push out Latinx dancers. The message to these young dancers and studio owner is quite clear: "You are the Other, and you do not belong here."

Skin color is not the only basis for discrimination that racialized Latinx dancemakers' experience in concert dance. Body shape and size, particularly a shorter height and/or curvy bodies, also mark Latinx bodies as racialized and can be lightening rods for discriminating treatment. Regarding experiences as a dance student in a community college, one dancer recalls:

Modern, contemporary dance is very white. . . . I was probably the only Latina dancer there. . . . Feeling a lot of pressure on like what my body looks like, and so I was working, taking dance classes, but then also like working out afterwards, or like eating . . . having a terrible diet because I was trying to keep up with the perception of what was in that room . . . like my body and my figure wasn't supported by the dance teachers there, or like the choreography that was being set. . . . And I remember getting back like super exhausted, walking home, and I remember feeling tears and crying and feeling like "Why is this so hard?" and it is . . . now I can say that it's race and culture in the dance world, like I was trying to keep up with that expectation that is set.

This dancer's testimony describes the excessive exercise and disordered eating, which many concert dancers of various racial/ethnic backgrounds experience. However, the testimony also highlights dance teachers' unfamiliar-

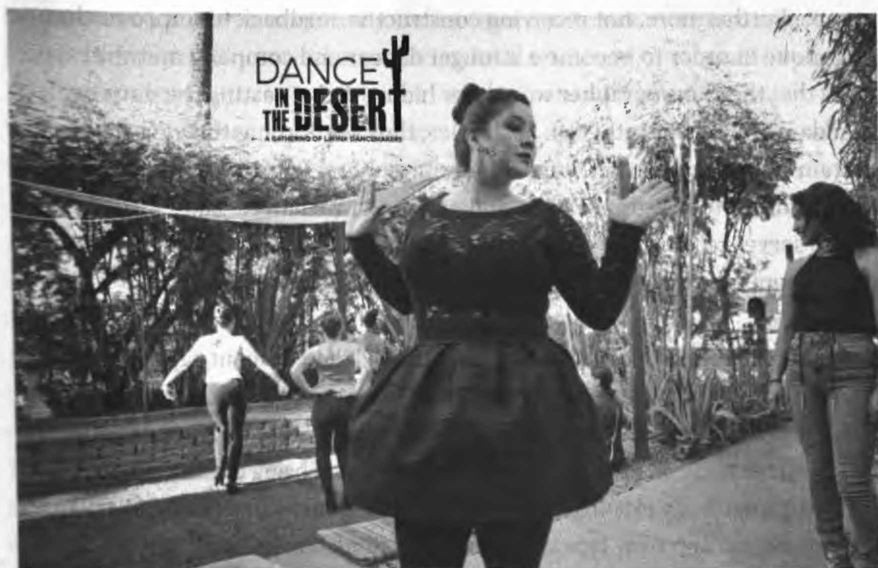

FIGURE 8.3 Dancer Reyna Montoya performing in *Viente* by Yvonne Montoya at Phoenix Hostel and Cultural Center, April 2018. Photo Courtesy of Yvonne Montoya and Dance in the Desert. Photo by Dominic Arizona Bonuccelli.

ity with Latinx bodies. Bodies of different shapes and sizes move differently, and not all movement looks good on or translates to all bodies in the same way. The dancer's observation that their "body and figure" was not supported or valued not only in technique classes, but also in choreography is an experience reported by almost all Latinx concert dancers interviewed. Furthermore, dancers share that a lack of familiarity with shorter and/or curvy bodies extended beyond the dance classroom into professional dance company spaces:

> Being in the company was a blessing and a curse, cause I felt I had a very traumatizing experience there throughout that time, just like constantly being put in the back, not being cast, not given enough feedback, I would go and seek feedback and I would ask the artistic director, "What do I need to do? I want to improve, if I'm not ready, just tell me what I need to work on so I can be cast." But it was always very shallow.

This dancer highlights a lack of understanding about how to incorporate Latinx bodies on stage, and a refusal to showcase and center them in perfor-

mance. Furthermore, not receiving constructive feedback to improve dance technique in order to become a stronger dancer and company member suggests that the choreographer was either hiding or not casting the dancer, not based on ability, but rather on aesthetics, thus reinforcing the idea that only certain bodies belong on stage. Choreographers' ignoring Latinx dancers in class and the marginalization and erasure of racialized Latinx bodies on stages serves to push them out. This push-out, as dancer Juan shares, is felt more deeply for undocumented dancers:

> I think I've seen a lot of artists that come through here without papers, without documentation and their work becomes erased or their cultural worth becomes devalued, and they become, I've seen quite a few times artists taken advantage of . . . 'cause I think there's this element of being documented and having your body existing in space versus being undocumented and your body doesn't carry any type of presence, so I think that becomes a really big issue. So you're erasing not just the color but you're erasing the full body, which becomes a really colonial issue when you think of this happened to us . . . what, 500 years ago but we didn't learn about this 500 years ago? . . . It's the same thing, it's just happening from a different legal perspective.

Juan is able to trace—and connect—contemporary experiences with a longer history of colonial mechanisms that uphold particular aesthetic standards and hierarchical practices of exclusion. While access to legal citizenship for some Latinx dancers remains unattainable, participating in DITD offers a space of potential and access via *conviviencia* enacted through cultural citizenship.

Dancing in Community: The Impact of Dancing in the Desert

DITD has created a space of possibility for participants and beyond. The DITD Arts administrator, Linda, underscores the importance of the creation of this space but also what it signifies for dancemakers to be able to fully assert their creativity through their own experiences, without extractive practices or exclusion:

> I'm a migrant, I moved to the United States when I was thirteen years old and I grew up seeing brown bodies sort of normalized as performers and

> as dancers, and moving to the United States that kind of disappeared for me for a while . . . later I became acquainted with artists that couldn't—for status reasons—who could not perform and earn a living professionally as dancers but who had incredible artistry . . . as a funder and as an arts administrator it's become—recently through supporting a convening—that it became really clear to me that I was not interested in the institution owning the cultural labor that we're supporting. It's really important to me that the institution does not own the labor and the cultural production, the creation aspect, that the brown bodies are producing.

During the focus groups, two dance projects were brought up as examples of spaces that they hoped the field could move more in the directions toward. Lourdes mentioned the BlakTinx Dance Festival—a project that merges Latinx and Black dancers.[10] By applying for grants and working with the founder of the project, she was able to bring it to Phoenix in 2017. Alicia, dancer and former dance teacher in their mid-thirties who is Phoenix-based and mixed-race, discusses another project:

> This past year I worked on a project that was actually a theatre show that was brought up from Tucson called *Mas* about the Mexican American Studies program down there, where I was working . . . and there was a moment where I was like "Oh my god, we're all brown," like I couldn't even. . . . I've never been in a process where everybody was Latinx, and it made me so emotional, so comfortable, and it felt so fucking good, and I couldn't believe that it had to take thirty-five years for that to happen to me. I live in the Southwest, I've always lived in the Southwest, like . . . what? So, yeah, it is just so special, and it doesn't happen very often.

By recognizing the value that comes from being in a project where Latinx bodies and experiences are highlighted and included, dancemakers make claims to belonging on their own terms. Here we start to understand the impact of DITD. During the community share-out, one performer said, "The biggest takeaway for me was that we all have stories to tell, are all in this together. We need our voices heard and it's so important to have the support of our community; I am grateful to be here with you all and I'm grateful to know that I'm not alone." Alicia also reflected, "The biggest takeaway for me, which might seem very simple, but I just want to name it because it doesn't

happen very often in dance spaces, but being in a room with all Latinx dancers gives us a safe space to talk about all of the things that have happened to us throughout our careers." Julissa, an Ecuadorian immigrant in her early forties, highlights that "Dance in the Desert means a bigger, broader picture of more Latinx choreographers and dancers, this is the place where we are gathering and finding how to break these barriers, how to open the doors, and how to move that forward."

DITD gives Latinx dancers the opportunity to reflect on their identities and aesthetics in dance. For example, a community member stated, "Our people don't perform all the time in theaters because our families don't want to come there, our people do not want to come there, and how do we make sure that [dance] is accessible and that it is not really rooted in a very specific Euro-centric way or that it is not rooted in a social-economic-specific way?" In other words, DITD members begin to contemplate how dancers can challenge what is traditionally seen as "presentable" in a theater setting. How can different music choices be included (i.e., *banda* or *rancheras* instead of experimental or classical)? How can colors of costumes, lighting design, and movements (the undulation of hips and pelvis of *cumbia* and *salsa* rather than the held pelvis of ballet and contemporary) better reflect Latinx culture and experience?

DITD provided the space for dancemakers to think more deeply about what might resonate for Latinx audiences. For example, one audience member stated that they prefer to see "digestible pieces" stating that "sometimes pieces are very complex and I am not from the arts community so it might be a little bit confusing or overwhelming to see a piece that is very complex and I don't have the background to appreciate it." These statements show that both Latinx dance artists and Latinx audience members desire to create and experience dance work within aesthetics that are not only legible and meaningful for Latinx communities, but that are staged in accessible locations. Another dancer commented, "I think this element of aesthetics and how it is placed in our bodies is interesting. I think it shows up a lot in conversations about how Latinx dancers are represented in multiple styles. . . . What about dances that are not contemporary, ballet, or modern? The ones that we learned in the *cocina*. How are those (dances) translated in performance settings and cultural settings?"

Salinas' (2015) borderlands/*frontera* cultural analysis frames how this cultural mixing/blending is part of Latinx cultural production which is fun-

damental to claiming space, claiming rights, and resources. There are clear artistic and cultural strategies being employed here, but there is also a play with contradictions and ambiguity that blur the lines between discipline (traditionally defined) and culture. DITD participants are claiming a space and inclusion in the world of dance in this way. In other words, we see claims to cultural citizenship through cultural expression. Moreover, DITD responds to anti-Latinx rhetoric and cultural exclusion by providing a place, space, and resources for Latinx dancer artists to band together and contest erasure and institutional exclusion in the field of dance. Regarding the gross underrepresentation of Latinx in dance, arts administrator Claudia added:

> And then also the very low-hanging fruit of representation. Many of us here have not had dance instructors, or teachers that look like us, that are Latinx, that understand our histories or understand our cultural understandings and placement within the world. Having representation at every level of dance creation whether it's dance instructors or dance critics that can write or speak about our work with proper context and language, researches, educators at the elementary school level and at the graduate and professional higher education level. Not seeing ourselves represented disproportionately at every single level of stakeholder that helps to build dance.

DITD becomes an opening for dancemakers to tell their stories, with their *frontera* worldview, through their art and reminds those across the field about the power they have to transform what and how stories are told through dance. Claudia continues:

> I didn't realize I had any power as an arts administrator before this past year . . . and I know so many Latinx arts administrators in New York City, in the Alvin Alleys, in the Martha Grahams, in the Dance Theatre of Harlems, in this huge institutions and we're not organized, because we're all just surviving. . . . None of us know how much power we have because we have internalized the racism, the narrative of survival for so long.

Holding space for Latinx dance artists to gather in Phoenix and Arizona in and of itself is, in many ways, a radical act and a first step toward eliminating Latinx erasure in dance. While claims to belonging and cultural citizenship do not "supplant or obviate the need for broader movements that can chal-

lenge class or hegemonic rule, the creation of social space and the claiming of rights can lead to powerful social movements. Latinos are creating social spaces (both physical and expressive) that knit together self-defined communities" (Flores and Benmayor, 1997, 277). Commenting on this erasure, participants in the first DITD cohort created a social media hashtag for the gathering that has been used in subsequent years by various members of the collective: #weexist. For us, this insistence—despite the erasure and exclusion—to exist, to express, and to belong marks DITD as a project that, through its insistence, will persist.

Conclusion

In this chapter, we have looked at how the anti-immigrant policies of the State of Arizona created an anti-Latinx climate that was felt across the Southwest. We argue that grassroots responses to these social conditions, like Dance in the Desert, are ways of pushing against this climate by creating a public presence that demonstrates belonging through cultural citizenship. Participants in DITD can assert cultural difference as they claim belonging and give citizenship meaning in their interactions. DITD creates opportunities in the *conviviencia diaria*—opportunities for relationships and opportunities for reimagining how dancemaking artists can bring to vision their stories as they fight for aesthetic equity in a field that all but ignores Latinx dancers. We know the experience we highlight in our work is not singular. Dance artist Alicia Mulliken (2020) reaffirms what we have learned from the narratives of DITD dancemakers when she writes, "As a first-generation Mexican American woman of color in the dance world, I have experienced microaggressions that have caused significant barriers to my progress as a dance artist and damaged my emotional health as a person of color—and yet, what I have endured is only a drop in the bucket." Our research supports Mulliken's experience of barriers and microaggressions; most dancers in DITD reported feelings of isolation, burnout, and even exclusion, with a handful of dancers reporting that they had left the field at various points in their careers. DITD is important for Latinx dancemakers because it creates a space to demonstrate cultural citizenship (a much-needed sense of belonging, a place for dancers to come together, have a voice and be heard, and build community) in the face of racism and exclusion in the world of dance and in U.S. society.

We also traced the limited literature on Latinx dancemaking to demonstrate DITD's potential and impact—essentially the archives of dance history erase the experiences of Latinx dancemakers. This work begins to address this vacuum, directly contributing to fields of dance and Latinx studies by centering Latinx dance makers and their voices. Dance in the Desert 2018 was a catalytic moment for Latinx dancemakers in Arizona and beyond because it offered a place and space for Latinx dancemakers to come together, conduct research, and build relationships. For many, Dance in the Desert marked the first time that Latinx dancemakers experienced a sense of understanding and belonging among a community of peers—providing a space for dancemakers to claim their own spaces for Latinx bodies, culture, and aesthetics in dance.

We conclude that in a region, and field, where Latinx peoples are often invisibilized or, worse yet, demonized, Dance in the Desert is offering a counter experience—one that centers their insistence and belonging to both. By creating a space that centers the movement of Latinx bodies when these bodies are so heavily restricted, DITD is building a movement that advocates for inclusion and visibility. In so doing, DITD invokes the human right to mobility and expression of cultural traditions and creative practice—one that invokes a shared experience that can best be understood as cultural

FIGURE 8.4 Dancers performing in *Viente* by Yvonne Montoya at Phoenix Hostel and Cultural Center, April 2018. Photo Courtesy of Yvonne Montoya & Dance in the Desert. Photo by Dominic Arizona Bonuccelli.

citizenship. Dancemakers who are culturally excluded are making claims to space and inclusion through cultural expression. They are carving out a new space for themselves in this world of dance, defying and remaking white aesthetics, and challenging the institutional and cultural exclusion of their racialized bodies. DITD contributes to the cultural fabric of the nation by sharing the experiences of Latinx communities; by enacting border stories, histories, and movements; and by centering aesthetics that remain largely unseen or grossly misunderstood by the mainstream United States.

Notes

1. All names are pseudonyms to maintain anonymity.
2. Dance in the Desert was founded by Yvonne Montoya. The 2018 project organizers were Yvonne Montoya, Erin Donohue, and Gabriela Muñoz. Dance in the Desert 2018 was supported by *Safos* Dance Theatre, AZ Artworker, an initiative of the Arizona Commission on the Arts, Liz Lerman LLC, ASU's Dean's Creativity Council, and Projecting All Voices, an initiative launched by ASU's Herberger Institute for Design and the Arts and supported by ASU Gammage. The research from this project was supported by WESTAF, the National Endowment for the Arts.
3. Latinx is a gender-neutral term that refers to the panethnic group referencing the multiplicities of cultural, racial, and national identities of peoples from Latin American origins living in the United States. While we use this term in our chapter, if we are directly quoting from another author we follow their terminology which may vary between Latina/o or Latino.
4. Several local arts organizations supported Yvonne Montoya's idea for bringing together Latinx dancemakers in Arizona. Through Montoya's fellowship at ASU, she was able to leverage the resources like meeting rooms, dance studios, access to gallery space, and additional funding for the project, which involved writing a handful of grants and project proposals and presenting the project to ASU's Herberger Institute for Design and the Arts Dean's Creativity Council, a shark-tank inspired event wherein ASU faculty propose projects to a group of local investors for funding.
5. While we don't engage with Latinidad in this chapter conceptually, we understand Latinidad as a way to refer to, as Rivera-Servera argues (2012), "the ethnic and panethnic imaginaries, identities, and affects that emerge from the increased intersection of multiple Latina/o communities" (22). Yet, as Aparacio (2017) has argued, "Latinidad has been highly contested and defined in various ways and also been claimed as a hemispheric framework for the study of the Americas, as well as critiqued and rejected as a label that homogenizes the rich heterogeneity of our communities and inadequately, if at all, recognizes the inclusion of Afro-Latinas/os and mixed-race Latinas/os" (113).

6. Montoya uses Ana Castillo's spelling of Xicana with a "X" instead of a "Ch." Castillo incorporates the use of the Nahuatl "X" in the spelling of Xicana to honor the indigenous roots of Chicana identities. Furthermore, the "X" challenges binaries and calls for solidarity while rejecting separatist nationalist ideologies. For more information, see Castillo (1994).
7. Mireya Guerra assisted with data collection and transcription of focus groups.
8. Light-skinned or blonde.
9. The color of your skin was different.
10. The BlakTinx Dance festival originates from Los Angeles, California, premiering for the first time in 2013 produced by choreographer, Licia Perea; and has been an annual production at the Bootleg Theatre for the past six years. In 2015, BlakTinx expanded to Tucson, Arizona, and later in 2017 to Phoenix, Arizona, with an annual show since then. The festival strives to diversify programming and audiences in the local dance scene and beyond. In 2019, the festival changed its name from BlakTina to BlakTinx, to be more inclusive and gender neutral. The festival focuses on contemporary dance but draws from many genres. Choreographers are encouraged to show work that is personal to them, and speaks about the Black and Latinx experience (BlakTinx n.d.).

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