Review: Manuel R. Cuellar, *Choreographing Mexico: Festive Performances and Dancing Histories of a Nation*

Camila Contreras-Langlois

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Choreographing Mexico: Festive Performances and Dancing Histories of a Nation

Manuel R. Cuellar

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Reviewed by Camila Contreras-Langlois, University of St Andrews.

In *Choreographing Mexico*, Manuel R. Cuellar explores how folklórico dance and its embodied experiences for performers and spectators can shape a nation, its consciousness building, and therefore its historical comprehension and legacy. Throughout, Cuellar offers a richly descriptive and theoretically nuanced exploration of *lo mexicano* while putting to the forefront the resistive and transformative qualities of dance. The study spans from the Porfirian centennial celebrations of 1910 (contrasted with the 1889 Paris World's Fair Mexican pavilion) to mid-1900s cinematic portrayals of Mexican dancing. He weaves together a combination of archival sources, visual media, and choreographic analysis, which reveals the complex tensions inherent in national self-representation and understanding.

Cuellar situates his project within critical theories of embodiment, performance studies, and specifically Mexican cultural studies. He articulates that folklórico – Mexican regional and traditional dance – has been underexplored in Mexican cultural production studies (6). Cuellar builds upon the work of scholars such as of Diana Taylor and David Guss to do just this – to engage festive performances of *lo mexicano* as sites where this national identity can be contested, interrogated, and repositioned. The methodological framework used is queerness, which allows Cuellar to frame his subject (Mexican folklórico dancing and its embodied experience) as "systematically and historically […] negated, erased, or simply excluded in discussions of Mexican nationalism" (xi). Thus, the methodology supports an examination of ephemera to find how cultural meaning is produced by the body in motion.

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Focusing on the postrevolutionary period, *Choreographing Mexico* then follows the historical timeline of the early 20th century. Cuellar engages dance scholars from a range of backgrounds, highlighting his awareness of resisting hegemonic discourses of heteronormativity, indigeneity, and universality.

The first chapter examines Indigenous reinterpretation and repositioning by the Mexican government to project a desire and appearance of "cosmopolitan modernity" (39) at the turn of the 20th century. This section starts with Mexico's participation in the 1889 Paris Universal Exposition with its Aztec Palace, but focuses on the 1910 centennial celebrations of Mexican independence. These two events from the Porfirio Díaz regime reconceptualised material examples of Mexican and especially Indigenous culture as "embodied cultural manifestation" (35). Cuellar reads symbolic references as well as performance and reception of the historical parade through archival sources. With this, he argues that the state first rehearsed this embodied presence abroad (in Paris) before staging it at home for the local audience, asserting a new sense of modernity for the Mexican people. Focusing on bodies in movement, he centres dance as an experience for building a national identity, while exposing how government use regional and traditional cultural signals for their own promotion and agenda. This socio-political dimension is especially relevant to those studying dance in a nationalistic context.

Continuing the investigation of state-run celebrations and its impact on perceived nationhood and history, Chapter 2 centres the staging of "La Noche Mexicana" of 1921, put in opposition to the centennial celebrations of Chapter 1. This event that looked to recreate a regional fair was President Álvaro Obregón's project to differentiate himself and his government from Díaz's events and thus aimed to go one step further than the modernist ideal of the 1910

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displays, to shape the evolving image of Mexico as a mestizo nation. Cuellar's analysis shows how the concept of the fair created an embodied social experience, unifying regional identities. He juxtaposes bodies in motion with the spectatorial bodies, linking them to each other and framing them as subject to sociohistorical spaces and moments. Thus, folklórico serves not only to build a mestizo national body but also to highlight its uneven, contested corporeal performances. This chapter showcases a strength in Cuellar's writing. Throughout *Choreographing Mexico*, he foregrounds the body across the archival resources he uses, from photography to newspaper articles, memoirs, and film. With kinaesthesia, he links it all, arguing that bodies in motion "function as archival practices that reveal power dynamics and forms of sense making that have often been neglected in the official archive and in the dominant history of Mexican nationalism" (7). This way he reads performances as archival texts and sources of historical knowledge that exceed conventional documentation.

Chapter 3 diverts from the festive performance of national regimes and turns to the Campobello sisters and particularly Nellie Campobello and her contributions to Mexican dancing. Although this chapter stands out due to its specific and almost biographical tone, the thread that Cuellar uses is Campobello's influence on national performance as choreographer of *El ballet simbólico 30–30* for the commemoration of the Mexican Revolution. Through this, the Campobello sisters embodied a sense of *lo mexicano* and allowed dance to become an embodied practice of Mexican nationalism and body politics. The gender focus of this chapter also highlights how Campobello presented her body as a challenge to early 20th century gender roles and discourses, thus putting the role of women at the forefront and establishing their place within a nationalistic expression of *lo mexicano*. This highlights another strength in Cuellar's writing, the breadth of theories and perspectives he adds to the discourse, with awareness placed on underrepresented communities and voices and what the

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ephemera of culture and especially Mexican folklórico has left behind. However, this change of tone for Chapter 3 and some of the larger historical implications shows how the study occasionally falters under its ambition. While the variety of case studies creates a dynamic and historical timeline through the Mexican postrevolutionary decades, its weight risks fragmenting the analysis. The rapid transitions between eras and topics sometimes leave the reader wanting deeper contextual grounding – especially those unfamiliar with the specifics of Mexican historiography or performative traditions.

Being of most interest to a cinema journal, Chapter 4 sees Cuellar shift his focus to filmic representations of dance during the Golden Age of Mexican cinema in the 1930s and 1940s. Building upon the preceding chapters, the final section combines an analysis of festive performances, national representations, and the medium of cinema, which is the continuation of modernisation, new technologies, and thus of new perceptions of *lo mexicano*, including outside of Mexico. Cuellar uses film studies methodologies to offer close reading of dance sequences to capture how filmmakers from home and abroad mediated Mexican folklórico on the screen. While previous chapters focused on a single national event or person's career, the scope of this chapter encompasses too many examples and case studies to make a succinct point, and, unsurprisingly, Chapter 4 is the longest one in the book. Cuellar spotlights three filmmakers, one of which is Russian director Sergei Eisenstein. He also brings in new themes such as muralism and Afro-mestizo identity politics and representation within a Mexican context. This chapter highlights even more than the previous ones the ambivalence present in creating and presenting images of festive Mexico, and thus this creates an ambivalent takeaway from this chapter, one where folklórico on the screen perpetuates nationalistic representations of Mexico while also helping to constitute them.

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The last section of the book brings the discussion to the present with "Half and Halves", a Punjabi-Mexican fusion performance piece created by diasporic communities in California. Although too short, the epilogue allows Cuellar to demonstrate the continued importance of folklórico in a transnational context that transcends the Mexican border. As mentioned throughout the other chapters, here it is reiterated that folklórico shows how history is carried through bodies and how embodied sociality and performances function "not just as a corporeal pedagogy but also as a means of articulating and interpellating a communal identity" (226).

The book's overall contribution challenges inherited narratives of folklórico dance, instead framing it as a vital apparatus in the negotiation of personal and national identity and modernity. Cuellar's approach reframes dance as historiographical evidence and performance as analytic work – ideas valuable to scholars in dance, Latin American, and performance studies. Those studying representation of folklórico on the screen will also find this useful grounding work. Ultimately, *Choreographing Mexico* is a model of embodied cultural criticism. It positions dance at the centre of the national imaginary as an embodied experience of knowledge and self-representation. It not only focuses on an important era of meaning building for Mexican identity but also tracks how dancing subjects of various background frame and reframe the nation through movement. Cuellar's work invites further research on alternative archives of gesture and performance, and on the ways bodies continue to choreograph national imaginaries within and across borders.

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