



# Long live Peru! Dancing national identity in a hostile context in the U.S.

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Today is the New York City Hispanic Day Parade, 13 October 2019, and I find myself back in Manhattan accompanying a Peruvian folk dance group performing on Fifth Avenue. The sun is out and it is warm for an October day. We are all excited to show Peruvian folklore to those attending the parade. After waiting our turn, it is time for the Peru delegation to join the elaborate show. The dancers are proud to perform and show off our traditional dances and colorful attire. As a Peruvian myself, I am also energized by the liveliness and pride in the music and dances. Time passes, and I get carried away between the vitality of the parade, taking photos, delivering water to the dancers, and my own enthusiasm. Then, as I am taking a photo of a group dancing the Chonguinada, I realize that the backdrop is Trump Tower. The irony hits me: we are celebrating our Spanish colonial heritage smack in the middle of the same anti-immigration and anti-Hispanic rhetoric that has always been so prevalent in US politics and has recently escalated. I realize that the parade is yet another representation of the tightrope immigrants walk in the diaspora in the United States: to cast a celebratory and unproblematic version of their national identity to show what good immigrants they are.

As Mamdani (2002) indicates, the Manichean distinction between good and bad Muslims, or in this case immigrants, can only be understood as a result of the encounter between immigrants and the society that receives them. Focusing on the United States as the receiving society, it is like the two faces of Janus, a nation of immigrants and a nation of xenophobia (Lee 2019). In the case of Hispanics, the face they have confronted the most is xenophobia, as they are perceived in the United States as perpetual immigrants regardless of their citizenship status, country of origin, or the number of generations they have lived in the country (Massey 2014). In other words, it is a hostile context of reception wherein Hispanics are compelled to highlight the bright, the good, and the unproblematic aspects of their identity.

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Exclusion of parts of the identity are an inevitable result of this process, most likely the aspects that were already marginal in the home country in the first place.

Let's go back to the parade. Performing the good immigrant through highlighting the celebratory nature of its cultural identity represented with music and dances at the event, each country delegation displays its culture as a distinct and self-contained whole. To put it plainly, the parade flattens the complexities of any cultural ancestry. Therefore, a possible interpretation is that by participating at the parade, the performers are supporting the problematic definition of Peruvian culture as a neatly contained entity that is straightforward and conflict-free. (The same is true for the representations of other countries and cultures at the parade.) Another possible explanation is that the flattening of a given culture is a way to show that we are good immigrants, distinctly different from the suspicious ones. Following the latter explanation, I argue that the good immigrant performance can be understood only in the context of xenophobia that casts Hispanics (and immigrants of color in particular) as a dangerous, imminent threat that has led to an increase in the fortified securitization of the southern border (Chavez 2008; Sampaio 2015).

Attending the parade is part of my long-term research project on immigrant incorporation studying the performance of Peruvian folk dances in the United States. I focus on folk dance practice as a window to understanding pathways of incorporation into the receiving country. The key point is how ethnic celebrations are crafted in conversation with the larger society where they are performed. Thus, the parade is an entry point to see how immigrants (and second and subsequent generations as well) have to perform the good immigrant to show they deserve to be in the United States. Drawing on the participation of the Ballet Folklórico Perú (BFP) at the parade, I analyze the setting (e.g., preparation for it, my role in the process, and the organization of the event); then, I move to examine the selection of dances, and then to studying the performance at the parade and its location. All these elements help us understand how national representation works in a multicultural event in the diaspora, and how closely it connects to the context of reception and thus to its politics.

## **The elements of the parade**

### **The dance group**

In midsummer of 2019, the directors of the BFP learned that BFP had become a full member of the Hispanic Parade Committee Inc. and therefore was set to perform as an organizer at the parade; this was the first time in almost 30 years of work. In the past, BFP members had been invited as individuals to perform a given dance. For the BFP, being a member was a big deal, so I decided to join them the week before the event to participate in rehearsals. The ballet is a well-established Peruvian folk dance group in Paterson, New Jersey, which was founded by three professional Peruvian dancers in 1991 and has performed in the tristate area. The ballet meets for rehearsals at the home of two members, as the couple has turned their three-car garage into a dance studio.



## My participation

I met members of the BFP in 2006 and have shadowed the group ever since. As a researcher and friend of the dancers, I share the pride and excitement to perform in Manhattan. But, as much as I feel ethnic pride, my eye as a migration scholar cannot be turned off. I am fascinated to participate in the parade, which falls during National Hispanic Heritage Month, a month chosen because it coincides with the celebration of independence from Spain by many Latin American countries. Interestingly, every year, the parade takes place the day before the celebration of Columbus Day—a day that represents the brutal colonization of the Americas. This seeming contradiction makes me wonder what the celebration is all about for those who claim Hispanic heritage in the United States in 2019.

## Parade organization

The committee renders the parade as a multicultural celebration. The organization is composed of representatives of three ethnic organizations from each of the 21 countries with Hispanic heritage. In other words, cultures are equated with national cultures and symbols. This is reinforced by the optional presence of representatives of the diplomatic consulate of each country. The BFP is one of the three groups representing Peru on the committee. The structure of the festive parade, however, has long been established, and groups have to follow it strictly. For example, each country (and every group within a country delegation) has to have two flags, the US flag on the right side and the country flag on the left. No other flags are allowed. It is equally forbidden to display any sign that is political, religious, or commercial unrelated to the parade. The committee has assigned every country delegation a street from which to join the celebration. Although the order is alphabetical, from Argentina to Venezuela, the first one is Spain, as the “motherland,” or as the origin of Hispanic culture. Interestingly, Cuba is missing, even though people of Cuban ancestry represent two million individuals in the United States (Flores 2017). Although politics is not allowed at the parade, it is central in the organization of the event. For example, in including Spain, and excluding Cuba, or disregarding the fact that a vast part of the Southwest of the United States was once a Spanish territory and therefore includes Hispanic heritage.

## The parade

The parade is a celebration of Hispanic heritage, but also of multiculturalism (in its cultural pluralism version; see Bloemraad and Wright 2014) that relates back to the United States, a country of immigrants. In the parade, “culture” appears to be about unity, homogeneity, inclusivity, and a lack of hierarchies and conflict. It is about a diverse mosaic, and a picture of distinct cultures, as if they were ever real as such. Dancing a folk dance and wearing traditional attire during the parade seems to offer a bounded space and time in which to celebrate diversity. Thus, multiculturalism



appears to be a seamless state of being: celebration. As if that was any country's history. As such, it constrains, or erases altogether, the possibility of grappling with the internal diversity of any culture.

Further, the celebratory nature of the parade hides the labor and thought process put in to performing and the material conditions in which dancers celebrate culture. Thus, the parade, as the public event, renders invisible the labor behind the scenes that makes it possible for groups and dancers to perform at the Hispanic Day celebration. For the parade to show how effortless the dances are, and how "naturally" the dance comes to the dancers, requires a great deal of preparation. In other words, the performance conceals the long rehearsals and the effort involved in acquiring every piece of attire. This last alone requires purchasing ornaments in Peru and having them sent to the United States for the BFP. The performance also requires recruiting forty dancers, between current and former members of the ballet, and friends who are willing to learn the dance and the choreography. Keeping in mind that all dancers work full time, and sometimes hold two jobs, the performance is an ambitious enterprise.

### **The setting of the parade**

The epitome location for high-end stores in the United States is Fifth Avenue, where the Hispanic Day Parade has taken place for more than forty years. The dancers, who come from the other boroughs and across state lines, are coming to Manhattan to dance on a Sunday morning, while the rest of the week they come to the same place to work. It is a movement from the periphery to the center, from the working class to the center of wealth and power. As the parade ends, everyone goes back to where we came from, leaving the space to its regular inhabitants. Masses of immigrants taking to Fifth Avenue to celebrate their countries, but also holding a US flag along with their home country's flag, make evident that they can be side by side for an event, but there is not necessarily much integration. In other words, Hispanics are taking the streets of the most famous avenue in the United States to perform their ethnicity, a situation that would be banned any other day of the year.

### **Disentangling the "harmonized national identity"**

Let's rewind and look back to the preparation for the performance. By the time I joined the rehearsals on October 10th, the founders of the BFP had decided to perform three folk dances. When I inquired what factored in to their decision, the dancers indicated that they considered the wardrobe they own, what they could acquire in the time they had before the parade, and which choreographies were easy for novice dancers to learn. Then, the call for recruiting dancers went out. The BFP dancers, former dancers, friends, and acquaintances signed up. The founders of the BFP scheduled regular rehearsals. When I learned what the three dances were—Marinera, Chonguinada, and Shapis—I was not surprised, because I have seen the ballet perform these dances at parades and theaters in the past. For the parade, though, the



goal of the ballet is to show off Peruvian folklore vis-à-vis other Hispanics performing, but also to sway the audience of the parade. They explained to me the decision was based on color, beauty, and distinctiveness.

### The dances

Marinera Norteña, Chonguinada, and Shapis of Chupaca are dances that, one could argue, each represent a part of the Spanish inheritance in Peruvian history. Marinera, a courtship dance, represents a male landowner and a female peasant during the onset of Peruvian republican time, and is a mixture of Spanish and Andean rhythms, musicalized with European, Afro-Peruvian, and Andean instruments. The moral of Marinera is that all we can do is flirt with the idea of incorporation into the other socioeconomic group because, in reality, invisible social boundaries are as firm as caste boundaries.

Shapis and Chonguinada tell us about how humor and satire can be used as tools for resistance. The Shapis, or men warriors, is a group dance. The dancers represent the Spaniards who venture to the jungle seeking gold. The dancers are covered from head to toe. They all wear feathered hats, handkerchiefs covering their necks, a tunic over white tights and a white shirt; a colorful bag goes on the side, and they carry an ax in one hand and arrows in the other. This is the representation of defeated Spaniards who failed to secure any gold. Chonguinada is a satire of the minuet, in which heterosexual couples dance in two columns, one lined up with women and the other with men. Women wear colorful dresses, with hat and cape, and a vest decorated with coins. They represent the Andean woman. Men, who represent Spaniards with blue eyes, wear a black suit, a hat with feathers, and a mask of a white person.

The three dances are about the defiance of strict social arrangements: Marinera represents social classes, and the others depict satirical versions of European dances and their misfortunes. However, dancing these three dances at the parade removes the element of defiance and, even worse, converts them to acts of compliance with the celebration of cultural diversity. The selection of dances represents a playful and colorful image of Peru, but also excludes many other cultural traditions; most noticeably, dances from the jungle are missing entirely, as well as Afro-Peruvian dances. Although the selection is problematic regarding how we define Peruvian identity, again, my work highlights that the very selection is a function of the context of reception that pushes groups to go for a seemingly self-contained national identity. They choose what they think is attention-grabbing for the few minutes they will parade in front of spectators who know little about Peruvian folklore.

### The dancers

During the rehearsals, I found out that dancing is a family affair, as almost half of the dancers and support team were there with a sibling, parent, or partner. Further, there was a mix of generations, levels of dance proficiency, and time living in the United States. Everyone committed to a month of frequent and long rehearsals on top of their considerable busy work schedules. As the day approached, the number



of rehearsals increased, as did tensions among dancers, as well as the excitement and the collaboration to make everything happen: cleaning, sewing, food donations, first aid services, photography, sound amplification, banners, props, and more. In the days preceding the parade, dancers work longer hours to make sure the choreography is ready. The labor involved in showing the joy, happiness, homogeneity, and pride during the celebration is hidden to the parade-goers.

Both the dancers and the dances perform a self-contained Peruvian identity in a hostile context. Thus, the festive celebration and the desire of being recognized as members of the society occur at the expense of reproducing stereotypes of the good immigrant. As the dancers attempt to use the parade to demonstrate that they are the good, law-abiding immigrants, the parade also reproduces the image of forever ethnic, forever traditional immigrants who remain tied to the past, contained and tamed and, therefore, forever foreign. Participation in these types of events de-historicizes the presence of peoples from Latin America in the United States, and that a large portion of the current US territory was acquired through the Guadalupe-Hidalgo Treaty of 1848.

### **At the end: Back to the “harmonized national identity”**

The New York City Hispanic Day Parade, and many other ethnic celebrations in the United States, homogenizes the immigrant groups represented and those representing it. The BFP put forth a performance that involved dancers who came as immigrants and their children born in the US, those that have professional jobs and those who do unskilled labor, and those whose first language is English and those who mainly speak Spanish all day. Regardless of the differences, all of the dancers see the United States as their home. And yet, these celebrations remind them that being ethnic and dancing is the way to be recognized, even if momentarily, in the country they call home. In other words, being the good immigrant that is excited, despite their worries and concerns, to dance their national pride in the streets of New York City. For the few hours of the parade, the hostile and xenophobic context has dissipated.

The parade, and the labor associated with it, serves as a window through which to view the contradictions of social incorporation. As with any other site of multicultural experience, the Hispanic Day Parade is a celebration of the past as a cultural experience that benefits the norm without grappling with what it entails today. This is a multicultural celebration that showcases Hispanic culture, underscoring the celebration of Spanish inheritance and erasing other heritages that are also central to any other Latin American country’s cultural heritage. Thus, the parade shows the tightrope immigrants walk in the diaspora, and that immigrants (and second generation as well) have to perform the good immigrant with a bounded (and static) culture in the United States. Finally, I am writing this in 2020, a presidential election year already shaped by the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic, which is leading immigrant cultural groups to virtual spaces, spaces that are forcing Hispanic groups to be yet more concise (and flat) in the representation of their heritage.



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