

Dance in the Canadian diaspora: Embodying identity in a Toronto Filipino community

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Abstract

As the world rapidly changes, dance offers a vibrant means for the child to become immersed in traditional culture that serves as both habitus and springboard to further development. Through the study of young members of the Philippine community in Toronto, this paper will demonstrate that dance facilitates cultural virtuosity among young people and enables them to negotiate multiple spheres of identity to both embrace and transcend diversities. Using semiotic, sociological, and political theory, this paper argues that the role of dance in a cultural community is a powerful form of social capital that creates and maintains strong community networks that nurture the child in navigating the slippery slopes of societal change. In the specific context of the city of Toronto, one of the world's most diverse cities, dance plays an essential role in defining and embodying identity. Through participant observation, as well as specific questioning aimed at discovering why children feel compelled to join the Fiesta Filipina Dance Troupe of Canada, it will be shown that young people view their position in a dance ensemble that privileges a minority culture in an English-speaking, North American environment as positive and nurturing. This study takes the conference theme of "Dance, young people, and change," and shows how dance empowers young people to celebrate their ethnicity while negotiating various spheres of identity. Through dance, these young people are bringing about change by breaking down barriers of "otherness." Cited as the "world's most diverse city," Toronto is enriched by hundreds of such groups.

Keywords: multiculturalism, Toronto, dance, Philippines, identity

From the window of my study, I look out into one of the most culturally diverse cities in the world: Toronto. This city consistently remains in the ranks of the 10 most livable cities in the world according to *The Economist's* Intelligence Unit. Results are based on scoring in stability, healthcare, culture and environment, and education and infrastructure. In the global urban inventory, my hometown is one where diversity works to create a successful civic environment.

There are, of course, many means by which diversity is expressed, but, as a dance scholar, I am interested in a discipline that has, I believe, a large and particularly important role to play in embodying diversity.

Many scholars have already shown us that dance is an expression of identity. Sociologist Cynthia Novack writes, "When we dance, we articulate and create images of ourselves and what our lives are like" (2001, p. 405). But what are those lives like? Anthropologist Arjun Appadurai speaks of "ethnoscapes, the ever-shifting world in which we live" (1991, p. 192). In our diverse society, we can belong to many different communities: family, school, church, and work.

We choose to dance in those communities where we feel most comfortable because of the freedom we feel to express our identity and thus validate that identity. We also choose to dance because community serves as an empowerment of that identity. In this way, dance and community have a symbiotic relationship, which is the focus of my research study of identity in the Canadian diaspora.

My study deals with one particular cultural community in Toronto, the Filipino, though my conclusions could apply to most cultural groups across the country. Cultural minorities face the same issues in Montréal, Toronto, and Vancouver. Although the language spoken outside of the community may be French or English, within the group, the language spoken is often that of the minority itself. Although “dance” takes an infinite number of forms and styles, in this paper, I will argue that children develop cultural literacy by learning dances particular to their ethnicity within their cultural communities.

Dance is important to Canadian history. From the beginning of oral and written traditions in this country, there is documented evidence that Canadians have danced. Indeed, among the earliest Europeans who arrived in Canada to seek out new possibilities for trade and commerce through the process of colonialization, it is Samuel de Champlain who stands out as an example of success after repeated French failures. During his first voyage to the New World in 1603, he observed aboriginal dance, understanding through its complexity that he was dealing with a sophisticated culture with which negotiation was possible (Fischer, 2008, p. 133). Although it is not the intent of this paper to discuss dance history, it is important to note that Canadian society values dance because it is one of the most powerful ways we have to learn about ourselves and, in sharing dance practice, learning about one another.

To provide a context for explaining the diversity of cultural dance communities in Canada and within Toronto, the structural framework for cultural dance communities must be understood. In 1964, in preparation for the celebration of Canada’s Centennial, the Canadian Folk Art Council was created with funds from the Centennial Commission. During the Centennial Year of 1967, the Canadian Folk Art Council organized hundreds of folkloric dance festivals across the country. As a result of this frenzy of cultural activity and funding, folk arts councils were created across the country at both provincial and municipal levels. However, once the Centennial funds dried up, other sources of money were needed. That many cultural communities still exist today and continue their support of embodied identities through dance pays tribute to the visionary leaders who founded these groups, as well as to the network of what sociologist Robert Putnam (2000) calls “social bridging capital” (p. 86). In Toronto, the Community Folk Art Council has some 75-member groups, testimony to the powers of dance and diversity in the context of Canadian multiculturalism.

A few words about multiculturalism as social policy are also in order here. When the Royal Commission on Bilingualism and Biculturalism published its final report in 1969, it contained recommendations on what steps should be taken to develop the Canadian confederation on the basis of equal partnership between the two founding races, taking into account the contribution made by other ethnic groups. Accordingly, Prime Minister Pierre Trudeau stood up in the House of Commons on October 8, 1971 to announce the creation of the world’s first multiculturalism policy. Trudeau stated his belief that “cultural pluralism is the very essence of Canadian

identity; every ethnic group has the right to preserve and develop its own cultural values within the Canadian context” (Trudeau, pp. 8545-46). The 1982 Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms entrenches the principle of multiculturalism in sections 15(1) and 27. The Canadian Multiculturalism Act became law in 1988 and a Multiculturalism Secretariat was established to support the federal government’s efforts towards achieving diversity and increasing minority participation in its programs

Multiculturalism has provoked much criticism. In her magisterial study of Canadian immigration policy, sociologist Freda Hawkins points out that “multiculturalism is a highly political phenomenon, involving the development of a special relationship between government and ethnic communities” (1989, p. 218). Suggesting that multicultural policy is difficult to implement in constructive and practical ways, as the potential field for action is so extensive, its rhetoric often implies far larger policies and programs than are financially or administratively feasible. Because multiculturalism takes the form of a broad, government-supported and financed interest group or coalition of ethnic communities, the party in power often sees it as an instrument of political control. Furthermore, multiculturalism can be viewed as “strengthening separateness among ethnic communities and ... possibly emphasizing cultural heritage at the expense of Canadian ... identity and of commitment to [Canadian] society as a whole” (Hawkins, p. 216). Hawkins points out that because the primary motive for most Canadian immigrants is the attainment of a higher standard of living, rather than leading the same kind of life in a foreign country, most look forward to becoming Canadian and may be confused by the concept of multiculturalism. However, she notes, ethnic communities can often provide a “safe haven” for new immigrants so that settlement agencies and services within these communities are needed (Hawkins, pp. 216-217). Indeed, many folk arts councils across Canada now offer settlement services to new Canadians rather than supporting cultural activities through lack of funding.

I became director of the Toronto Folk Art Council in 1996 and was able, at first hand, to see the power of dance at work in hundreds of cultural communities across the country.

I had a special connection with one group in particular: Fiesta Filipina, a Filipino ensemble based in Mississauga, just west of Toronto. Fiesta’s spokesperson, Betsy Abarquez, was the chairman of the Folk Art Council’s Board of Directors, and as such, a mentor to me as I reacquainted myself with Toronto after having spent many years abroad. George and Estrellita Aguinaldo founded Fiesta in 1966 with the mission to “promote, preserve and propagate Filipino arts and culture in Canada.” By training first family members, then friends, and ultimately admirers in Filipino dance and music making, the Aguinaldo’s created an ensemble that today serves as an ambassador of Filipino dance in Canada, as well as internationally. In 2004, as the result of community efforts at fundraising and a successful Ontario Trillium grant application, Fiesta was able to purchase its own building, the Fiesta Filipina Centre for the Arts, where classes, rehearsals, and performances are held in Filipino dance and music.

On December 6, 2009, I attended the Christmas Around the World Festival at Toronto’s City Hall Rotunda to observe the participation of Fiesta Filipina in this community event. On January 17, 2010, I visited Fiesta Filipina Centre for the Arts to carry out my fieldwork by inviting members of the intermediate dance group, aged 12-14, to complete a survey for this study. On

March 28, 2010, I attended the Easter Around the World Festival in City Hall Rotunda to interview Lito Dizon and Josefina Clemente, former dancers with Fiesta, to discuss the roles played by gender, identity, and self when teaching and performing dance.

A few words about the dances of the Philippines are needed here, and will not begin to do justice to their beauty, but perhaps help the reader understand the diversity of identities expressed in their performance. This nation of 7000 islands is at the crossroads of Pacific trading routes, whose cultural influences may be clearly seen in the dances performed by Fiesta Filipina. The aboriginal repertoire referred to as the Cordillera Suite pays homage to the Igorot, tribal ancestors of Filipinos, and exhibits a style of movement and dress that is quite different from dances introduced in later periods of Filipino culture. The men exhibit strength and dexterity, wearing only loincloths and headdresses, while the women demonstrate grace and balance in tightly wrapped sarongs. The dances feature expansive and abrupt movement performed to the percussive throb of drums and gongs. European contact in the 16th century is reflected in the Spanish Suite, where costuming is much more modest, featuring women's long, sweeping skirts and lace-covered bodices, while the men wear trousers and barong Tagalogs. Dances are more fluid and circular, echoing the strummed bandurria, a stringed, mandolin-like instrument. The dances of the Morolandia Suite find their origin in Mindanao, the second largest island of the Philippines, highly influenced by Islam. The music is an eclectic mixture of percussive gamelan and drum. Movement is abrupt and explosive, the men wearing loose-fitting trousers and vests, while the women preen in their richly embroidered sarongs. Terno-clad women perform the rural dances, while the men wear trousers and barong Tagalogs. The music is a lilting instrumentalization of bandurria and guitar that echoes the sustained circular movement of the dance.

With a view to space limitations, I will analyze the outcomes of my fieldwork by discussing the results of the above-mentioned 2010 survey.

In my first question, I asked, "Why did you want to join Fiesta Filipina?" Responses indicate that dance plays a strong role in the decision of the participants to join. Although Fiesta is involved in many activities, it is primarily through dance that members develop a link to their Filipino heritage. The cultural information contained in dance is of sufficient strength to be transferrable to its practitioners and serves in defining a particular culture. Sociologist Helen Thomas writes that the body is a cultural text (2003, p. 28). Respondents to Question One note that membership in Fiesta Filipina also facilitates meeting "new friends." That membership in this particular dance ensemble also permits the introduction of like-minded persons to one another, implicating a sharing of "social capital" that is consistent with Robert Putnam's ideas of "bonding" in the formation of community.

In the second question, I ask about Fiesta's membership requirements. Respondents indicate that membership entails significant time and financial commitments; clearly, the attractions of membership in the Fiesta community are sufficient in overcoming barriers created by its somewhat remote location, weekend scheduling, and possible financial considerations.

Question Three asks about the advantages of membership. Opportunities for travel and adventure exist, but the chance to come into contact with exciting possibilities for participants

indicates a willingness to take the risks in creating bridges with outside organizations, all the while preserving Filipino identity. This shows an impressive ability to negotiate multiple spheres of identity while performing with members of a “second family,” to quote the response of one participant. This indicates that the bonding capital within Fiesta is sufficient in providing a “safe haven,” as suggested by Hawkins, or Bourdieu’s habitus. Respondents indicate the importance of performing Filipino culture. The use of “expressive culture” and “a desire to keep it alive,” by one respondent, indicates awareness of the importance of dance in expressive culture as well as its fragility. Other respondents demonstrate self-awareness in their desire to profit from the well-documented benefits to health and body control provided by dance practice.

Question Four asks respondents to assign value to their membership in Fiesta Filipina. The positive response is not surprising, as the young dancers would not otherwise be at the rehearsal hall on a Sunday afternoon. Respondents view the dance ensemble as a “second family,” and once again we are confronted with Bourdieu’s habitus.

The fifth question asks whether respondents practice other forms of dance. Most indicated a participation in a broad variety of dance styles, an answer consistent with the Fiesta practice of including a multitude of dance genres in the repertoire, mirroring the diversity of Filipino culture and accepted practice at international dance festivals accredited by CIOFF, a UNESCO-affiliated organization. When participating in a CIOFF festival, visitors always prepare dances in the style of the host country. This also indicates the virtuosity of identity negotiation as noted above.

Question Six asks whether the ensemble is open to outsiders. The overwhelmingly positive response to this query again indicates strong social capital within Fiesta and the powerful force of dance in developing identity, as well as the virtuosity of Fiesta members in negotiating multiple identities. Outsiders pose no threat to this tightly-knit ensemble, although one respondent does point out that a newcomer might “feel lost in the Filipino community at first.” Respondents are anxious that newcomers learn the skills of identity negotiation that they themselves have mastered, and they are willing to teach through example.

In Question Seven, I ask whether membership in Fiesta makes respondents feel more Filipino. Here I address one of the major criticisms of multiculturalism as social policy that supposedly reinforces feelings of exclusion or otherness. Respondents’ replies indicate that a feeling of “Filipino-ness” increases when dancing as a member of Fiesta, but this sentiment is perceived as a positive attribute and as a valuable addition to the respondent’s sense of self. The replies also show that learning ancestral dances validates identity, thus addressing and resolving the deterritorialization referred to by Appadurai through the creation of cultural communities formed by the power of dance.

Question Eight asks whether respondents feel more attachment to Canada or to the Philippines, choosing between various spheres of identity. Replies indicate a well-developed ability to negotiate multiple selves, showing attachment to both Canadian and Filipino identities. Some express a marked preference for the Philippines. This is unsurprising, given the fact that the survey is being answered in a space marked by Philippine dance, music, food, and costume. The virtuosic negotiation of multiple spheres of identity is striking and indeed encouraged by the Fiesta staff who supply both Filipino and North American food, dance, and music.

In Question Nine, respondents put a value on the role played by Fiesta in the Filipino community. Answers indicate that participants feel that the ensemble plays a very important role inside the Filipino community by helping members stay in touch with their Filipino heritage and keeping the community intact, again showing the power of dance as a vehicle of identity. Respondents also expressed the importance of teaching Filipino culture to outsiders and showing the importance of dance as an articulator of expressive heritage. Dance is seen as a positive way of promoting Filipino culture, and performance is considered an expression of Filipino identity.

Question Ten gives the respondents an opportunity to reflect on their own position within the context of Fiesta Filipina and the Filipino community. Answers to this question indicate that participants attach great importance to the role played by Fiesta within the Filipino community, and that membership in the ensemble validates their position so that they become “ambassadors” for Filipino culture through dance practice. Dance also adds value to their status as members of the Filipino community. Here again, we see the power of dance as social capital in a community. In this paper, I have shown how cultural information can be transmitted through movement and how identity can be expressed through dance. Fiesta Filipina members are able to negotiate multiple spheres of identities with virtuosity to both embrace and transcend diversity. We have seen that the role of dance in a cultural community is that of a powerful form of social capital that serves both to create and to maintain strong community networks. Dance as it is practiced in Fiesta Filipina is an important expression of identity, and, as such, is crucial in creating culture in an Ontario Filipino community.

The semiotic vocabulary of dance as practiced by Fiesta Filipina serves to transmit Filipino culture to an audience. The body as cultural text (Thomas, 2003, p. 28) can act as a bridge between performer and spectator, facilitating discourse. Otherness is both reinforced and transcended; diversity is celebrated and understood. As one respondent commented, “I am an ambassador for the Filipino community.”

The structural framework created in the 1960’s to support the introduction of multiculturalism policy in the 1970’s has served well to entrench and empower the embodiment of diversity in Canada. As noted above, in Toronto alone, there are 75 dance ensembles that are members of the Community Folk Art Council. The fact that few of these cultural dance ensembles receive any financial support from the various funding agencies at the municipal, provincial, and federal levels may indicate a strong ethnocentric bias.

The multitude of ensembles that exist, despite a lack of outside funding, also demonstrates the commitment shown by members/dancers, as well as access to other income sources. The power of dance and its symbiotic relationship with the formation of community cannot be underestimated. Dance, as indicated by another respondent in the Fiesta Filipina survey, “Is something to look forward to and without it, I would be bored on my computer doing nothing.” Through dance, members of Fiesta Filipina, and, I believe, hundreds of similar groups across Canada, are bringing about change by breaking down barriers of otherness.

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