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ZUMBA® FITNESS AS A CULTURAL MEDIATOR

A Thesis

by

CORA E. DURAIN

Submitted to the Graduate School of the
University of Texas-Pan American
In partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

MASTER OF MUSIC

December 2012

Major Subject: Ethnomusicology

ZUMBA[®] FITNESS AS A CULTURAL MEDIATOR

A Thesis
by
CORA E. DURAIN

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December 2012

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ABSTRACT

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This ethnography describes local experience as it pertains to aspects of music, dance, and fitness which are compiled into Zumba® Fitness classes of the Rio Grande Valley. While Zumba is not unique to this region, it is locally interpreted based on geo-cultural factors of the Texas-Mexico border region. A large part of Zumba's success in the Valley can be attributed to the way music is used to identify with regional popular culture and becomes a catalyst for changing the way locals think about health. Research gathered through participant-observation shows that Zumba has become a cultural expression where participants perform both local and global identities. This study links Zumba to the fields of Latin American music history, performance studies, ethno-choreology, medical anthropology, and border studies.

DEDICATION

This thesis is dedicated to my best friend and future husband, Francisco Piña, for supporting me lovingly throughout my hours of studying. His compassion in the health field and his enthusiasm for helping others has been a constant source of inspiration. Thank you, Frank, for reminding me of the value of this work.

The completion of this master's degree is a testament to my mother's love for learning which she instilled in me from a young age. The hours she spent reading to me and teaching me to read and write were seeds sown toward this academic accomplishment, while my father's provision made it possible for her to homeschool me. Thank you, to both my parents, Dawn and Norman Durain, for giving so much of yourselves to "train me up in the way I should go."

Becoming an ethnomusicologist has been much like an apprenticeship, in which I have been very privileged to study under the direction of Dr. Catherine Ragland at University of Texas-Pan American. I also dedicate this writing to her for the example she has shown me of a true scholar, and a faithful mentor—seeing this project to completion even after relocating to the University of North Texas. Her contagious passion for border music studies continues to propel me further into the field. Thank you, Dr. Ragland, for believing in this project, guiding my research, and working with me long-distance to carry out this study.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I am grateful to my interdisciplinary committee for their willingness to invest time in helping me through the process of research, writing, and presenting. It has been an honor to work with each of you, Dr. Ragland, Dr. Davis, Dr. Cole, and Dr. Ernst. Thank you for providing perspectives from the fields of ethnomusicology, music education, socio-linguistics, and psychology. I appreciate each of you for venturing into this project with me.

Within the field of ethnomusicology, there have been many forerunners that I look up to for their theoretical approaches to the issues at hand. A special thanks goes to Sydney Hutchinson, Ruth Hellier-Tinoco, Alejandro Madrid, and Harris Berger, for especially influencing my thinking and writing about local expressions of identity.

This work would not have been possible without the welcoming response from many Zumba instructors and participants throughout the Rio Grande Valley. Thank you for all the rigorous workouts and engaging conversations. Most of all, thank you for the steps you are taking to impact the health of our community. *¡Que sigan bailando!*

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INTRODUCTION

CROSSING BORDERS

Waiting nervously at the Texas Traveler's office on the Anzaldua International Bridge, I shifted my weight from one foot to the other, glancing down at my pointy black high heels. I simply wanted a Senti pass to be able to quickly cross the border with my fiancé and visit his mother occasionally. Yet, you would have thought I was applying for a position with the FBI, or being interrogated for incriminating evidence. Although they already had all my information on file, I explained again that I had been living in Harlingen for three years and working as an elementary music teacher. My family lived in Houston, and *no* I had not been in trouble with the law other than some speeding tickets.

Finally leaving the office, I was so tempted to start speeding again when I realized how long I had been there and knew I would barely make it to my Zumba class on time. I rushed home and changed out of my dress clothes into workout attire. After a stressful summer morning I did not want to miss Zumba. The class started at 9:45 AM. I got there at 9:50. The first song was already playing and I jumped into an open space near the back of the room. "Con las manos in the air..." the music repeated as mirrored walls reflected a room full of women waving their hands over their head and marching to the beat. Immediately the pressure of my visit with the federal border agents lifted and I felt like I had quickly crossed over a new border space where both Spanish and English mingled and music, dance, and fitness coincided.

Falling in Love with Zumba

My first encounter with Zumba Fitness goes back two years earlier to the summer of 2010 when I was visiting family in Houston, TX. My Aunt Jenna invited me to a class, but I was a little reluctant to go. I had heard Zumba mentioned a few times in the Rio Grande Valley during my first year there, and remembered seeing signs for it, but had no clue what it would be like. Aunt Jenna showed me videos on YouTube of different classes, and I was shocked that I recognized the music. They were dancing to my favorite songs: Shakira, reggaeton, Latin pop...and it was exercise! Elated, I went with her to my first Zumba class.

We left that Zumba studio covered in sweat, with aching muscles and empty water bottles. That day I vowed to find a Zumba class near where I lived in the Valley. I could not believe that there was a global network of Zumba participants who shared a love for “my style” of music and had this much fun with it! I felt like I had discovered a subculture where I belonged, a place where I could dance around for an hour and get the same benefits, if not more, than running on the treadmill. A release of energy, an embrace of expression, and a whole community of people gathering around this gym class performance!

Little did I realize that as popular as it was in Houston, Zumba classes were exploding all throughout the Rio Grande Valley (RGV). Doing a search for classes on Zumba’s website turned up 131 classes for Friday within a 50 mile radius of Harlingen, TX. Searching for Friday Zumba classes in a 50 mile radius in Houston gave 192 results. Keep in mind that the estimated population of the Valley is 1.2 million (U.S. Census Bureau, 2010) and that of Houston is about 4 million! There are many Zumba classes in both places. But I began to wonder, “What is it about the Valley that has made Zumba an overwhelming success?”

Cultural Mediation

When I moved to the Rio Grande Valley in 2009, I began a process similar to that experienced by immigrants assimilating into another country. Although I had transplanted myself from one Texas city to another, the Valley turned out to be a whole different world for me. Not exactly Mexico, but not the same as the rest of Texas, the unique culture of the “RGV” required some adjustments in the way I perceived myself in relation to others. With my blonde hair and light skin, I appeared different from most local residents, but in my heart I felt a connection to their laid-back lifestyle, sincere communication, and passionate expression. My roots in Houston tied me to multiple international communities, while a special love for Latin culture had brought me to South Texas. Grappling with a desire to “belong”, I found in Zumba classes a bridge between the world I had grown up in, and the border space I now call home.

In this thesis I label Zumba a “cultural mediator” because I have experienced the opportunity to express different cultural identities and expressions through participating in Zumba classes. I define a cultural mediator as that which presents people with the familiar while introducing the new. Here I view the Zumba experience as a cultural mediator, while the music, the instructors, and the participants all play a role within this collective experience, and can each be viewed as mediating cultural exchange as well.

Not only for me, but also for instructors and participants that I have spoken with, Zumba guides us through the journey of grappling with how we define ourselves in this ever-changing world. We look in the mirror and see our ethnic and physical appearance—our weight, height, color and shape. But as we begin to dance, we take on new identities. Experiencing music from familiar and unknown styles, we move in ways that display sensuality and strength, acquiring

these expressions from around the world. With a tango, we embody the smooth and intentional movements of an Argentine dancer, yet when the beat changes to hip hop we swerve to an urban-American swagger. Salsa and reggaeton evoke Afro-Latinidad through accentuated hip choreographies that double as an ab workout. The fluid arm and hand motions of Flamenco dancing blend into interpretations of Middle-Eastern bhangras, sprinkled with sexy hip-hop steps remerging as interpretations of French-Arabic reggaeton. Including country-western music and Mexican cumbias in the mix brings together local identities with other world genres. A seamless flow of cultures is mediated through dance choreographies that show-off stylistic movements representative of particular people groups, while serving as cardio-aerobic exercise. We feel as if we are performing on a global stage, taking on new cultural expressions and turning familiar music and dance steps into symbols of transnational pride. Whereas folk dancing celebrates regional or national identities, in Zumba we proudly vest ourselves with all the colors of the world. We link ourselves to local Valley party-culture, Mexican pachangas, Pan-Latino fiestas, and global night clubs all at the same time through sweating it out on the floors of neighborhood Zumba studios. Throughout this thesis, I describe how both local and global cultures meet and interact within Zumba. By joining together multiple worlds, Zumba facilitates an exchange of creativity and health.

Multiple Dimensions Joined Together through Zumba

Music, Dance, and Fitness

Music is performed in Zumba, not by live musicians, but by moving bodies. Dance is employed as a means of achieving fitness goals, like sugar-coating on medicine. The success of

Zumba can be attributed to the fun of grooving to the music which masks the “work” of exercising. Zumba is unlike many other fitness programs in that the whole class revolves around the music, instead of music being merely played in the background.

Border Cultures

In a zone where Mexican and American cultures collide, Zumba offers a way to partake in both with a sense of competence. When we eat at a restaurant that serves “foreign” cuisine, (Italian, Chinese, Greek, etc.) we sample the culture. But when we dance to music from another culture, we are *recreating* a taste of that distant land. Instead of simply consuming a cultural product by listening to the music or eating the food, learning the recipe of dance steps is like cooking a cultural dish that can be shared with others. Not only does it encompass enjoying the music, but the action of dancing is the choice to actively express that culture through your movements. To perform a dance from another culture is to accept that culture, to embrace it, and take it on as your own. In the Rio Grande Valley, Zumba is a way participants can learn about and perform world cultures including representations of Mexican and American identities. Thus Zumba has become a powerful medium for socialization between people from both sides of the border, and between different generations of Mexican-Americans living here.

Differing Levels of Health and Fitness

Besides mediating different identities, Zumba is also brokering cultural change by mediating health culture to those who may not have prioritized their health before. As is often

the case in the Valley, personal wellness gets overlooked most of the time because we don't feel like exercising, or we are just too busy to do it. However, more and more people are going out of their way to attend Zumba classes—not because they *should*, but because they *want to*. In the Zumba setting, participants enjoy themselves, and simultaneously are educated about their fitness. Instructors model to them how to vary steps according to their ability, offer nutrition tips, and set an example of a healthy individual. For those, especially in this region, who never gave much thought to exercise before, Zumba meets them where they are, and gives them a vision for who they can become. Zumba instructors build participants' confidence in themselves by leading them through flashy choreography that helps them perform health as an image, and as an identity. As participants dance sensually, they begin to perceive themselves differently, and attain the attractive body which they are continually working towards through participation in Zumba.

Various Academic Disciplines

This thesis in itself is a testimony to the way Zumba can bring together different professions and fields of study. The committee of professors to which this thesis is being presented includes a psychologist, a linguistic-anthropologist, a music education specialist, and an ethnomusicologist. I hope this is the first of many occasions that the academic study of Zumba will mediate discussions across disciplines. We have discussed the way Zumba connects to people at the core through music, and promotes healthy changes in their lifestyles. This committee has taken special interest in the way Zumba specifically affects people of the Rio

Grande Valley region as they relate to cultural identities represented through music and dance, and shift prevailing social attitudes toward health.

Placing Zumba Within an Ethnomusicology Framework

This study is a description of local experience as it pertains to aspects of music, dance, and fitness which come together in Zumba classes of the Rio Grande Valley. While Zumba is not unique to this region, I seek to understand how local interpretations are made based on geo-cultural factors. The cultural influences of two nations overlap along the Texas-Mexican border and result in a refraction of various identities, emphasizing differing degrees of Mexicanness and Americanness. Enamored with Mexican culture myself, I fell head over heels in love with Zumba as it has allowed me to take part in Latino expressive culture. Involvement in local Zumba classes has also helped me to better understand the dynamics of Texas-Mexican border society. By attending classes, Zumbathons, and master classes throughout the Valley, I have had the opportunity to participate in regional culture and experience the way Latino, American, and global identities are interpreted locally. I have seen how familiar and exotic music is used in local Zumba classes to connect with participants' sense of cultural pride and desire to keep up with global trends. I propose that Zumba provides a space where expressive cultures are mediated and constructed identities are performed.

At first glance, it may seem controversial to dwell on the subject of Zumba within a framework of ethnomusicology. Is not our field reserved for the study of authentic folk and popular musics, the transcription and preservation of endangered cultural practices? Yes, but it is so much more! With a recent shift toward examining music practices in the diaspora and

validating pop culture as worthy of scholarship, our ethnomusicological research now takes into account social music both nearby and faraway. In the case of Zumba, we find a mixture of the global and local, traditional and modern, familiar and exotic cultural soundings. As colleagues focus their fieldwork on issues of identity, gender, social activism, cultural and individual perceptions, influences of technology, mediatization¹, and globalization within the scope of ethnomusicology, this ethnographic exercise in participant-observation contributes—either directly or indirectly—to all of these current issues. Most of all, I hope that my research might call attention to the rising field of medical ethnomusicology, which hinges on music therapy and medical anthropology.

Throughout my time of research I have witnessed the powerful social impact Zumba has made by harnessing the energy of music. Much as the force of water or wind is used as an energy source, being channeled through power plants to provide electricity for whole communities, Zumba Fitness demonstrates how currents of popular dance music can fuel social transformation. By bringing people together from diverse ethnicities, ages, and social classes, Zumba provides a meeting ground that bonds people through music, dance, and exercise. Furthermore, Zumba classes are changing the way people may have traditionally thought about fitness—showing that a workout can actually be fun. In the case of the Texas Rio Grande Valley, where obesity and diabetes are at epidemic proportions, a widespread health revolution driven by local Zumba classes is a beacon of hope. Zumba is spreading quickly through communities in South Texas where many people had previously given up on trying to get fit. Zumba instructors are working hard to educate Valley residents about the importance of staying

¹ *Mediatization* is the process a social practice goes through when it becomes commodified by the media, or the result of a performance being oriented toward the media. This is a type of mediation being discussed by scholars in the field of socio-linguistics and anthropology, which carries strong implications for ethnomusicology as well. See: Asif Agha, “Meet Mediatization,” *Language & Communication* 31, (2011).

active and taking care of their health, while spreading awareness of organizations that benefit medical research.

The primary emphasis in Zumba is on having fun by moving to music. Because of the central role music has in Zumba, the impact and popularity of Zumba is inseparably linked to the music it features. It wouldn't be a party without the music! In his book *Zumba: Ditch the Workout, Join the Party! The Zumba Weight Loss Program*, Zumba founder Beto Perez notes the importance of music:

The key to the Zumba fitness program is not flashy choreography; it is the music. Music adds instant energy to your workout. It pulls you in. It makes you want to move. It is very inviting, very sensual. You follow the steps by feeling and moving to the music.²

What makes Zumba different from other fitness programs is the use of dance steps which correlate to the style of music being played. Where many cardio-related programs use music to keep the beat, in Zumba, music actually dictates the moves. Zumba routines are patterned after the form of the song being used, so that participants learn to recognize dance rhythms such as cumbia, merengue, reggaeton, bachata, quebradita, salsa, cha-cha-cha, and swing rhythms—to name a few—and to relate basic dance steps that match the music.

Zumba Fitness now produces their own music which mixes together different styles within each song. The music department at the Zumba office consists of three people who work to discover up-and-coming popular genres from around the world, secure the rights to rerecord hits, and then compile them to create a new hybrid. Resulting fusions include flamenco/cha-cha-

² Beto Perez and Maggie Greenwood Robinson, *Zumba: Ditch the Workout Join the Party! The Zumba Weight Loss Program* (Grand Central Life & Style, 2009), 65.

cha, merengue/hip hop, and belly dance/reggaeton. Blending musical styles allows for variations in the choreography as well. Dance styles are sometimes simplified, showing an essentialized version of what might be performed in a ballroom, yet they are often embellished as well—especially to increase muscle exertion. However, instead of just focusing on the music genres in Zumba as they relate to local Valley culture, or to any other community where Zumba is found, I have chosen to describe the effect of the whole Zumba experience within the border region of South Texas. I assert Zumba as a cultural expression where participants perform both local and global identities. As such, this study is also closely linked to Latin American music history, performance studies, ethno-choreology, medical anthropology, and border studies.

Other Research Fields Related to This Study

Latin American Music

Scholars such as Deborah Pacini Hernandez, Ed Morales, and John Storm Roberts have given us a historical and cultural framework for popular music styles throughout the Hispanic diaspora. Roberts' work has been particularly useful to scholars of Latin music as an overview of the travels of many different musical styles that came to the United States from Cuba, Mexico, Argentina and Brazil. Morales peers into the history of Latin music artists to find common threads to the imagined homeland, linking each genre to cultural waves and historical signs. Pacini Hernandez, dissecting identity and hybridity, contributes her observation of the Latin diaspora as it connects through music. Other musicologists and ethnomusicologists have focused on certain Latin music styles including merengue (Hutchinson), banda (Simonett), reggaeton (Rivera, Marshall, Pacini Hernandez), and conjunto (Peña) that can be heard in Zumba classes.

There are many more genres performed within Zumba contexts, each having been explored by music scholars, yet I would like to assert that Zumba is a new way of *performing* and *experiencing* Latin music. While Zumba is not exclusively comprised of Latin genres, these syncopated, rhythmic dance styles are fundamental to Zumba classes around the world. Candace Foxx, a local Zumba instructor and NASM certified fitness trainer explains how Latin and international dance styles are intentionally combined to make the most of the workout.

Zumba's about all Latin cultures. All the music is great, and it's all different. You keep the class interesting because you're throwing in the cumbias, you're throwing in the merengue, you're throwing in some salsa, you have the belly dancing. All those different styles actually work out your body differently, so it actually maximizes your results, instead of just doing the same, repetitive movements.³

In Zumba we also see the Latin identity becoming a cultural mediator that bonds together other world cultures.

Medical Anthropology

As a recently developing field that considers, “how the health of individuals, larger social formations, and the environment are affected by interrelationships between humans and other species; cultural norms and social institutions; micro and macro politics; and forces of

³ Candace Foxx, personal communication July 2012.

globalization as each of these affects local worlds,”⁴ medical anthropology is highly concerned with the effect of cultural mindsets and practices on health issues. Because I have seen that Zumba is working to change social norms by making physical exercise acceptable and even popular for Latina women⁵, I consider this topic to be noteworthy to scholars of culture and medicine.

More recently, the field of *medical ethnomusicology* has been emerging as a discipline driven by collaboration among practitioners, theorists, and musicians. Doctors see the value of music in the healing process, and ethnomusicologists are gaining opportunities to record the way societies—impacted by health problems, cope by using musical practices. Take for example, the compilation recently edited by Gregory Barz and Judah M. Cohen entitled *The Culture of AIDS in Africa: Hope and Healing Through Music and the Arts*, which tells of cultural expressions that allow for communication about this health situation. Study of the role of music in dealing with AIDS has been handled with sensitivity and compassion from a variety of fields relating to health sciences and the arts. When it comes to viewing health issues surrounding the people of the Rio Grande Valley, I wish to do the same by highlighting the chance for change being offered through Zumba Fitness. While Zumba methodology and practice has been brought to this region from outside, it has become integrated into the local culture to the extent that there is a Zumba studio on nearly every street corner. Actual medical research that determines the extent of Zumba’s reach into our local health is a subject for future science-based studies. Here I seek

⁴ Medanthro.net, “What is Medical Anthropology?”, Society for Medical Anthropology: A Section of the American Anthropological Association, 2009, <http://www.medanthro.net/definition.html>

⁵ While Latina women are not the only social group participating in Zumba or affected by it, the impact Zumba has on this population could be considered counter-cultural. Women do not typically focus on physical activities or even take time for their own leisure activities in many Latin cultures. Further research is called for in the area of gender studies to also examine the implications for men involved in Zumba.

to raise awareness in the field of medicine and anthropology that there is a fitness program we should keep our eye on.

Performance Studies

With an emphasis on color, fashion, and presentation of the body, this ethnographic topic is also ripe for the field of performance studies. We see a social practice surfacing that resembles “going clubbing” as Zumba merges dance with fitness. Zumba instructors perform with flair as they acknowledge that the world is watching. By posting videos on YouTube, instructors and participants increase reflection and communication about their choreographies and overall presentation. All of these behaviors signal that Zumba is viewed as a performance by members of the Zumba community. Simply by doing Zumba in front of a mirror, participants are conscious of their appearance as they shimmy and shake through each song.

The field of performance studies has been shifting towards a broader definition of performance by viewing everyday tasks—such as exercise—as part of performing cultural and individual practices. Ruth Hellier Tinoco coins the term “performism” in her recent work, *Embodying Mexico: Tourism, Nationalism & Performance* in which she describes the ways corporeal acts of *la danza de los viejitos* (Dance of the Old Men) and *noche de muertos* (Night of the Dead) involve several layers of performance. Performism looks at the process and production of performance. One of these layers of performance is the relation of a song or dance to a national identity. Just as the Dance of the Old Men is a symbol of *mexanidad*, different performances can portray a physical representation of certain cultures, histories, rituals, and values. I view the performance of *constructed* identities and the re-enactment of exotic images

as elements of performism that are found in Zumba. The global identities presented and performed in Zumba—whether personally associated with one’s own culture or as a construct of a different global identity—develop into a representation of exoticism. Through Zumba, these images and identities are all performed within a social group where coordinated body movements time-lock individuals into an interdependent collective. Providing a foundation for all of these elements, the distinctive embodiment of music within Zumba ties it to the other performing arts as a cultural expression.

Ethno-choreology

Zumba fits into the discussion of effects of globalization on social practices as music and dance are reunited on the floors of studios and gyms everywhere. While western cultures have tended to separate music from dance, Zumba classes return to a holistic approach to music that includes movement and social interaction. Instead of retaining the semi-passive role of listening to music purely for entertainment, Zumba gives us a chance to interact with music as it suggests specific types of steps, tempi, and stylistic gestures. The roles of *performer* and *audience* blend into a single role of *participant* as the music is embodied through workout choreography. Zumba adds a new dimension to the field of ethno-choreology by giving us an opportunity to consider the meanings different dance genres take on as they are performed within a fitness context.

Border Studies

I hope to contribute a scholarly perspective that looks at performance space as another way of “crossing over.” Through enactment of cultural memories or identities, participants are linked to other places—whether a distant homeland or an exotic tourist site. As participants journey through each song in a Zumba class, they travel across political, geographic, and language barriers. As different genres and styles are used to represent the faces of the world, Zumba music imports urban America as well as rural Mexico, tribal Africa and sensual Persia into the sweaty, foggy rooms of brightly-painted studios and packed out gym classes.

To a diverse population in the border region of South Texas/Northern Mexico, Zumba provides a common ground for sharing cultures and constructing identities. Recent immigrants to the Valley recall how much they enjoyed attending Zumba classes in Monterrey, Reynosa, or Matamoros. When they discover a Zumba class on this side it feels like they never left Mexico. For Valley residents who travelled here from the north (myself included) we enjoy the opportunity to feel included in local culture while occasionally hearing a familiar pop song as well. The lyrics switch back and forth from Spanish to English, with a few other languages sprinkled in. Instructors often follow suit, code-switching when describing dance steps and printing phrases from each language on signs and flyers. In an area where “Spanglish” dominates, Zumba class provides the perfect setting for monolinguals and bilinguals to interact, although verbal communication is not imperative, even for the instructor.

Methodology

With such a wide range of locations to choose from, my fieldwork has been conducted throughout the Valley from Brownsville to Mission. Beginning as a participant, I noted aspects of my experiences that intrigued me to pursue further study. Taking field notes, and asking questions, I began to notice some similarities from class to class. At some locations I was able to attend multiple classes over a long period of time, which allowed me to develop more relationships and gain deeper perspectives; and other times I would visit for a single class to sample what was new to that location. Pharr and Harlingen served as the hubs of my most concentrated, regular attendance over a period of two years, while I occasionally visited Zumba classes in different towns in the Valley as well.

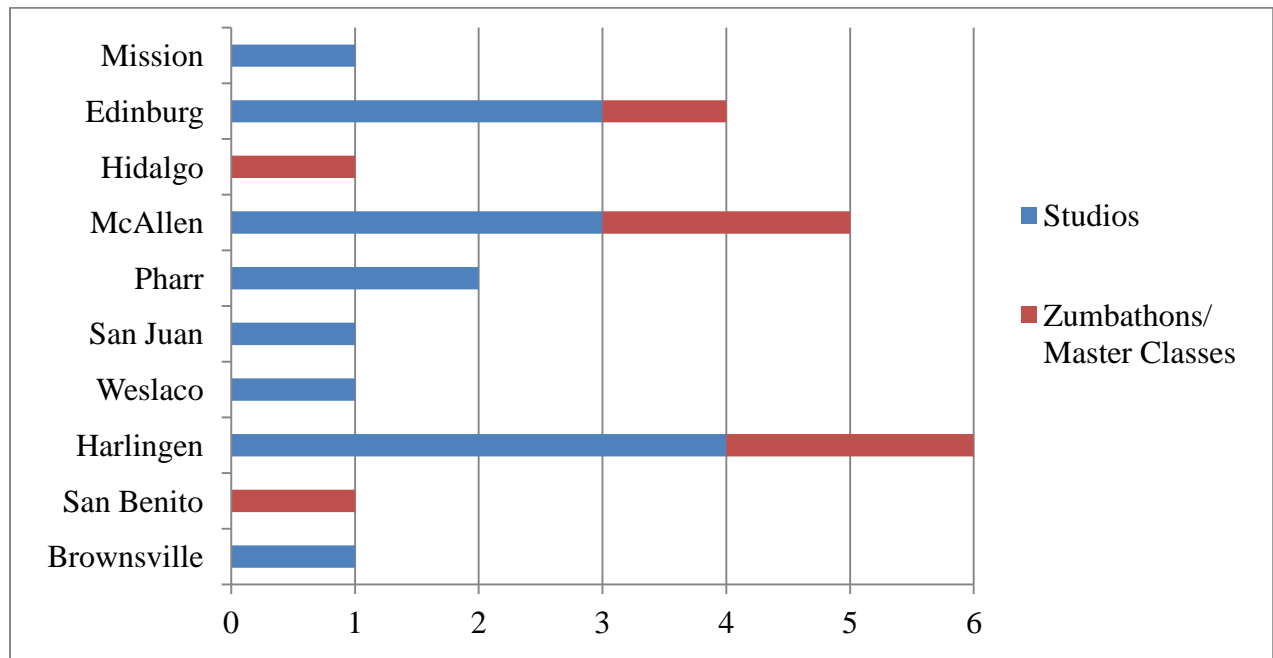
In Table 1, I outline the number of different locations I have attended for classes, Zumbathons, and master classes. The number of instructors and classes attended is not included. Some gyms offered classes by as many as five different instructors, and the Zumbathons I attended showcased numerous instructors as well. My interviews were conducted outside of class, but casual conversations and comments made in class equally shaped my perspectives. Readings and websites pertaining to my topic have been located through references from professors, time spent scouring bibliographies on world music genres (especially Latin music as it is emphasized in Zumba), and extensive online searches in English and Spanish. I detail much of my ethnography through personal experience as a young woman transitioning into life in the Valley by participation in Zumba classes and Zumbathons. Within the Zumba space, I have found an outlet for creative expression that combines music, dance, social life, and fitness.

Beginning Research in the Rio Grande Valley

The first Zumba class that I visited in the Valley was packed. I had arrived a few minutes early and signed in at the front desk of the exercise gym where the class was held. I noticed over forty people had already signed in before me, and there was a line waiting outside of the room where the class was about to start. I asked someone at the back of the line if it was always like this, and they told me it was best to get there 30 minutes early for Zumba or I might not find any spots left. I learned that the room at this gym only holds 50 people, and they usually have to turn people away! The Friday evening classes were especially packed as people flocked to Zumba to relieve stress from their busy work week. During the winter months I had to be sure and arrive extra early to class, as everyone's New Year's resolutions motivated them to fill up Zumba classes even more regularly.

As I waited in line for my first Valley Zumba class, I recognized a few friends and co-workers there for Zumba as well. We began to talk about the role Zumba had in their lives. Soon, I began realizing that these Zumba classes were part of a thriving culture here in the Valley. People that did not usually exercise were showing up for Zumba. People showed up early to a class where they were excited about sweating for an hour! In South Texas I had never seen people looking forward to getting sweaty before, not to mention arriving early.

Table 1: Research Sites



My early encounters with Zumba in the Valley opened my eyes to a popular movement and made me curious about the eager reception Zumba was meeting here in the border region. I began to see that Zumba perpetuates its own expressive culture and philosophy. At the same time, these classes provide a platform for regional identities and behaviors to be re-enacted. As I have observed the marriage of Zumba culture with Valley culture, I have seen a new subculture being born of the two—a community of people along the Rio Grande river gathering together to burn calories and express themselves with music and dance.

Just as Zumba provides a space where culture and fitness merge together, the Valley has become a region where identities fuse together into a *mestizaje*⁶ of rural and urban, Texan and Mexican, Latino and American, young and old. In this culturally-rich “third space” I see evidence that “Latinos’ personal and collective hybrid genealogies have served to facilitate the bridging and crossing of musical borders,”⁷ as Deborah Pacini Hernandez states. Not only are geographical boundaries crossed everyday as locals travel back and forth between Texas and Mexico, but a blending of musical styles can be heard simply by tuning into the soundscape of Valley life.

A cross-cultural palate of music fills the Rio Grande Valley, layering aural and visual scenery upon a backdrop of border life dripping with cultural hues. Listening to the sounds around me on any given afternoon, my ear picks up on *chicharras* (cicada-like insects) buzzing in the hot mesquite trees while a distant rooster crows, an airplane roars overhead, and nearby roofers whistle to the sound of their hammers pounding felt paper on the roof of an old, clapboard house. A worn-out diesel motor rumbles by, leaving behind faint strains of accordion

⁶ A term originally used to describe the mixture, of indigenous and European bloodlines. See Gloria Anzaldúa, *Borderlands/ La Frontera: The New Mestiza* (Aunt Lute Books, 2012).

⁷ Deborah Pacini Hernandez, *Oye Como Va!: Hybridity and Identity in Latino Popular Music* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2010), 9.

and vocals as the local Univision station plays Vizzio's "*Es un angel mi mujer.*" Kids gather in an empty lot to play soccer until the sun begins to drop. They yell "GOOOOOOL!" as Kiskadees and mockingbirds cheer them on from a low-hanging power line. Soon enough a lady carries her laundry basket outside to hang clothes in the warm, evening breeze. She tunes her radio on the porch to a lively *cumbia*, but then her nephew comes out to smoke with some friends, turning up "Wild 104" from his souped-up car stereo. As the sun sets, every window in the neighborhood is rattling with the latest hip hop beats and *reggaeton* hits blaring from his subwoofer. Day and night, sounds of nature blend with music and the noise of neighbors coming and going. Notes of *vallenato* overlap with rap late into the night, to be replaced with good-old *rancheros* when coffee is poured the next morning. It is this hybrid of rhythms, languages, and sounds that flows through the Valley and sets the stage for local encounters with Zumba Fitness.

CHAPTER I

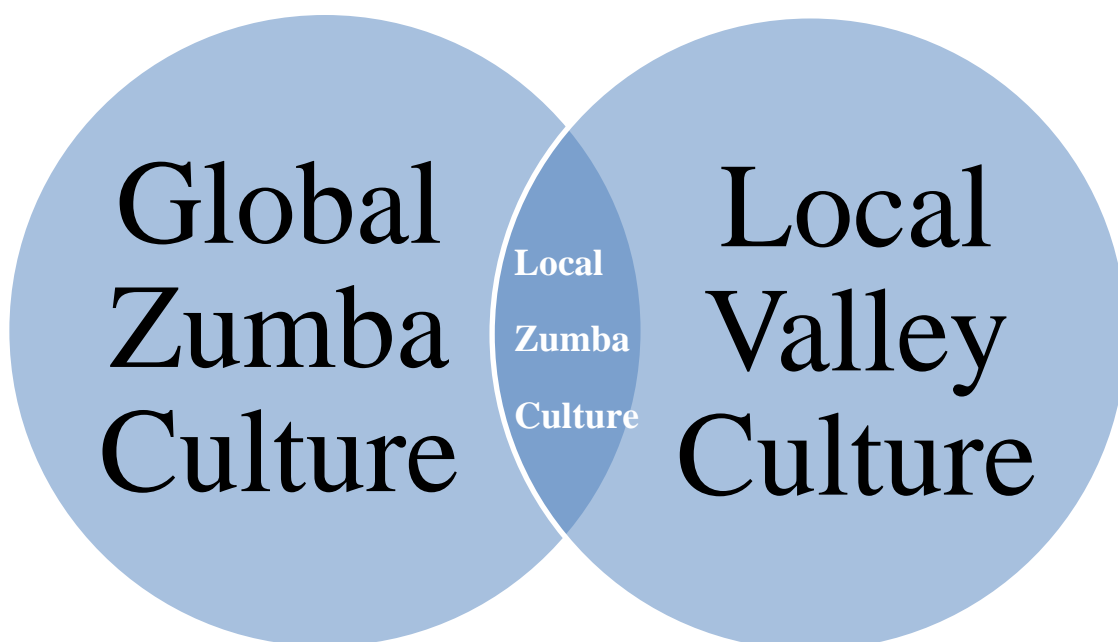
LOCAL CULTURE MEETS THE GLOBAL ZUMBA MOVEMENT

In 1871 Sir Edward Burnett Tylor defined culture as “that complex whole which includes knowledge, belief, art, morals, law, custom, and any other capabilities and habits acquired by man as a member of society.” Edward Sapir, an anthropologist who conducted ethnographic and linguistic fieldwork among indigenous Canadians during the First World War, responded to Tylor’s definition with a similar, but more in-depth analysis. Sapir focused on “cultural content” such as gestures and behaviors that had no direct link to a person’s inherit traits or qualities⁸. For example, he saw whistling as a cultural behavior that is given meaning to an individual based on its context within a larger group of social processes. Cultural geographers tend to divide the world into cultural groups based on physical borders and environments; linguists often delineate cultures by zones that share a common language; and sociologists work to map behavior patterns in communities throughout the earth. Throughout the history of anthropology as a social science, this field has gone from studying tangible differences to intangible differences, from studying groups of people based on physical appearance, borderlines, and dialects, to studying communities of practice that share common interests, ideals, and artistic tastes.

⁸ Edward Sapir, *The Psychology of Culture: A Course of Lectures*, ed. Judith T. Irvine (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter & Co., 2002), 34-38.

My own understanding of culture is cyclical, as can be seen clearly in our commercialized, media-driven world where meaning is given to an act or use of an object and then that practice impacts the structure of society, influencing the producers of further cultural content. Widespread influences can be interpreted by a specific group of people in their own way, creating a subculture. Therefore, in this study I seek to explore both conservative and liberal definitions of culture by looking at a regional culture that is tied to a specific location, as well as a community of practice that provides a way for people to mingle across time zones and geographical barriers. First, I define a regional identity which I term “Valley culture” based on a place one can find on the map. Then, I set forth “Zumba Culture” as a social network or movement which encompasses the globe (in chapter two I explore Zumba as a culture). Finally, I view how the two cultures merge when Zumba is practiced in the specific locale of the Rio Grande Valley. Local Zumba culture becomes a third space where participants can associate with world cultures.

Figure 1: Local Zumba Culture as a Third Space



The Rio Grande Valley as a Third Space

Social theorists use the term “third space” to describe a location within a diasporic community where immigrants can cling to their cultural heritage and retain traces of their former way of life while being insulated from the pressure to assimilate to mainstream influences. Historically, border regions such as Tijuana in Southern California and the Rio Grande Valley in South Texas, have been places where “ethnic Mexicans attempted to mediate the profound sense of displacement and other stresses raised by their daily existence as members of a racialized and marginalized minority in a region they had long considered to be their ancestral homeland.”⁹ For some Mexican-Americans, this space is located in a literal border region, and for others they may live hundreds of miles from their native country, yet create their own third space when interacting with other immigrant families and re-enacting cultural practices.

As Valley residents imbue Zumba classes with references to a shared Mexican heritage, Zumba becomes a third space within a third space. That is to say, Zumba is a place where participants cross over local and global boundaries. Local Zumba culture is mixture of local Valley culture and the global Zumba culture. This mixture happens within the larger mixture of Mexican and American cultures that are constantly blending together in the border region.

Understanding the geographic and cultural setting in which this study takes place is valuable to our grasp of particular implications that Zumba as a social practice carries. This border space provides a setting for the local history of Zumba to unfold. Geographers have nodded their heads to the role of musical influence in defining spaces, and in turn beckon us to look at the scenery which surrounds cultural expression: “To consider the place of music is not to

⁹ David G. Gutiérrez, “Migration, Emergent Ethnicity, and the ‘Third Space’: The Shifting Politics of Nationalism in Greater Mexico,” *The Journal of American History* 86, No. 2 (Sept 1999).

reduce music to its location, to ground it down into some geographical baseline, but to allow a purchase on the rich aesthetic, cultural, economic and political geographies of musical language.”¹⁰ Mexicans, Filipinos, and winter Texans carry their identities to south Texas just as Beto Perez, an enterprising Colombian immigrant, brought his Latin culture to Miami, fulfilling his dream of becoming a fitness superstar.

Because the Valley is somewhat isolated from the rest of Texas, a cultural bubble has formed here that especially fosters the retention of many traditional Mexican customs. This concentrated “Mexicanness” is precisely what attracted me to the Valley in the first place. Perhaps it will be helpful to know a little bit about my background and how I came to live in South Texas.

When I graduated from college with my Bachelor’s degree in music education and a Spanish minor, all my friends knew I was in love with Mexican culture. I was constantly practicing Spanish in front of the mirror, sticking fútbol decals on my car, learning to make tamales, and blaring reggaeton music; so no one was surprised when I decided to move to the Valley. Never mind that I had not visited this new location even once, all I knew was it was close to Mexico and had a university which offered a master’s in ethnomusicology.

One of my college friends drove down with me for my job interview and remarked, “This place is great for you, Cora.” “Why is that?” I asked. She laughed, “It is so Mexican!” I tried to see my surroundings through her eyes, but the wide streets and large commercial buildings with neatly mowed lawns and sidewalks reminded me more of Houston than Monterrey. The business signs had a nice ring, though, as I read them off: “Elizondo’s Agency, Martinez Tires,

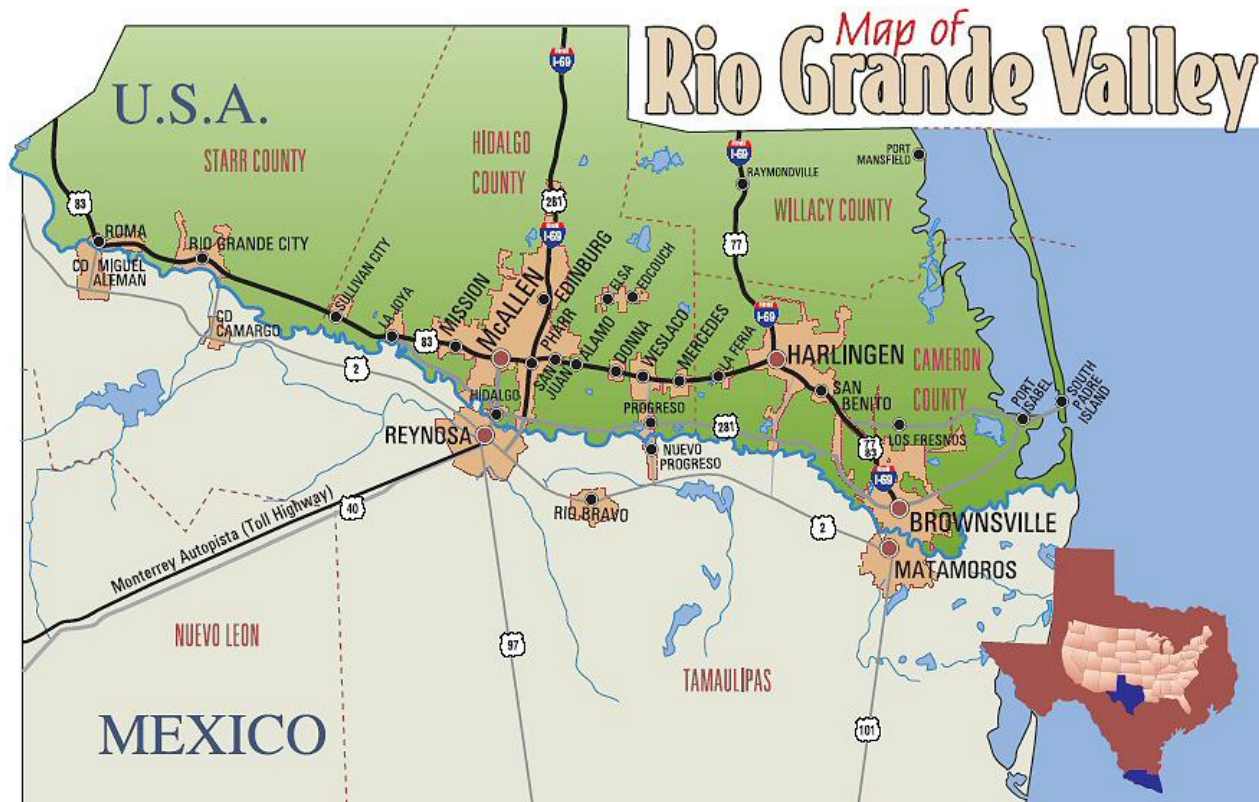
¹⁰Andrew Leyshon, David Matless and George Revill, “The Place of Music: Introduction,” *Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers*, New Series 20, No. 4 (1995): 423-433, stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/622973>.

Ramirez Auto Repair...” And people did converse more in Spanish here than where I grew up. But where was the Spanish pop music, the brightly colored houses, and sense of community that I felt when travelling in Mexico? At first glance I did not recognize the deep layers of history and culture that tie this region both to Mexico and Texas. Nor did I credit the diversity of identities present within this community comprised of varying definitions of “*lo mexicano*.”

Valley Culture

After living in the Rio Grande Valley for three years, I have come to understand that there are different layers of identities within this region. The 100 mile expanse that stretches from Rio Grande City to Brownsville, TX includes Starr, Hidalgo, and Cameron counties with eleven international border crossings. Two major cities in Tamaulipas, Mexico border this region: Reynosa (neighboring McAllen, TX) and Matamoros (neighboring Brownsville, TX). The region previously belonged to Mexico until 1848 when the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo was signed, recognizing the Rio Grande river as the southern U.S. border. By this point, few Mexicans remained in Texas, most being driven out during the previous decades of conflict.

Figure 2: Map of the Rio Grande Valley¹¹



Diversity within Local Identities

According to folklorist Américo Paredes, there are three different groups of “Mexicans” that now reside in the Rio Grande Valley. There are descendants from original Spanish settlers who claimed this area as part of *Nuevo Santander*; there are rural immigrants who started coming as migratory farmers during the *bracero* movement at the start of the 20th century; and then there are urban Mexican Americans living in the larger cities and working in factories, often descendants of the first two groups. Yet, his description, written in the early 1990’s can now be expanded as stricter border laws take effect and the once fluid migration paths are now heavily

¹¹ County Map project, <http://webhost.bridgew.edu/jhayesboh/counties/tx.htm>

entrenched in politics. Besides this, several generations of Mexican Americans have now populated south Texas. What was once a predominantly Anglo-American space in the early 1900's has shifted back to a Hispanic majority. On top of this, violence south of the border has caused a number of Mexico's upper-class to flee to Texas and settle in elegant, new neighborhoods. Due to all these changes over time, the current population of the Rio Grande Valley region is more diverse now than ever before. I choose to list the populace in Table 2.

My definition of Mexican American generations is borrowed directly from Pamela Mejias' article, "Generation and Spanish Language Use in the Lower Rio Grande Valley of Texas."¹² This is a particularly useful way of distinguishing within layers of identity and varying degrees of "Mexicanness" present in the Valley where families overlap both countries. For example, my fiancé is, by Mejias' definition, a second generation Mexican American—that is, both his parents and all his grandparents were born in Mexico. However, his grandparents on his father's side also immigrated to the U.S. and had children born here. Therefore, he has uncles who also are second generation Mexican Americans. To further complicate matters, he is going to marry an Anglo-American transplant to the Valley (my parents and grandparents are also Anglo American), and if we have children they would be considered fourth generation Mexican American. One can quickly see how diverse combinations of generational ethnicity abound in south Texas, even if you only examine variations within the Mexican American population.

¹² Pamela L. Anderson-Mejias, "Generation and Spanish Language Use in the Lower Rio Grande Valley of Texas," *Southwest Journal of Linguistics* 24, No. 1-2 (Dec. 2005).

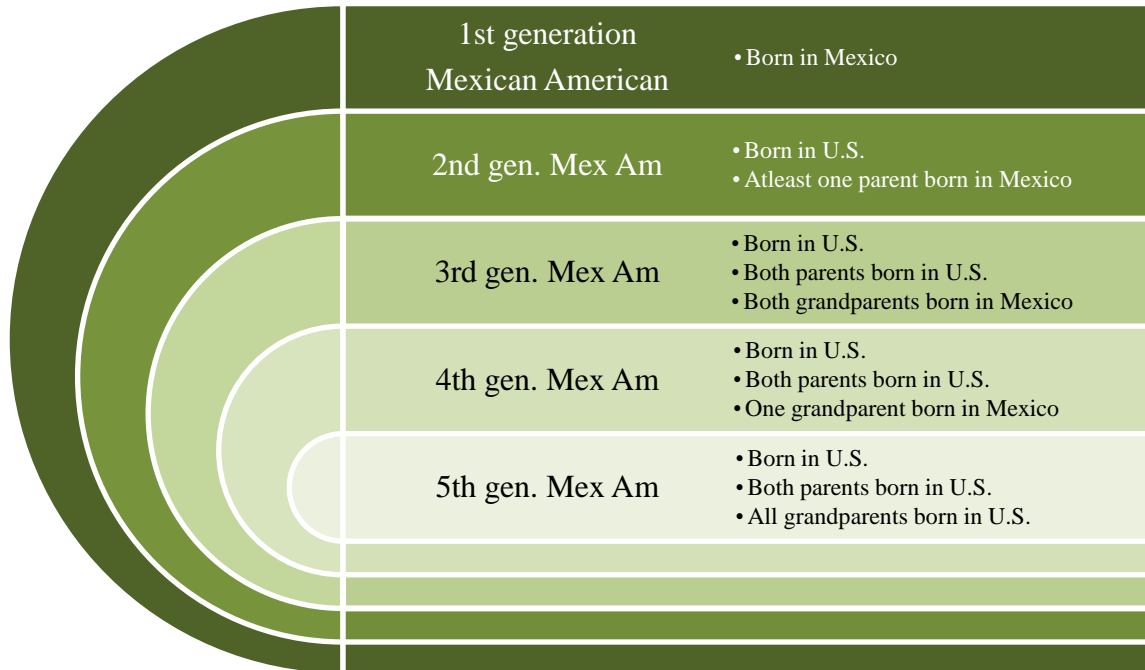
An understanding of the relationship between generations of Mexican Americans and Mexican identity will be important to this study where we will look at ways performance and culture mesh. Also crucial to this study on the impact and popularity of Zumba in the Rio Grande Valley, is the role of the Spanish language among its population. Even “Winter Texans”, who migrate down to the Valley for an average of 4 months each year, pride themselves in learning a little Spanish as they play the role of tourist, vacationer, and part-time Texan. Spanish is commonly used in nearly every profession, even if it is just a few words sprinkled in to assure a customer that you identify with them. Zumba participants that I interviewed stated that the use of Spanish in both the music and instruction of Zumba classes added to their experience. The continued use of Spanish in the Rio Grande Valley points to the strong influence of incoming immigrants, along with the clumping together of Spanish-speaking communities which are geographically isolated from the rest of the U.S.¹³ A survey study conducted among University of Texas-Pan American students in 2000 revealed that Spanish continues to be used in public communication out of necessity and loyalty to a Hispanic heritage¹⁴. Therefore, bilingual (Spanish and English) speakers have an advantage over monolingual English speakers in the Rio Grande Valley because they can display their ability to connect to Mexican American roots by using Spanish phrases and references.

¹³ Hugo A. Mejías, Pamela L. Anderson-Mejías and Ralph Carlson, “Attitude Update: Spanish on the South Texas Border,” *Hispania* 86 (Mar., 2003): 138-150, stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/20062822>.

¹⁴ Ibid.

Table 2: Diverse Populations of the Rio Grande Valley

Mexican American populations:



Other populations:

Migrant workers	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • From Mexico • From other Latin American countries
Anglo Americans	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Native to RGV • Transplants • Winter Texans
Immigrants from other countries	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Latin American • African, Asian/Pacific-Islander, Arabic, European
Non-Anglo Americans	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • African Americans • Asian/Pacific Islander American • Arabic American

As Ruth Hellier Tinoco describes, after the revolutionary war in 1917, the Mexican government tried to construct nationalism based on a romanticized view of indigenous people that categorized their traditions as historical while assimilating the people themselves into society. Therefore, regional identities emerged as rural Mexicans moved to the big cities and remembered their past by keeping traditions.¹⁵ Dance styles such as Bolero, Danzon, and Cumbia were all popularized in Mexico as economic problems, urbanization, and class divides caused Mexicans to associate themselves with styles related to their new found “national” identity. The same nostalgic process occurs on this side of the border as Valley residents look back to Mexico and re-enact their Mexican identity in forms of social performances, or look outward to world cultures as a way of becoming well-versed in a global community. Just as Sydney Hutchinson described inner city youth turning to quebradita as “a new artistic expression that served both as a reflection of cultural mestizaje and as a means of constituting a new urban identity...,”¹⁶ Zumba is now contributing another way of grappling with changing identities.

The Global Zumba Network

Having given a local backdrop for this cultural study, I now turn to a global network of Zumba instructors and participants to contextualize the branded workout package that we will later view in light of the border region of the Rio Grande Valley. Speaking of the process of *transculturation*, Peter Manuel notes that Western popular music is produced as “an agent and a

¹⁵ Mark Pedelty, “The Bolero: The Birth, Life, and Decline of Mexican Modernity,” *Latin American Music Review / Revista de Música Latinoamericana* 20, (Spring - Summer, 1999): 30-58, stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/780164> . Accessed: 23/08/2011 16:58.

¹⁶ Sydney Hutchinson, *From Quebradita to Duranguense: Dance in Mexican American Youth Culture* (Tucson: The University of Arizona Press, 2007).

function of the formation of pan-ethnic social identity,”¹⁷ taken in by non-Western cultures and synthesized with their local musics. The result is a hybrid output resembling both global influences and local practices. In the same way, Zumba is embraced throughout the world and re-contextualized through local responses.

On the macro-regional level, Zumba is associated with a pan-Latin identity through use of popular Latin styles. This association links Zumba to a diaspora of Hispanic communities that listen to Spanish music and perform dances such as bachata, quebradita, cumbia, and salsa. However, these styles in and of themselves are also composites of syncretic music which tie together African, Spanish, and indigenous influences.

Biographical Sketch of Beto Perez

The founder of Zumba, Beto Perez, grew up in Colombia, surrounded by a variety of social and ethnic influences. In his story we see Beto engaging the world with a strong Latin identity and assimilating other world cultures into his own sense of style. Zumba Fitness started as a one-man program taught by Beto in Cali, Colombia in 1986¹⁸. In a *Zlife* magazine article, he talks about how it all began:

“Back in Cali, where I grew up,” says Perez, I taught at a dance academy, and we offered an aerobics class for the students’ mothers. At one of those sessions, I forgot to bring the music, and all I had were salsa and merengue tapes

¹⁷ Peter Manuel, *Popular Musics of the Non-Western World: An Introductory Survey* (Oxford University Press, 1988), 17-19.

¹⁸ Mireya Navarro, “Samba Lines at the Gym,” *NYTimes.com* (July 10, 2008): <http://www.nytimes.com/2008/07/10/fashion/10fitness.html>

in my back pack.” Acting as if he had planned it all along, Perez said he popped a tape into the player and improvised a session with spicy Latin moves.¹⁹

This first, spontaneous dance-aerobics class was a big hit, and soon Beto Perez had requests for more “Rumbacize” sessions—as they were originally called.

As a child, Beto had fallen in love with dance when his mom took him to see *Grease* at age seven, and the next day all the neighborhood children crowded around him to learn to dance like John Travolta.²⁰ By the time he was 16, Beto’s single mom had moved to Miami, Florida in response to a job offer, and he told her he would stay in Cali and support himself while finishing school. His first paycheck came when a modeling agency hired him to choreograph a dance for their runway show. He started sending money to his mom as soon as he made a salary, and he began to dream about spreading Latin dance to a wider audience. Although a talented dancer and teacher, Beto still faced struggles as he moved to Bogotá, Colombia and worked hard to gain entrance into the dance profession. In a YouTube interview, Beto Perez describes the dance community that shaped him in South America.

It’s funny because in Bogotá, it’s a cold city, it’s a lot of very white people. And all of my friends you know sort of, *qué*, Latin-African guys. And of course they open the doors for *them* because of course they look at them and they are handsome guys, good bodies, look cool and of course they don’t need to make audition. But me—they don’t believe I dance! I’m white, little, ugly. It’s so funny.

¹⁹ Chan Tran, Ashley Pound, and Wendy Paris, “10 Years Livin’ the Party,” *Zlife: Powered by Zumba* (Summer 2011): 51.

²⁰ Raquel Perlman, “Mama Knows Best: Two Special Women Compare Notes on Beto Perez,” *Zlife: Powered by Zumba* (Summer 2011): 60-61.

So finally, somebody give me the opportunity and all my friends are African-Latin guys and I learn a lot with them—because you know...it's in the blood, the skin, they have the flavor in their body.²¹

During the '90's, Afro-Colombians were seen as exotic images, while still experiencing racial discrimination even after the nation's constitutional reform in 1991²². The new constitution brought a political endorsement for multiculturalism—recognizing Afro-Colombians as a distinct ethnic group²³, although they were often treated as second-class citizens²⁴. In many social settings, including the dance floor, racial differences were reinforced by boundaries between popular Latin dance styles (preferred by the upper class) and street forms of hip hop. Beto himself had taught in Cali at the elite school for Brazilian dance, yet also identified with marginalized, Afro-Colombian youth who had taught him as a kid to do head spins and all the other “steps of the street.”

Working as an aerobics instructor in Bogotá, and a choreographer for Sony Music, Beto Perez became known for his combination of Latin dance with hip hop and break dance moves²⁵. This inventive style of choreography fit perfectly with the global hybridity that Sony Music artists such as Shakira sought to embody. In 1999, building upon the popularity he had garnered within Colombia, and his experience in overcoming obstacles to success, Perez decided to move to the U.S. in attempt to expand his career. His dream was to be a leader in the fitness industry.

²¹ “Exclusive Interview with Creator of ZUMBA, Beto Perez” <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QuFgZVE9SVk>

²² Kiran Asher, *Black and Green: Afro-Colombians, Development and Nature in the Pacific Lowlands* (Duke University Press, 2009), 14.

²³ Christopher Dennis, *Afro-Colombian Hip-Hop: Globalization, Transcultural Music, and Ethnic Identities* (Lexington Books, 2012), 6.

²⁴ Dennis, 5.

²⁵ Beto Perez and Maggie Greenwood Robinson, *Zumba: Ditch the Workout Join the Party! The Zumba Weight Loss Program* (Grand Central Life & Style, 2009), 39.

Perez exhausted his resources attempting to establish Latin aerobics classes in Florida, until finally, after several sleepless nights on park benches in Miami, and three trips back to Colombia to renew traveler's visas, he landed a job at the William Islands Spa in South Beach, Florida²⁶. This became a starting point for future connections that would lead him to his future business partners. Beto told the Orlando Sentinel's *Hispanosphere* "An immigrant with a dream, and the determination to make it happen, can succeed in the United States."²⁷ Beto's dream came true after one of his class members went home and told her son, an aspiring CEO, to contact Beto about starting a business.

The Three Albertos

Raquel Perlman had taken "Rumba" classes from Beto back in Bogotá when he taught there in the early 90's. Years after moving to Florida with her family, she was excited to discover Perez teaching there also, and faithfully enrolled in his classes. Meanwhile, her son, also named Alberto was going through a job crisis himself. With a background in consulting, he had become CEO of an internet business that had helped Latin entrepreneurs until economic hardships hit in 2001. It was then he began to listen to his mom as she told him about her beloved "Rumba" classes. In an interview with Laura Pennino on "The BusinessMakers Radio Show", Alberto Perlman recounts his reaction to his mom's words.

²⁶ Cammy Clark, "Sweat Equity: Zumba on the Move in the Fitness World," *MiamiHerald.com* (Feb 12, 2012) <http://www.miamiherald.com/2012/02/12/v-print/2637647/sweat-equity-zumba-on-the-move.html>

²⁷ Victor Manuel Ramos, "Zumba Fitness: Colombian immigrant is Behind the Craze," *Hispanosphere: Covering the Latino Experience in Central Florida* (September 4, 2009), http://blogs.orlandosentinel.com/news_hispanicaffairs/2009/09/zumba-fitness-colombian-immigrant-is-behind-new-fitness-craze.html.

...I had never listened to her, but at this point, I was looking for something new. And I said, “Mom, maybe I should meet this guy because maybe he could be the next Taibo.” And so she set up a meeting. And the first thing he asked me when we met was “Do you have money?” And I said, “No, do you [Laughter]?” And he said, “No.”²⁸

Alberto Perlman contacted another buddy of his—Alberto Aghion to help launch the business that the three Albertos decided to officially name “Zumba.” With only \$4,000 they set out making infomercials on the Miami beach and sold them through an Ohio infomercial company named Fitness Quest. When the VHS released 6 months later, in 2002, it made \$20,000,000. But what really launched Zumba Fitness were the phone calls from fitness instructors who loved the videos and wanted to know how they could become certified to teach Zumba themselves.

Zumba Instructors Network

One Hundred-Fifty Zumba instructors were certified in the first Miami training in 2003. Perez, Perlman, and Aghion continued making home videos and training instructors using a handheld camera and bed sheets draped in the background. But production changed when Zumba partnered with the Kellogg company to promote “the importance of combining physical exercise and a balanced diet toward maintaining a healthy lifestyle.”²⁹ *Zumbando con Kelloggs* DVDs were offered on cereal boxes, and local events were held, targeting Latin communities.

²⁸ “The BusinessMakers Radio Show Episode #274: Alberto Perlman” (September 4, 2010) <http://www.thebusinessmakers.com/episodes/shows/2010/september-2010/episode-274/alberto-pearlman.html>.

²⁹ “Partnerships and Programs” <http://module.kelloggs.com/nutrition/about-kellogg-nutrition/partnerships-programs.html>.

Kellogg helped to shine the spotlight on Zumba Fitness, advertising it as “La Manera Divertida de Ponerse en Forma” (The fun way to get fit)³⁰. Doors opened nationwide for Beto to travel and host education programs, teaching adults and children about the importance of staying active.

Then in 2005 Zumba expanded to Mexico where it has become a part of a concentrated effort to fight against obesity. In Reynosa, Tamaulipas, *El Desarrollo Social* (the social development department) has instituted an intervention program called, “*Zumba en tu colonia*” (Zumba in your neighborhood) to promote physical wellness. This program, which in 2011 was offered in 15 sectors of the city, has attracted over 1500 participants—mostly women to parks and cultural centers where Zumba classes were hosted by the government.³¹

Just three years after the first Zumba instructor training, in 2006, the booming popularity of Zumba led to the creation of the Zumba Instructors Network (ZIN). By subscribing to this network, instructors would be able to receive business support which included access to music specially produced for Zumba, choreographies that they could implement in their classes, Zumba brand clothing they could sell, and tools for building their businesses. The focus of Zumba Fitness LLC had turned full force to aiding Zumba instructors in becoming entrepreneurs. Staff members at the corporate headquarters worked full time calling gyms and finding jobs for newly certified Zumba instructors. Zumba CEO Alberto Perlman stated, “our reason to exist is because we want to make our instructors successful, and we have a vision of bringing the Zumba® party or the Zumba® philosophy, the Zumba® way of life to tens of millions of people.”³²

³⁰ “Zumba Kelloggs Promotion” uploaded by *lovezumba* on Aug 7, 2008
<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ELWKMNkJiUo>.

³¹ “Zumba mucho más que baile y broncos”, *Hora Cero* 322, July 2011, 2A,
<http://www.horacerotam.com/noticia/?id=NHCT56578&ed=322>.

³² “The BusinessMakers Radio Show Episode #274: Alberto Perlman” (September 4, 2010)
<http://www.thebusinessmakers.com/episodes/shows/2010/september-2010/episode-274/alberto-pearlman.html>.

The structure for company growth was put in place just in time for another economic blow that hit the U.S. in 2008. Economists began calling it “the worst financial crisis since the Great Depression,”³³ but for Zumba there was no recession. In fact, the job losses around the world encouraged more and more people to consider becoming Zumba instructors. According to *Inc. magazine*, the number of Zumba instructors tripled during the 2008-2009 financial crisis.³⁴ A record-breaking 2,200 Zumba instructors attended the 2009 convention in Orlando, Florida³⁵ where they attended trainings on new Zumba programs for elderly populations and children, and participated in a fitness concert featuring groups of costumed dancers representing various world cultures.

Continued Popularity as a Global Trend

Over the last three years, Zumba has continued to see enormous growth around the world. With the 2010 release of an “exer-game” for Wii™, Xbox 360®, and PlayStation®3 that enabled players to enjoy Zumba at home with up to three other players, or to join in to online Zumba parties via gaming networks,³⁶ the corporation showed its keen marketability. On September 7, 2011, over 3,869 Zumba participants in Sonora, Mexico broke the Guinness world record for the

³³David Pendery, “Three Top Economists Agree 2009 Worst Financial Crisis Since Great Depression; Risks Increase if Right Steps are Not Taken”, *Business Wire* Feb 27, 2009, <http://www.reuters.com/article/2009/02/27/idUS193520+27-Feb-2009+BW20090227>.

³⁴Issie Lapowsky, “Zumba Turns Dancers Into Entrepreneurs,” *Inc. magazine* May 26, 2010, <http://www.inc.com/articles/2010/05/zumba-fitness-entrepreneurs.html>.

³⁵Lilyvania Mikulski, “Zumba Fitness® Annual Convention Draws Thousands,” *Zumba® Fitness* September 22, 2009, <http://www.marketwire.com/press-release/Zumba-Fitness-Annual-Convention-Draws-Thousands-1204721.htm>.

³⁶“Majesco Entertainment Announces 'Zumba Fitness® The Video Game' Is Now Available on Wii™, Kinect for Xbox 360 and PlayStation®Move Motion Controller”, *Majesco Entertainment Company*, Nov 30, 2010, <http://www.prnewswire.com/news-releases/majesco-entertainment-announces-zumba-fitness-the-video-game-is-now-available-on-wii-kinect-for-xbox-360-and-playstationmove-motion-controller-111037994.html>.

largest Zumba class in the world.³⁷ This more than doubled the previously recorded largest Zumba class held in Brownsville, TX on April 30, 2011³⁸. Just by looking at these numbers, we can see that within the northern Mexico/south Texas region, Zumba Fitness has met with overwhelming popularity.

At the end of last year, a survey conducted by the American College of Sports Medicine predicted Zumba to become one of the top ten trends in fitness worldwide for 2012.³⁹ There are currently over 12 million people participating in Zumba classes in at least 110,000 locations across more than 125 countries.⁴⁰ That would indicate that by the end of 2012, approximately one out of every 587 people in the world⁴¹ will have participated in a Zumba class.⁴²

Local Reception of Zumba

From the Global to the Local

In order to lay a background for local interpretations of Zumba in the Rio Grande Valley, I have first discussed Zumba within a global framework. Now I examine how this global music-dance-fitness conglomerate has become a localized experience. As social anthropologist Rico Lie points out, it is through the process of “localization” that identity is formed.⁴³ That is, as

³⁷“Largest Zumba Class,” accessed July 6, 2012, <http://www.guinnessworldrecords.com/records-8000/largest-zumba@-class/>.

³⁸ “San Luis Río Colorado impone nuevo récord mundial de zumba,” uploaded by *megustasanluis* on Sep 8, 2011, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Zz2qxLksILs>.

³⁹ Lilly Workneh, “Fitness Trends for the New Year,” *CNN Health*, Dec 27, 2011, <http://www.cnn.com/2011/12/27/health/new-year-fitness-trends/index.html>.

⁴⁰ “About Zumba ® Fitness,” <http://www.zumba.com/en-US/about/>.

⁴¹ U.S. Census Bureau, “World POPClock Projection,” <http://www.census.gov/population/popclockworld.html>.

⁴² This estimate based on projected world population of 7,055,639,015 by the end of 2012, divided by 12 million Zumba participants.

⁴³ Rico Lie, *Spaces of Intercultural Communication: an interdisciplinary introduction to communication, culture, and globalizing/localizing identities* (Hampton Press, 2003), 98.

communities of practice interpret global and social influences within a local context, they begin to construct identities based on these interpretations. Just as we have seen musical influences traverse the globe, to be reshaped by various cultures through the process of acculturation, Zumba spreads across the world, gaining popularity while being interpreted as an expression of local, regional, and global cultures.

From the undulating wrists of a Flamenco dancer to the bump and grind of reggaeton, from the swirling hips of a belly dancer, to the punchy moves of hip hop; images are recreated which embody what it is to be healthy, hip, cool, beautiful, and healthy. In many cultures, dance is used to entice, and in Zumba it is used to make participants feel that they are attractive. Mirroring the fluid steps of a vibrant instructor, participants begin to sweat away their frustrations as they perform movements that convey sexiness, coordination, and energy.

In Zumba, exotic body images and choreographies are performed by exaggerating dance styles from world cultures. Performance in Zumba commodifies both global and local expressions. Just as national folkdances are performed in Mexico for the tourist gaze, new meanings are given to music and dance genres which are extracted as cultural artifacts and reappropriated on the stage of Zumba fitness. Compiled music and dance such as Arabic-French hip hop and Iranian-Swedish belly dancing are elevated alongside *cumbia tribal* and *techno-banda*.

Here in the Valley, some of these regional emblems border on participants personal lives. Where music from Spain or the Middle East is foreign and new, most Latin and hip hop genres resonate strongly with urban Latinos. The way Zumba packages Latinidad as sleek, colorful and desirable further boosts the self-confidence of local women and men. In the Zumba setting,

participants find their common, everyday soundscape enacted as an exhibit of sensual, cultural artistry. Therefore, genres which are close to home for many Valley participants in Zumba become redefined as exotic world music by association with dance forms from other continents.

In this study I examine how Mexican identity and a broader Latin identity are embodied in Zumba classes throughout the Valley. Through musical selections, choreographies, clothing design, interactions between class participants and instructors, and structure of Zumba classes, cultural constructs are being performed to accomplish fitness goals. I seek to determine the implications of these processes in the Valley as locals interact around music in Zumba classes and events.

Local History of Zumba Fitness

Answering the call to promote better health in the Valley, Liza Chavez began teaching Zumba in 2005 at three of the largest gyms in the McAllen area. The first Zumba instructor in the Rio Grande Valley, she is a certified nutritionist, born in Cali, Colombia—also the homeland of Zumba founder Beto Perez. She came to the Valley after living for several years in Miami, Florida, where she became certified. After teaching in various gyms, she opened her own Zumba studio in 2008⁴⁴, called Xtreme Fuzion where she offered multiple classes daily. She returned to Miami in 2011 where she continues to teach Zumba and work as a nutritionist. Although Liza no longer resides in the Valley, her legacy is very evident, as she helped other Zumba participants become instructors.

⁴⁴ Crystal Olvera, “Zooming in on the Zumba Workout Trend” July 23, 2010, *The Monitor*, <http://www.themonitor.com/articles/side-41116-trend-aguirre.html>.

Another key person in the Valley Zumba scene is Clara Mata, a Zumba Education Specialist (ZES) who teaches instructor certification courses in Reynosa, Tamaulipas. She continues to be very involved in the Zumba community on both sides of the border, and combined with the inspiration of Liza Chavez and other Zumba specialists, has caused an explosion of Zumba studios here in the Valley. I have had the opportunity to interview instructors who started participating in Zumba through the help of each of these women.

To begin with, I share the account of Edith Gonzalez, a Zumba instructor who told me how she came to the Valley and started her own studio. Originally from Mexico City, Edith moved to Reynosa in 2001 and made friends with a Zumba instructor at a local gym. Her friend, a Venezuelan Mexican named Clara Mata, invited her to try a Zumba class, but Edith was content going to spinning classes and using the gym's equipment. Finally, after the third time Clara invited her, she agreed to go once. "I loved the Latin rhythms," Edith says. Soon, she was going to a Zumba class every day, sometimes twice or three times a day. In 2005, when Zumba publicly opened up to all of Mexico, Edith took the Basic One instructor certification just for fun, but did not plan to teach Zumba classes.

The next year, Edith got married and moved to the Valley. She transitioned into her new life, leaving her engineering job at a *maquiladora* when she became pregnant. As a stay at home mom in the Pharr/San Juan/Alamo area she began to miss Zumba and looked around for a class nearby. In 2006 it was not easy for her to find a Zumba class in the Valley. Some of the big gyms were beginning to offer them, and there were very few privately owned Zumba studios. Then, Edith discovered a Zumba instructor giving classes in her garage next door to her mother-in-law's house. When Edith started attending, there were only about eight people in the class, but Zumba was becoming very popular, and the classes began to grow fast. The instructor

noticed Edith's energy and talent, and one day asked her if she would be interested in teaching Zumba at a nearby nutrition club to help her manage the growing demand for classes. It was Edith's first time teaching Zumba, but people loved her enthusiasm. Right away her class grew to twenty people. Then it outgrew the nutrition club! They changed locations, but when her class exceeded forty participants, they had to start holding class in the parking lot.

In 2010 Edith got her Zumba Basic 2 and Zumba Toning certificates. Now she was licensed to provide more intense workouts with challenging rhythmic choreographies, strength training, and body-sculpting techniques. The same year her husband was one of the teachers affected by a massive lay-off in the Valley's IDEA school system. Noticing his depression, Edith encouraged him to try out her Zumba classes. He had already begun to think about starting his own business, and when he attended Edith's Zumba class and saw his wife's talent, he had an idea. "You are really good at this," he told her. "Do you want to start a studio?" She was taken aback, "Yeah," she told him, "it's like a dream!"

Edith and her husband spent two months constructing a studio while she continued to teach in the nutrition club's parking lot. "This is my baby," she told me, explaining all the details they put into the studio's design. When it came time to paint the interior studio walls, Edith selected flashy shades of pink, green, and yellow, showing the painter which color was for each wall. He agreed to paint the studio according to Edith's specifications, although he was hesitant to use such bright, alternating hues around a large, open dance floor. "I'm telling you, *these are the colors*," Edith had to reassure him, and sure enough, the painter admitted, it turned out beautifully. Across one wall she stenciled, "Made with Zumba love, designed for Zumba lovers."

Edith was so excited on the day of her studio's grand opening. She had special guests coming including Marcos Valdez, a local Spanish-televsion personality, and Clara Mata, the friend who first introduced her to Zumba (since then Clara had gone on to become a Zumba Education Specialist in Mexico). But Edith's heart sank when it started to rain. "Ayyy, no!" she nearly cried, "now people will not come." As the downpour continued, a few participants showed up, although it was not the turn out she had hoped for. "Just wait," someone told her, "the rain is a blessing!" And sure enough, in the following days, people began to pour in to her new studio for Zumba classes—just like the rain had foretold.

Edith's story is an example of the close relationship between communities in Mexico and the Valley. Many local instructors are originally from Reynosa or Matamoros, while a few are from Nuevo Leon, Mexico City, or farther into Mexico. There are a variety of Mexican-American identities represented among Zumba instructors in the Valley. Out of the ten instructors that I interacted with the most during my fieldwork, at least four of them identified themselves as first generation Mexican-Americans, with the others being mostly second-generation (having at least one parent from Mexico). For many instructors, having ties to the Zumba community on both sides of the border is a way to stay connected to Mexican culture while living in the U.S. In the next chapter I explore ways that Zumba provides a space for expression of Mexican identity to be performed.

CHAPTER II

ZUMBA AS A PERFORMANCE OF CULTURAL IDENTITIES

In our world of various belief sets, ethnicities, economic highs and lows, migration patterns, and commercial marketing, cultural groups emerge as circles of society centered on specific practices. Every day practices such as going to work, attending school, working out at the gym, taking the dog for a walk, grocery shopping, watching TV, and eating dinner with family, are examples of the means by which our broader sense of culture is learned, reinforced, and implemented. More formal events such as weddings, baptisms, quinceañeras, proms, graduations, Holiday parties, concerts and recitals; showcase cultural practices that are performed by designated people with authority, prominence, or highly accomplished skills.

However, it seems that somewhere in between the everyday grind and the big, yearly occasions, are the very activities and events by which we define ourselves the most. Labels we give ourselves—“soccer mom,” “nerd,” “Star Wars junkie,” identify ways that we devote our time outside of the demands of society, but in so doing often find ourselves as members of another, more defined group of people. This is where communities of practice tend to pop up—social networks revolving around specific shared activities—people coming together on a regular basis around a common interest or goal. When it comes to music cultures, we see whole networks of fans blogging and interacting around their favorite artist or genre of music. Yet in our world, there is less and less actual time dedicated to “getting together” whether for purely social purposes or for the sake of helping each other accomplish something.

Robert Putnam's landmark study *Bowling Alone* became well known for spouting the steady digress in community gatherings during the last half of the 21st century. He noted that an increase in social disengagement or "cocooning" among Americans began in the 1970s with accelerated TV watching and a decline in civic involvement. Making connections with other people and investing time together results in building up "social capital." Equipping us to resolve conflict and advance society while widening awareness of our interdependence, channeling helpful information, and improving one another's lives both psychologically and biologically; these gains result from forming "high levels of trust and citizen participation."⁴⁵

At a time when national statistics show that the rate of depression and suicide is increasing now more than ever⁴⁶, involvement in social groups and identification with a community of practice is an important way of finding support during life's hardships. In the field of psychology, studies have shown positive effects of participating in social support networks.

These buffering effects may alter perceptions of negative events, transfer coping resources, or facilitate changes in health-related behaviors (Wills & Shinar, 2000). ...Past research has suggested that social support may buffer the negative effects of stress, and thus protect against depression, by enhancing individuals'

⁴⁵Robert D. Putnam, *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community*, (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2000), 288.

⁴⁶ "Facts and Figures," American Foundation for Suicide Prevention, http://www.afsp.org/index.cfm?fuseaction=home.viewPage&page_id=050FEA9F-B064-4092-B1135C3A70DE1FDA.

self-esteem, self-confidence, and self-efficacy (Nezlek, Kowalski, Leary, Blevins, & Holgate, 1997).⁴⁷

In light of this research, I seek to define what a community of practice is and to show how these types of social networks are being created through Zumba Fitness. In the past eleven years, Zumba classes in over 110,000 locations⁴⁸ have provided spaces for strong community ties to form as participants move to the same beat and interact around shared health goals.

Zumba as Culture

Not only are social networks formed through participation in Zumba by connecting face to face or online to share Zumba experiences, but a common philosophy is disseminated through participation in Zumba which lays the groundwork for meaningful interactions around shared goals and practices. When individuals subscribe to the same ideals and join together to practice a certain method of achieving their desired outcome, they create a community of practice. This term, borrowed by sociolinguists from the social theory of learning, describes the way knowledge and skill is cultivated in an environment such as that of apprenticeship. Similarly, participants in Zumba learn from their instructors how to follow the philosophy of “health and happiness and of loving everything you do, especially your workout.”⁴⁹ This happens when participants join a Zumba class to improve their health and have a good time at it. Often a transformation takes place as participants change first their mindset about fitness, and then their habits. Even participants who choose to practice Zumba at home with DVD packages such as

⁴⁷ M. Sol Ibarra-Rovillard, Nicholas A. Kuiper, “Social support and social negativity findings in depression: Perceived responsiveness to basic psychological needs,” *Clinical Psychology Review* 31 (2011).

⁴⁸ “About Zumba ® Fitness,” <http://www.zumba.com/en-US/about/>.

⁴⁹ Ibid.

“Exhilarate: The Ultimate Zumba® Fitness DVD Experience” will read in the accompanying program guide about how to plan a healthy menu and implement it in part of a 10-day fat loss program.

As Miriam Meyerhoff explains in “Introducing Sociolinguistics,” a community of practice meets the following criterion:

1. Mutual engagement—direct contact
2. A jointly negotiated enterprise—working together towards a common goal
3. Shared repertoire—a specific vocabulary or means of communication⁵⁰

Looking at the ways Zumba meets each of these criteria, we first see that mutual engagement is found at instructor certification courses and conventions, Zumba classes, Zumbathons (extended Zumba classes often used to raise money for charities), and master classes. The exception could be in the case of a single Zumba participant dancing alone to a DVD or with a Wii. However, even in these occasions, instructors and participants were engaged in the production of those home versions which seek to recreate the sense of being in a group setting. Furthermore, these products often lead to participation with a local class. Zumba gamers, for example, will encounter a screen that allows them to search for the nearest Zumba class. So those who access Zumba solely through DVDs, playing YouTube videos, or working out to their Playstation may be considered peripheral to the community of practice although these forms of Zumba practice usually supplement the class experience.

Zumba practitioners also share a common goal—fitness. Yet, from person to person this may be defined in different ways. For the instructor, he or she may be focused on helping others meet their fitness goals, while maintaining their own health. Some participants may have

⁵⁰ Miriam Meyerhoff, *Introducing Sociolinguistics* (New York: Routledge, 2011), 200.

varying goals concerning weight loss, cardio endurance, muscle toning, strength and coordination, dance skills, or just to have a fun workout. Sometimes friends tag along just to hang out and try something new, or to be part of the catchy movement. As Pitbull reacted when he saw the popularity of Zumba, “Man, I need to be a part of that.”⁵¹

While people attend Zumba classes for a variety of reasons, the overarching desire that draws most people to Zumba is that they want to look and feel better. 67 year-old Janet LeBarbara of Arizona says she goes to Zumba because it is fun, makes her feel sexy, and brings up her metabolism.⁵² Victor Niño, a Zumba instructor in Milwaukee, Wisconsin shares about his first encounter with Zumba in a *Zlife* magazine interview, “I was going through a bad time and getting overweight. I found a Zumba class and came alive...I met the love of my life there.”⁵³ He is now a “Zumba Jammer”—a specialized instructor who is licensed to offer Zumba choreography jam sessions.

In an interview one Zumba participant in the Rio Grande Valley described to me his reasons for attending local classes:

I enjoy it because I’m always soaked in sweat when I leave—its good exercise, it’s a good workout. Two, its fun enjoying the music and the dancing with a group of people. There’s always an eclectic mix of people in there. And, I also continue to go because I’m exposed to an interesting variety of music. I find myself, more recently, asking the instructors, “What’s the name of that song?

Where can I find that?” because they get stuck in your head. They’re really

⁵¹Rob Markman, “Pitbull And Wyclef Get Fit With Zumba”, MTV News, July 15, 2011, <http://www.mtv.com/news/articles/1667348/pitbull-wyclef-zumba.jhtml>.

⁵²Sadie Jo Smokey, “Zumba helps women stay fit, 'feel sexy'”, *The Arizona Republic*, Dec 8, 2007, <http://www.azcentral.com/news/articles/1208phx-zumba1208.html?&wired>.

⁵³Ashley Pound, “Too Sexy for their Shirts” *Zlife : Powered by Zumba* (Spring 2011): 96.

catchy. Of course they're all in Spanish, and I can appreciate that. I do it because it's fun, it's a good workout, and it's really interesting and engaging.⁵⁴

Musicians such as Pitbull and *Fugee*'s producer Wyclef Jean also look at involvement with Zumba as a beneficial enterprise. They both performed in a fitness concert for the 2011 Zumba instructor convention in Orlando, and afterwards spoke with MTV news. Wyclef Jean concurred with Pitbull's previous statement about wanting to be involved with Zumba, saying, "If it's hot in Brazil, it's hot in Afghanistan, it's hot in Jerusalem, it's hot in Flatbush... we all should be able to rock with it, and that's why I'm into the Zumba movement."⁵⁵

This "movement" which spans cultures incorporates the same songs and dance styles wherever Zumba classes are offered. As Zumba.com puts it, "Zumba classes feature exotic rhythms like salsa, merengue, cumbia and samba set to sexy Latin and international beats."⁵⁶ These choreographies and playlists make up the "shared repertoire" which Meyerhoff notes can include not only spoken language, but other social practices as well.

A previous research project I conducted compared choreographies of a popular reggaeton song used in Zumba classes in four different locations: Oxford, Ohio⁵⁷; Seoul, South Korea⁵⁸; Bangkok, Thailand⁵⁹; and McAllen, Texas⁶⁰. The Wisin y Yandel hit "Pam Pam Pam" was performed with similar accented hip movements in all four cases, while specific choreography

⁵⁴ Jesse Parrish, personal communication, September 2012.

⁵⁵ Rob Markman, "Pitbull And Wyclef Get Fit With Zumba", MTV News, July 15, 2011, <http://www.mtv.com/news/articles/1667348/pitbull-wyclef-zumba.jhtml>.

⁵⁶ About Zumba Club Program, "Zumba-Ditch the Workout, Join the Party!" <http://www.zumba.com/en-US/clubs/>.

⁵⁷ "Zumba – Pam Pam – Reggaeton", uploaded by *chinitamu* on May 29, 2009, http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qev8MhLkJ0c&list=PL119C9CFCA3D19955&feature=mh_lolz.

⁵⁸ "Zumba Fitness ' Pam Pam ' (Reggaeton/Hip-hop)" uploaded by *hapjung007* on Dec 1, 2008, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NrPWrgIUdZw&feature=BFa&list=PL119C9CFCA3D19955>.

⁵⁹ "ZUMBA WORKSHOP - Pam Pam Reggaeton", uploaded by *krunum* on Oct 12, 2009, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=S4nRd7M8EJU&feature=BFa&list=PL119C9CFCA3D19955>.

⁶⁰ "zumba con liza @ xtreme fuzion/pam pam" uploaded by *zumbaconliza* on Dec 27, 2008, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MbU0Bra6Zzs&feature=BFa&list=PL119C9CFCA3D19955>.

varied. The first two examples had the most in common, with almost matching dance steps and patterns. Yet in Bangkok and McAllen, the instructors used different stylistic moves which have been implemented by Zumba instructors with other songs. Zumba participants may speak different languages around the world, but when it comes time to “party hearty”, they draw from the same vocabulary of movements and dance rhythms. As Zumba continues to grow in popularity around the world, we see an increased interest in Latin music and dance styles outside of Hispanic diasporas. It seems that Zumba is helping to promote Latinidad as the glue between different genres, styles, and interpretations of what is “hip” or “cool”.

My approach has been decidedly experiential. Because of this, it is difficult to separate out different strands that are braided together into the Zumba experience. These strands carry implications for a variety of fields in both science and art. In a facebook message, Zumba’s chief marketing officer, Jeffrey Perlman, described to me how the popularity of Zumba resulted from intentionally combining these two worlds.

With Zumba we set out to blur the lines between fitness and art. We decided that fitness could be about culture. But culture is an ever changing, dynamic dialogue. So we decided that the most important thing was to listen to our community, identify what its members have in common, and create a platform for them to share their experiences. We didn't set out to establish a culture (that would be presumptuous), we set out to establish a hub for cultural exchange. And this is what came out.⁶¹

⁶¹ Jeffrey Perlman, personal communication, 2010.

Within the setting of Zumba Fitness, scholars from social sciences and the fine arts will find a stage that has been set for cultural exchange. When working out becomes an art form, the interdisciplinary nature of the object being studied calls for an approach from multiple angles. If we view Zumba through a scientific lens, its noticeable contributions to the health sciences include success in helping men and women of all ages stay active, lose weight, and enhance muscle coordination and toning. From the perspective of the social sciences, involvement in Zumba is becoming a social practice that brings people together while shaping and reshaping cultural identities. Anthropologists and ethnomusicologists wade into social science when conducting qualitative research of particular communities, such as groups of musicians who perform a common repertoire, or fan bases that share a passion for eccentric styles of underground music. Pockets of people groups and subcultures are the subjects we place under our microscopes, comparing our own experiences with those of others—and when it comes to Zumba, we just might have a new cultural specimen on our hands.

While at first Jeffrey Perlman was not ready to admit to molding a new culture, now he is asserting that it might be possible to brand a lifestyle. He stated in an August issue of *Advertising Age*, “we want to craft an archetype of a Zumba enthusiast. If a yoga enthusiast is a tofu-eating, patchouli-smelling person, the Zumba enthusiast might have the baggy cargo pants, drive a Jeep Wrangler and rip up her clothing,’ he said. ‘We’re in the business of building a community.’”⁶²

⁶² Alexandra Bruell, “How Zumba Built a Cult Following in Just a Few Years,” *Advertising Age* (Aug. 20, 2012).

Classifying Zumba as Performance

We call acts in everyday life and those set aside for special occasions, “performances.” (i.e. “he performed well on his spelling test,” “she performed two surgeries this morning,” compared to more formal performances: “tonight they will perform a holiday chorale,” or, “they always perform together for the annual recital.”) A performance indicates the presentation or culmination of a process or chain of actions which have been practiced, honed, rehearsed and developed over time. The performance in itself is part of the process of increasing skill development, urging performers to prepare for the critical eye of the audience and then to assess their act as the cycle of preparation continues toward the next exhibition of their skill. Some performances serve the purpose of showcasing ability or even of entertaining, but they all serve to communicate a message—however subtle or overt. Just as artwork leaves much to be interpreted by the observer, live art which is performed by movement or sound can be interpreted in multiple ways, varying from person to person based on their background of knowledge and experiences.

Different interpretative and performative stances which are involved within the scope of local performance of Zumba will be examined further in later parts of my study, but first I turn to defining Zumba as a performance site. There is a deliberate element of performance evident in Zumba as the physical workout is intentionally disguised. Zumba participants perform for themselves just as a work song might be used to mentally distract coal miners from their labor while helping to synchronize their efforts. In some cases, Zumba instructors play into these performance aspects further by converting their fitness routines into nightclub shows, theme parties, or master classes that specialize in dance forms of certain cultures (African, Colombian, Dominican, etc.).

Zumba instructor Wil-son Williams hosts “Club Zumba at the Conga Room” from 9-11:00 PM every Friday with live percussionists, DJs and a light show. He calls Zumba, “a unique society that can cross from nightclubs to dance studios to gyms,”⁶³ and on Friday nights his class packs the club with 50-100 participants dressed in high heels and bright make-up. This high-energy atmosphere serves to create a second audience as well—friends and significant others who came along to sit, have a drink, and enjoy the show.

Although I’m not much of a club-goer, my sleepy eyes opened wide early one Saturday morning when I walked into a Zumbathon held at a local nightclub. Famous for featuring Latin music, this club in McAllen was perfectly suited for the cause. The club’s DJ rocked the house from his booth in the back, while sparkly lights shone through the air. A large stage in the front of the club featured different sets of instructors from all over the Valley, leading their favorite routines. Many of them chose music and dance styles that are already popular regionally such as cumbia, quebradita, and reggaeton. However, routines with African, Middle Eastern, or hip hop influences were wildly received as something fresh and new. Speaking to choreographer Guillermo “Memo” Mendez afterwards, he told me that he specializes in more International-sounding rhythms, including Euro-techno. This same instructor had found out the day before from the Zumba home office that he had been accepted as the first “Zumba Jammer” from the Rio Grande Valley. Surprisingly, he would not be touring the world to promote regional blends from the border, but to show his original moves set to global house styles. His ability to navigate the currents of eclectic world beats is on-demand in the expanding Zumba market. As Helena

⁶³ Angelina Cebrian, “Zumba Class at the Nightclub,” *ZLife: Powered by Zumba*, (Fall 2010).

Simonett⁶⁴ and Christopher Dennis⁶⁵ both note, cultural diversity has become a commodity in the performance industry. And Zumba is no exception. As genres from around the world are added to Zumba playlists at the central office in Florida, they get remixed, reinterpreted, re-localized, and re-released as an export of global capitalism. Memo's flashy choreography is just one example of the opportunity Zumba provides for participants to associate with any identity they choose as they perform from a plethora of global "pop" genres.

Within the constructs of Zumba, Latin and world dance even fuse together within the same song, creating new hybrids such as "Caipirinha" a hit released by Zumba at their 2010 instructor convention.⁶⁶ This song features lyrics in Portuguese, English, Arabic, and Hebrew with choreography that intentionally references samba, hip hop and belly dancing. The Zumba-produced music video features Beto Perez and various other dancers in a variety of fashions including sports jackets paired with brilliant high top shoes, women in cargo pants or designer jeans and sports bras, wearing their hair down. A variety of ethnicities are deliberately displayed along with cultural trademarks such as the Indian *bindi* (forehead mark) worn by women, hair twirling, and Beto donning his hood and throwing hand signs gangster-style. The "Caipirinha" video jumps back and forth between a staged performance where dancers engage the camera and a Zumba class where Beto interacts with participants. Zumba dance choreographies are gathered from near and far, portraying a party image that draws from every corner of the earth.

⁶⁴ Helena Simonett, "Re-localized Rap and its Representation of the Hombre digno." In *Transnational Encounters: Music and Performance at the U.S.-Mexico Border*, ed. Alejandro L. Madrid (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011).

⁶⁵ Christopher Dennis, "The 'Afro-Colombianization' of Hip-Hop and Discourse on Authenticity," in *Postnational Musical Identities: Cultural Productions, Distribution and Consumption in a Globalized Scenario*, eds. Ignacio Corona and Alejandro Madrid, (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2008).

⁶⁶ "Zumba Fitness—Caipirinha Music Video," uploaded by *lovezumba*, Aug 16, 2010, http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=g_2X59Cycrc.

Figure 3: A Scene from Zumba's Music Video "Caipirinha"



Figure 4: Images of Exotic Bodies Acted Out Through Movement and Fashion



This music video gives a way for the actual Zumba experience to be reviewed, remembered, and reinterpreted, adding on layers of audience perception. While hinting at other cultural forms of performance, this video provides one example of the way Zumba plays on a mish-mash of symbols to create an exotic atmosphere, emphasizing music, fitness and dance as channels of culture. Therefore, Zumba becomes a performative act as defined by performance studies scholars Stern and Henderson: “In all cases a performance act, interactional in nature and involving symbolic forms and live bodies, provides a way to constitute meaning and affirm individual and cultural values.”⁶⁷

Group Identity and Social Entrainment

For Valley residents, family traditions and cultural values are very important fabrics of society. When I interviewed local participant Jesse Parrish, he shared how Zumba gave him the opportunity to participate in Latin culture through dancing to Spanish music. Coming to the Valley from a different state, Zumba has become another way for Jesse to connect to the local community through group exercise.

I’ve been fascinated by Spanish, Latin American, South American and Mexican cultures for years now, so I like the fact that this group exercise experience relates to that. That’s something that I’m passionate about, so I guess another reason I go is it involves a passion of mine—which is the Spanish language and Latin culture.

⁶⁷ Carol Simpson Stern and Bruce Henderson, *Performance Texts and Contexts* (New York: Longman, 1993), 3.

...Some of the songs will take that Latin base and then blend other elements from other cultures into it. The same thing happens through the dance, and the same thing happens through the participants. Like me, I'm not a Latin-American person, but I was attracted to it, and now I've blended myself into that aspect of the culture. I've seen other white people access Zumba and enjoy it.

...I never attended a Zumba class before I moved to South Texas, so it was an experience as new to me as living here and interacting with the culture here. I had heard of it. I was familiar with Zumba, so I knew it was not a regionally-specific phenomenon. I actually only started going because I was invited by a co-worker that happened to go to the same gym. I became a member of a gym here locally, and I would use their other equipment and facilities and just work out by myself. But I never really attended a group exercise class. Zumba was my first group exercise experience.

So I was invited by a co-worker, I decided to go, and that was about two years ago. Even though I was very uncoordinated and off-balance the first time, I enjoyed myself because it's very high energy and it engages you in a different way. You don't realize that it's exercise. You're dancing and you're enjoying moving with a group and responding to music as a group. Your movements are synchronized and you're following a leader, and you're exercising to a rhythm.⁶⁸

In Zumba classes, the instructor becomes the conductor, demonstrating a response to the isochronous pulse and complex rhythms of world music. As individuals mirror the instructor's

⁶⁸ Jesse Parrish, personal communication, September 2012.

movements, their behaviors are time-locked with the flow of the music. These artistic experiences create a mental groove which gives participants the sense of transcending time and space. Psychologist Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi termed this “optimal experience or flow,” which ethnomusicologist Thomas Turino calls, “a state of heightened concentration when one is so intent on the activity at hand that all other thoughts, concerns and distractions disappear and the actor is fully in the present.”⁶⁹ He also notes that flow is a result of a certain level of challenge, enough to enhance the concentration without boring the participants or overwhelming them.

Zumba participants become fully engaged in sensorimotor synchronization as they take in visual cues from the instructor and other participants around them, they absorb danceable rhythms aurally, and they feel their body moving in connection to these signals. At the same time, their brains are processing sensory feedback about the amount of energy they are exerting, whether their movements are matching the instructor’s, if they are about to bump into another person, or if they need to stop and drink some water. When the class ends there is a release of endorphins as participants feel a sense of accomplishment and both a mental and physical rush of energy. Participants often describe how they forget about their problems when they are at Zumba because they get lost in the music. Jesse Parrish also commented about the power of music and dance as a type of exercise. He noted that he felt a creative flow in Zumba classes that allowed him to perform as an individual while also participating as part of a group.

What I see as the difference in Zumba is, it’s a more personal experience.

Dance animates something really deep inside of you. When you dance to a song that you are really enjoying—you hear people say “I can feel the music”—when

⁶⁹ Thomas Turino, *Music as Social Life: The Politics of Participation* (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 2008), 4.

you can do the step in synch, but then once you get good enough, add your own flair to something, or twist it out a different way, that's what I think is really cool about Zumba. When you're on the bike in spin class, there is only one thing you can do—spin the pedals, and when you're doing lifting or step aerobics, you have to do the moves exactly as the instructor shows you (1. to avoid injury and 2. to get the most out of the exercise). But in Zumba it's like you're operating within a sequence of steps, you have this space, and you know you have to go from this corner down to this corner and move diagonally and there's a certain number of steps you can take so you don't bump in to anybody and you maintain flow with everyone that's in the class. But you can do your own thing with your hands, and you can look in the mirror and bob your head and make a face or whatever, I think that's what makes it so much fun, is you make it your own. You're doing your own thing even though you're doing the same moves as everyone else.⁷⁰

Group coordination to a rhythmic pulse has been termed “social entrainment,” by neuroscientists and behaviorists. Entrainment is used in the field of medicine to synchronize and control cardiac rhythm by an external stimulus.⁷¹ In the arts, entrainment pertains to dance and music where rhythm is perceived and responded to through spatiotemporal coordination⁷². For example, in a ballet, we witness musicians in the pit inhaling at the conductor's preparatory cue, string players bowing in synchrony, and trumpeters tonguing with precise articulation. Meanwhile, dancers count the beats as they turn to the left, then to the right, jump and land and curtsy together. Simultaneously, the audience erupts into applause as the conductor signals a

⁷⁰ Ibid

⁷¹ W.A. Newman Dorland, *Dorland's Medical Dictionary for Health Consumers* (Saunders, 2007).

⁷² Jessica Phillips-Silver, C. Athena Aktipis, Gregory A. Bryant, “The Ecology of Entrainment: Foundations of Coordinated Rhythmic Movement,” *Music Perception: An Interdisciplinary Journal* 28 (Sept 2010): 3-14, stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/10.1525/mp.2010.28.1.3>.

dramatic cut-off. These actions are all dictated by a rhythmic signal, mediated by the conductor, and performed through the bodies of the dancers.

A Local Cultural Expression

As participants adopt Zumba's music, fashion, and dance styles and incorporate it as part of their geographically-situated identity, Zumba becomes part of a local expression of culture. Interpreting Zumba as their own, it becomes a piece of cultural capital to be exchanged back and forth between Mexicans, Americans, Colombians, Afro-Latinos, Boriquas, Mexican-Americans, African-Americans, etc. Stepping inside the shoes of a local Zumba participant would have to involve a mental upload of all the memories and associations with border music culture. For a "Valleyite," hearing a cumbia such as "*Juana la Cubana*," "*Mil Horas*," or "*Saca la Maleta*" in Zumba class triggers an automatic connection to years of family gatherings where certain relatives regularly requested these songs from the live *conjunto*. The thought process which occurs when a person relates music to past experiences is similar to linguistic processing where symbols are interpreted according to a previously-associated meaning. Turino explains such "semantic snowballing"⁷³ as the mental addition of meaning upon meaning in reference to a single object. In Zumba, this object, or "sign vehicle" is the music. A majority of the music used in Zumba classes provokes past memories to resurface which participants previously experienced in a variety of social contexts.⁷⁴

⁷³ Thomas Turino, *Music as Social Life: The Politics of Participation* (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 2008), 237.

⁷⁴ Participating in Zumba, therefore, is not only exercise for the body, but it is also the opportunity to draw up feelings associated with different musical sounds. Turino suggests that activities which involve "feeling, physical reaction, and symbolic thought" are important ways to "develop, exercise, and integrate the different parts of the self." (2008, 51).

While I am not claiming Zumba as a language, per say, I do assert that as a cultural expression, Zumba provides a setting where participants make connections between music and meanings. While Turino calls this process of associating certain types of music with past experiences “semantic snowballing,” I prefer to think of these ongoing connections in terms of something a little more likely to be found in Texas—*tumbleweeds*. As balls of brush roll across time and space, collecting pieces of landscape or other particles as they are blown about, these tumbleweeds are reshaped by the environment and collide with various routes of travel. In the same way, certain musics have travelled from culture to culture snagging style variations along the way until they wind up in the path of Zumba producers only to be further entangled into a hybrid of other world-sounds.

Often local branches of dance music which have been uprooted and thrown into the Zumba mix, come to represent their native soil as they are redistributed throughout the world. Take for example, the way *quebradita* has been popularized in Zumba classes as a re-enactment of Mexican identity. Sidney Hutchinson recently pointed this out in her discussion on the commercial appeal of this dance form, stating that, “quebradita is now seen not only as Mexican or Mexican-American but, at least potentially, as part of pan-Latino dance culture...[it] has been included in the mish-mash of Latin American popular dances and aerobics that is Zumba.”⁷⁵ This is especially interesting since *quebradita* was initially rejected by many Mexicans for being associated primarily with immigrant populations in the U.S., marginalized youth in Los Angeles, and lower-class groups. Now due to Zumba, *quebradita* is being widely experienced as a popular, Latin dance form alongside such genres as salsa and bachata. Another music genre that

⁷⁵ Sydney Hutchinson, “Breaking Borders/Quebrando fronteras: Dancing in the Borderscape,” in *Transnational Encounters: Music and Performance at the U.S.-Mexico Border*, ed. Alejandro L. Madrid (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011), 49.

was previously tied to a specific location and is now being popularized through Zumba is the Monterrey-based *cumbia tribalera*.

Tribal as an Example of “Tumbleweeding”

The surging new genre of cumbia tribalera, or *tribal guarachero* is decidedly Mexican. Mixing Aztec and African rhythms with cumbias through electro sounds grafted into the scraping sounds of the *guaracha*, this club music has overwhelmed Monterrey youth culture in the past few years and spread throughout Northern Mexico and up into Texas. Taking up the tribal groove, teens identify themselves through performing to this music within competitive subgroups or genres—dancing together with flashy outfits distinct to their “chuntaro” cliques.

I have specifically chosen to highlight the use of cumbia tribalera in Zumba because it is definitively Mexican music which has recently transversed the border, “tumbleweeding” its way into local clubs, parties, and Zumba classes. Although the first roots of cumbia originated in Colombia among the *costeños*, cumbias travelled to the U.S. mainly through Mexican immigrants after passing through a Mexanizing process where the rhythm was modified and instrumentation slightly altered. Due to the association of cumbia with mestizo identity, as Pacini Hernandez notes, many Mexicans think the cumbia is a product of their homeland. She adds that, “Given the transformations in Mexican cumbia styles and its central role in contemporary Mexican musical practices, they are not entirely mistaken.”⁷⁶ With the ongoing evolution of cumbia in Northern Mexico, the new tribalera off-shoot references a pre-

⁷⁶ Deborah Pacini Hernandez, *Oye Como Va!: Hybridity and Identity in Latino Popular Music* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2010).

Hispanic past and the techno-centric future merging into the party scene with a distinctly Mexican flair. On top of this, the genre has been created by and for the up-and-coming generation. Fader magazine sent Jace Clayton to Monterrey in 2010 to report on this strand of cumbia that was drawing over 4,000 teenagers to the sizzling dancefloor at Club Arcoiris. He wrote about the young DJs who prepared tracks for clubs and quinceaneras using the latest software:

The genre creates a space where kids can playfully experiment how local roots (from psycho to narcocorridos) tangle with random internet click-trails (inexplicably, it samples lots from Egyptian percussionist Hossam Ramzy). This explains those mysterious swinging triplet beats in tribal. The Monterrey kids grew up hearing rancheras, huapangos and corridos, all in 3/4 time. This meter reappears in folk music across Latin America, and it creeps into tribal even though they're using software that defaults to 4/4 beat structures. Kids all over the world make tracks with FruityLoops, but you have to be strong or stubborn to pack it so thick with structural references to other Mexican music—particularly folding in those alternate time signatures, those sneaky triplets that move the body more subtly.⁷⁷

In 2010, when this genre was enjoying a popular sweep of the underground music markets, young men from the ranchos in northern San Luis Potosi would get together and dance competitively to tribal guarachero, showing off their finest footwear. For these dance-offs they would alter their boots using hoses or foam to elongate the points even up to six feet. Therefore, *botas picudas* came to be associated with this style of music, although not always worn in

⁷⁷ Jace Clayton, "Feature: Tribal Guarachero: Mexican Teens & Aztec History," *Fader* (Oct. 13, 2010), <http://www.thefader.com/2010/10/13/feature-in-tribal-guarachero-teenage-wilders-rebirth-aztec-history/#ixzz22ofXTZHB>.

“chuntaro” competitions throughout the Mexican diaspora (including dances in Houston and Dallas). Teenage boys would also wear skinny jeans to accentuate their boots, and developed a style of dancing that combined small kicks, swaying movements, and hops. Hip gyrations are reminiscent of African-rooted cumbias, and sometimes variations of breakdancing or electro dance are included as crews compete to tribal mixes.

Partially due to the exotic fashions, and also to the association with a more indigenous identity, tribal guarachero has faced a lot of rejection among those who view it as “*naco*” or lower-class music. Despite these stigmatizations, it continues to seep into clubs two years after its big boom in Monterrey. Recently, the hits “La Cumbia Tribalera” from DJ Morphius, and “Intentalo” from 3Ball MTY have entered Zumba classes around the world with a danceable beat that merges with other cumbias and serves as a cardio workout loaded with quick jumps and swiveling hip motions.

Local Zumba Interpretations of “La Cumbia Tribalera”

In the Valley, while not all Zumba participants may recognize tribal as a genre yet, it is well received and widely played. Attending a Zumba class at Club Fuego in McAllen, El Pelon’s music video “Cumbia Tribalera” was projected in the house amongst other Spanish-language dance songs before the event began, and then used in the playlist of Zumba songs towards the middle of the Master Class. Choreography referencing the lyrics “*moviendo la cadera*,” with corresponding dance steps.

By transcribing parts of the music video and the corresponding Zumba choreography, I intend to show how movements in Zumba compare to the way tribal is danced in clubs and

competitions. The use of representative movements as cultural markers reveals a semiotic tie between movement and culture. As dance steps are transformed into parts of an exercise routine, choreographers must determine which aesthetics to keep and/or embellish while promoting fitness goals. Zumba instructors piece together dance styles into a quilt of cultural content that references regional identities while simultaneously targeting certain areas of the body, toning and strengthening specific muscle groups.

My transcription of Cumbia Tribalera is just one example of Zumba taking a genre that is tied to a specific region, and making it available to the global community. Zumba continues to bring styles such as quebradita and tribal guarachero from the Mexican diaspora, currulao and mapale from the Colombian coast, axe and lambada from Brazil, and many more “ethnic” genres to the forefront. Through taking part in these genres, Zumba participants are able to join with these identities. As is the case with cumbia tribalera, participants in the Valley are able to re-enact a Mexican identity as a construct of hipness, youth, and regional solidarity.

La Cumbia Tribalera

By ReMex Music/ Discos Sabinas

Transcribed from “La Cumbia Tribalera (Video Oficial)
El Pelon del Mikrophone Feat. Banda la Trakalosa & Violento”

<http://youtu.be/ujbcoumKIuc>

Introduccion:

¡Hola, que tal!

Soy DJ Morphius.

El día de hoy le voy a enseñar cómo preparar tribal.

Tenemos banda, tenemos tribal, y tenemos grupero.

Si los contamos, vamos a ver qué pasa.

Hablando:

Y le seguimos con más tribal

DJ Morphius, El Pelón del Mikrophone
(you knew)

Con Violento (y La Trakalosa de Monterrey)

Ya tú sabes cómo suena (póngase, Violento)

Coro:

//A e-a e-a e, moviendo la cadera,

A e-a e-a e, con mi cumbia tribalera.\\

Primer verso:

Es domingo por la noche

También quiero ir a bailar

Ya tengo mis botas nuevas listas para zapatear

Mis amigos, las mujeres, y una tequila pa' empezar

Toda toca lavadita

Lista para parrandear

Hablando:

Y ahora si nos vamos todos a bailar tribal,
(jajaja)

Con la cumbia tribalera, (sabe)

Con el Pelon del Mikrophone, (you knew),

La Raza de Violento (dale)

Y La Trakalosa de Monterrey

(suena, DJ Morphius).

Introduction:

Hi, what's up!

I'm DJ Morphius.

Today I'm going to teach you how to prepare tribal.

We have banda, we have tribal, and we have grupero.

If we put them together, let's see what happens.

Speaking:

And we continue with more tribal

DJ Morphius, El Pelón del Mikrophone
(you knew)

With Violento and La Trakalosa de Monterrey

You already know how it goes, (get at it, Violento)

Chorus:

//Uh ey-uh ey-uh ey, moving my hips,

Uh ey-uh ey-uh ey, with my cumbia tribalera.\\

First verse:

It's Sunday night

And I want to go dancing

I already have my new boots ready to go

My friends, the ladies, and tequila to get started

Everything washed up

Ready to party

Speaking:

And now, yes, we are all going to dance tribal
(hahaha)

With the cumbia tribalera (you know)

With the Pelon del mikrophone, (you knew),

With La Raza de Violento (give it up)

And La Trakalosa de Monterrey

(play it, DJ Morphius)

Puente:

Y moviendo suavemente sandungueando despacito,
Sacudiendo la cadera y meneando el ombligo.
Y moviendo suavemente sandungueando despacito,
Sacudiendo la cadera y meneando ese culito.

Coro

Hablando:

Y ahora a ver toda mi gente
Con las manos bien arriba
Porque ahora todo el mundo
Va a bailar el pasito de La Cumbia Tribalera
(jaja)
¡Ya tú sabes cómo suena, (you knew)!

Según verso:

Llegando a la party nos pusimos a pistear
Una de sellito rojo que tuvimos que comprar
Las mujeres se acercaron, nos pusimos a bailar
Todo el mundo ya bien pedo
¡Pues que toquen más tribal!

Puente

Coro

Hablando:

Ay pues ya que andamos bien, Violento.
¿Y qué andas bien, Trakalosa?
¿Pues vamos a darle chance que cante el mudo,
No?
¿Cómo ven?
Que cante el mudo, véngase mi mudo,
Que suene, que suene el tribal

“El mudo”:

///A e-a e-a e
E-a e-a e\\
E-e-e-e-e-e-
(risas)

Bridge:

And moving smoothly, grinding slowly,
Shaking the hips and gyrating the belly-button,
And moving smoothly, grinding slowly,
Shaking the hips and gyrating that booty.

Chorus

Speaking:

And now let's see all my people
With their hands up high
Because now all the world
Is going to dance the steps to La Cumbia Tribalera
(haha)
You already know how it goes, (you knew)!

Second verse:

Arriving at the party we started to drink
One with a red seal* that we had to buy
The women came closer, we started dancing
Everyone was already very drunk,
So, play more tribal!

Bridge

Chorus

Speaking:

Ay, well we are already doing fine, Violento.
And are you doing fine, Trakalosa?
Well let's give the mute a chance to sing,
No?
What do you think?
Let the mute sing, come here my mute,
Let's hear it, let's hear tribal.

“The mute”:

///Uh ey-uh ey-uh ey,
Ey-uh ey-uh ey\\
Ey-ey-ey-ey-ey-ey
(laughter)

*Buchanan's whiskey

Figure 5: Movement Transcription Key

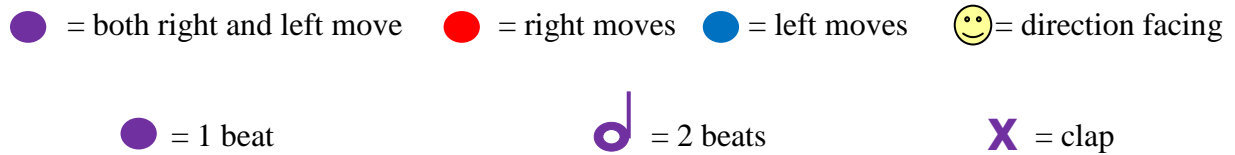


Figure 6: “La Cumbia Tribalera” Dance Steps—*Bridge*

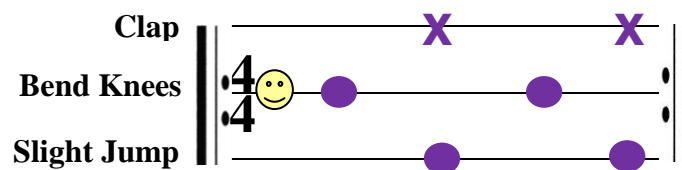
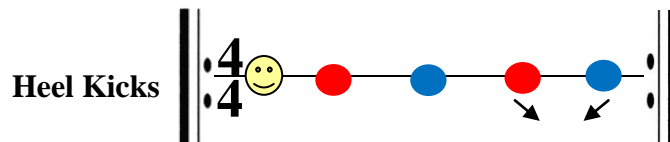
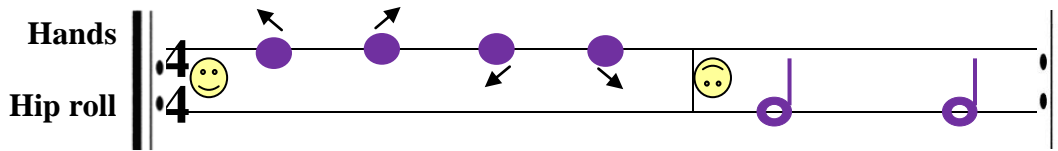


Figure 7: “La Cumbia Tribalera” Zumba Steps—*Bridge*



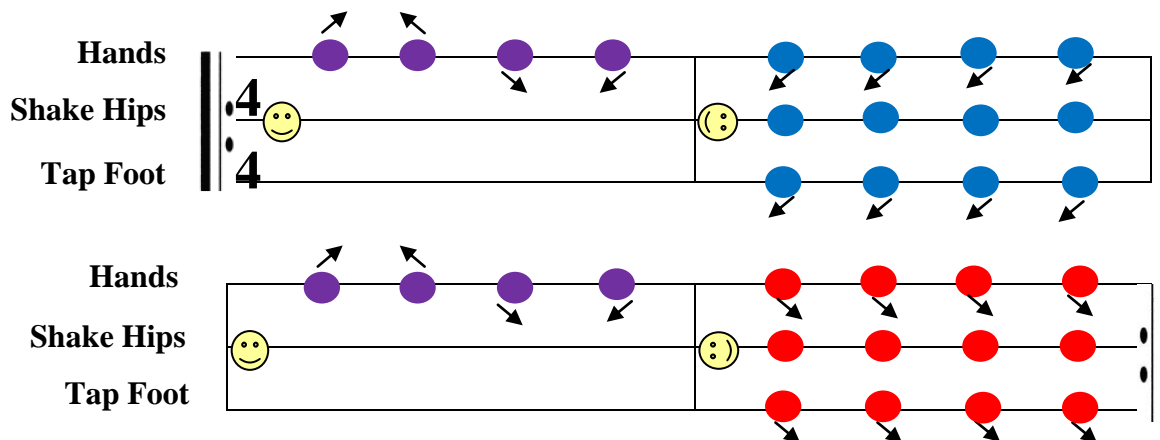
These steps repeat eight times (facing front) during verse two of the song. The dance steps show both knees bending on beats one and two, with feet moving together with the clap on beats two and four. The Zumba steps only highlight heel kicks, but more aerobic energy is expended with each kick. On beats one and two, the right and left feet kick to the front. Then on beats three and four, the right foot kicks to the right and left foot kicks to the left (demonstrated by arrows).

Figure 8: “La Cumbia Tribalera” Dance Steps—*Chorus*



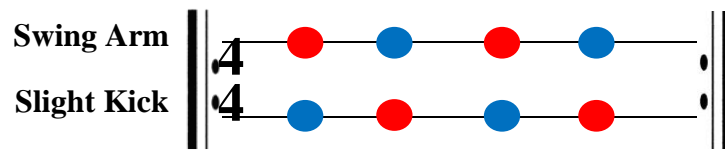
The dance steps for the chorus emphasize both hands moving up and down in an angle, first to the left, then the right, while the singers vocalizes “Uh ey-uh ey-uh ey.” Then the hips are rolled in a complete circular movement twice, each gyration taking two beats. This whole sequence repeats four times, facing the front for the hand movements, and facing the back for the hip rolls. Variations do occur however, throughout the music video as camera angles focus on different dancers.

Figure 9: “La Cumbia Tribalera” Zumba Steps—*Chorus*



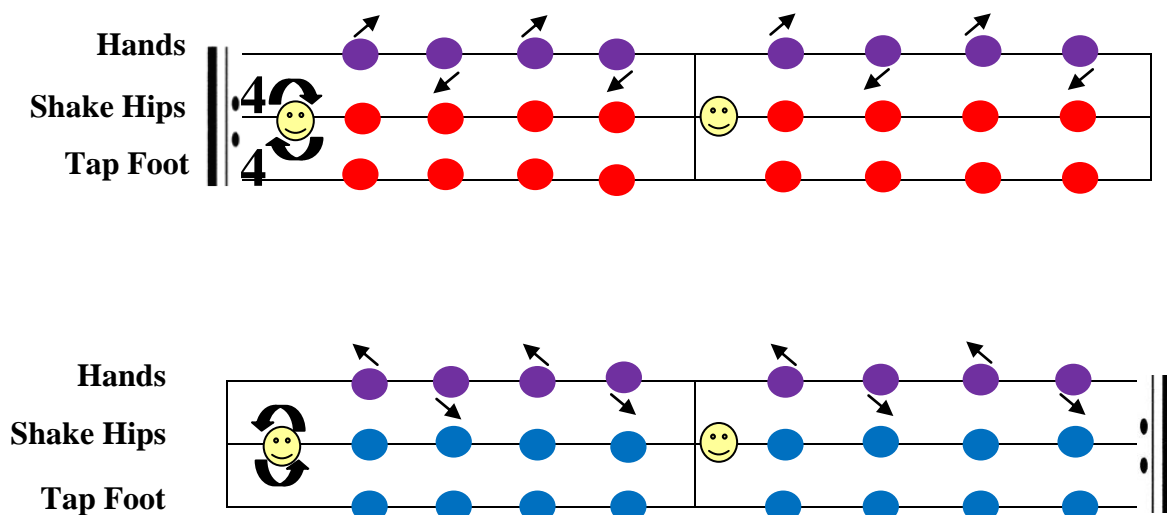
Zumba choreography for the chorus consists of the same hand/arm movements (although the direction changes), and then turning the whole body to the side while shaking the hip quickly.

Figure 10: “La Cumbia Tribalera” Dance Steps—*Instrumental Interlude*



This movement is done facing any direction, and shows off the *botas picudas* (pointy boots) associated with tribal. As the right arm swings forward, the left foot is brought forward, staying close to the ground. The steps continue in place, with alternating motions.

Figure 11: “La Cumbia Tribalera” Zumba Steps—*Instrumental Interlude*



The Zumba choreography for the instrumental interlude is much more complex than the music video’s dance steps here. The Zumba steps involve pivoting in a circle while tapping the outside foot, waving both arms up then down, and shaking a hip on each beat.

By comparing side by side the similarities and contrasts between music video dance steps and Zumba class choreography, we see Zumba bringing two worlds together. Fitness and dance merge through exaggerated cumbia movements which participants perform as a means of exercise. Embodying a North-Mexican identity through the use of heel kicks and rhythmic tribal moves, participants are transported across the border, albeit only in their mind. The Zumba instructor points her hands up and down in alternating chopping-motions, mimicking exact arm motions from the popular video featuring “El Pelon del Mikrophone.” Speeding up hip movements, and adding more turns and kicks, Zumba choreography also fulfills its mission to burn calories while participants are too busy having fun to notice the “work” in their workout.

In his book on Zumba, Beto Perez encourages participants to incorporate a wide variety of dance steps into their daily routine. He also mentions the purpose of each style:

As you practice in this manner, you will be on your way to getting a shapely, sexy body, since the different dance steps give different benefits. For instance, salsa and reggaeton emphasize a cardiovascular workout, so overall fat-burning is the result. On the other hand, certain aspects of merengue and cumbia focus more on strengthening specific body parts—hips, thighs, legs, and stomach muscles—as well as fostering greater endurance.⁷⁸

Zumba attendees feel their body changing and continue coming back for more. While different genres, such as tribal, connect with participants and make the workout interesting, music in Zumba classes also serves to direct sweat-inducing movement. Here music fills a functional role, facilitating the modern-day social practice of exercise.

⁷⁸ Beto Perez and Maggie Greenwood Robinson, *Zumba: Ditch the Workout Join the Party! The Zumba Weight Loss Program* (Grand Central Life & Style, 2009), 78.

CHAPTER III

ZUMBA MEDIATES CULTURAL CHANGE

Throughout the past two chapters we have examined the history of Zumba, its reach into the Rio Grande Valley, and how it has become a cultural expression. In this chapter, I seek to highlight ways that Zumba serves to bridge communities, both globally and locally. I point out the role of instructors as mediators of the Zumba philosophy, embodying health to local participants. I follow this by sharing notes from the field which demonstrate the local impact of Zumba. These notes include testimonials, personal observations, and reports from regional media. At the end of the chapter I will share how the changes happening in this geographical area fit into a bigger picture of worldwide cultural exchange.

As a transnational art form, Zumba is providing opportunities for people to come together around a constructed “global party”. Instructors attend international workshops through the Zumba Instructors Network, and then go back home to share their experiences with local participants. Participants search on YouTube for classes in other countries and compare different choreographies for the same song. The Zumba website itself serves as a hub for global commerce, and the Z-life magazine is a companion to instructors investing themselves in creating a subculture around health and music. Looking at the way all these factors tie together elements of pop culture and individual communities, we see the growing appeal of Zumba as an effecter of social transformation.

Local Group “La Señal” Portrays Zumba

While dance and music are a common part of society in the Rio Grande Valley, exercise is not traditionally viewed as a priority. In a music video filmed in McAllen, local *conjunto* group “La Señal” (The Signal) embodies the way Zumba participation disrupts the typical Valley lifestyle. Their song “La Zumba” depicts the struggle facing many women along the border who want to get in shape, but confront social norms among some Mexican Americans that say “bigger is better.” Some local women receive little support from their families for their participation in Zumba classes.

For example, one participant I became acquainted with during my research was participating in Zumba as a way to lose weight. While attending classes, she began to set healthy goals for herself. This marked a bold change in her lifestyle, yet her family misunderstood why she felt she needed to change. Although her weight was a health threat, her family felt uncomfortable with her going against commonly accepted ideas about women’s bodies. I also listened to one instructor tell me how her relatives tried to sabotage her for wanting to make positive changes in her lifestyle—perhaps out of jealousy that she was aspiring to build a successful business and reach for higher goals. The waves of change brought about by Zumba participation are not always welcome by family members or relatives who feel their ways of thinking are being challenged.

In the music video for their song, “La Zumba” the Valley-based La Señal shows a husband and wife discussing her obsession with Zumba. The husband seems pessimistic that it will help his wife, but she is determined to transform her body into that of a super-model such as famous Mexican actresses Ninel Conde and Maribel Guardia. Halfway through the song her husband tells her, “*te quiero asi gorda*,” which essentially means, “I like you fat like this.” However, at the end of the video his expression betrays his words when he sees his wife before him “*bien buenota*,” (one hot mamma).

The making of this video shows the strong influence of Zumba on Valley culture and how its philosophy and goals clash with those of the local, seemingly male-dominated culture. Not only is the style of music in La Señal’s video familiar to Valley residents, but it also represents Zumba as driving a wedge between the sexes, posing a threat to the fabric of patriarchal society. As local Zumba instructor Candace Foxx pointed out to me, it is a cultural practice in the border region to raise overweight children as a sign of affluence. Foxx believes American commercialism is to blame. She described to me how advertisers influence families into thinking that cooking is a horrible, time-consuming experience for people to suffer through if they cannot afford to buy pre-made meals. This ignorance about health and nutrition, combined with a lack of support from family members towards those trying to set aside time for exercise, makes it very challenging for the population in the Rio Grande Valley—especially women with small children—to take care of their physical condition.



Figure 12: “Una Diet Coke para rematar ”



Figure 13: “El borrado está pasando”



Figure 14: “Con esta Zumba voy a rebajar”

La Zumba

By Grupo La Señal, directed by Rodrigo Chico and Betto Salinas
Transcribed from TX.DOWNTOWNFILMS music video filmed in McAllen, TX
<http://youtu.be/7soVst5nsds>

Mujer: Amor, has visto mis llaves?

Hombre: Ay, hombre,
¿No sabes eso de la Zumba?
Ya te dije, no vas a rebajar.

Mujer: Pues aunque lo dudes,
una modelo yo creo a quedar.

En este mundo
El borrado está pasando
Todas las mujeres están rebajando.
Cuando llego a la casa
Con hambre y cansado
Miro a mi gorda*
Solo aquí' sta bailando.
Le pregunto que está pasando
Ella me contesta, "Pues ando zumbando
Y con esta Zumba voy a rebajar.
Una modelo yo voy a quedar.

Coro:
“//Porque yo quiero estar como una Ninel,
O la Maribel, (Bien buenota*.)\\
Yo me quiero ver como una Ninel
O la Maribel. (Bien buenota.)
//Porque yo quiero estar como una Ninel
O la Maribel. (Bien buenota.)\\”

Pero le digo te quiero así gorda.
Para demostrarla te voy a invitar.
Hacen la taquitos, tamales y cocas,
Una Diet Coke para rematar.
Ella me contesta, “Vete con los niños,
No menos que quiero esta noche a cenar.
¿No me ves que estoy como tanque de guerra?
Y bailando Zumba voy a rebajar.
Coro 3x

Woman: Love, have you seen my keys?

Man: Aw man,
You don't know that about Zumba?
I already told you, you're not going to lose weight.

Woman: Well, even though you don't believe it,
I know I'm going to end up looking like a model.

In this world
Things are changing
All the women are losing weight,
When I get home
Hungry and tired
I see my woman
Just here dancing.
I ask her what's happening,
She tells me, “Well, I'm doing Zumba
And with this Zumba, I'm going to lose weight.
I'm going to end up looking like a model.

Chorus:
“//Because I want to be like Ninel*
Or Maribel.* (Very very hot.)\\
I want to see myself like Ninel
Or Maribel. (Very very hot.)
//Because I want to be like Ninel
Or Maribel. (Very very hot.)\\

But I tell her, “I want you fat like this.
To show you, I'm going to take you out.
Make her taquitos, tamales, and cokes,
A Diet Coke to finish it off.
She answers me, “Go with the kids,
The last thing I want to do is eat tonight.
Don't you see that I am like an army tank?
And dancing Zumba I'm going to lose weight.
Chorus 3x

**gorda*—a term of endearment, literally meaning “fat,” but used affectionately.

buenota—a term which means very hot, attractive; a “bombshell”, “knockout” or “good-looker.”

**Ninel Conde*—an award winning actress and singer from Mexico.

**Maribel Guardia*—an actress and singer from Costa Rica who lives and works in Mexico.

La Señal's music video also re-defines the role of women as typically portrayed in *conjunto* music, showing how local women are calling attention to themselves as they put on colorful Zumbawear and kissing their husbands goodbye on the way to Zumba class. As I spoke with a local nurse practitioner who is native to the Valley (and whose last name will soon be my own), he admitted that the typical "macho" male from this area would probably feel threatened if he saw his wife getting dressed up every night to go to Zumba. He might ask himself, "Why is she sexy-ing herself up?" Most of all, when a woman shows that she wants to better herself—whether through exercise, or in other ways such as furthering her education—it may open the door to her independence.⁷⁹

Participating in Zumba as a step towards self-liberation breaks the mold of traditional gender roles where the woman would stay at home, dependent on her husband, and have fresh hot tortillas ready for him when he walked in the door. That is not to say that all families in the Valley operate within a chauvinist structure, but, as La Señal's song indicates, women are facing these challenges as they choose to go to Zumba classes. Through participating in Zumba Fitness, women are deciding what type of body they want, and are working to make themselves more desirable and healthy-looking, contrary to long-standing Latino ideals that define beauty as having a larger, curvaceous figure. Different ethnic views of beauty begin to surface, and beg further study from the fields of gender studies and Latina identity.

⁷⁹ Fortunately, my fiancé added that a husband's healthy response would be to support his wife's goals, while evaluating how he can work to improve his own health as well.

Health Factors in the Rio Grande Valley

The history of Zumba in South Texas is also linked closely to the battle against obesity on both sides of the border. In an underactive, overweight society succumbed to regional norms where *manteca* seems to sustain the base of our food pyramid and a *chile relleno* floats around at the top as the singular “green vegetable” of Tex-Mex culture, Zumba Fitness rises as a culturally-appealing movement. By using aesthetics of both the familiar and the exotic, Zumba gives residents in Northern Mexico and South Texas a means to reclaim self-esteem by empowering them to become healthy individuals. In fact, before Zumba reached the Rio Grande Valley, it was already growing in popularity in Reynosa, Mexico a border city south of McAllen, TX.

While communities on both sides of the Rio Grande share a need for programs that stimulate good nutrition and physical activity, in 2010 Mexico came in first place for obesity in the world,⁸⁰ with the U.S. as runner-up. Within the U.S., McAllen, TX was named “the fattest city in America” in 2011⁸¹. The same year, in the Mexican border state of Tamaulipas, 70% of the population was struggling with obesity.

In a region where diabetes prevails in an estimated 26 % of the population⁸²--16% of which live with type 2 diabetes—the success of fitness programs is crucial to both prevention and treatment of related diseases. In a 2004-2005 study approved by Texas A & M University, clinical depressive symptoms were shown to be prevalent in 39 % of border residents with type 2 diabetes, leading to “increased mortality rates, poor glycemic control, increased diabetes

⁸⁰ Mayra García Sánchez, “Ocupa México, primer lugar en obesidad,” *ElMañana* (Nov. 24, 2011), <http://www.elmanana.com/diario/noticia/La%20Tarde/La%20Tarde/Ocupa%20M%C3%A9xico,%20primer%20lugar%20en%20obesidad/1379703>.

⁸¹ Jack Hambrick, “Everything is Bigger in Texas, Including People,” *The Digital Texan* (Mar. 7, 2012), <http://digitaltexan.net/2012/state/mcallen-obese-fattest-city-people-country/article28658/>

⁸² UTPA Border Health Office, (2006), <http://www.utpa.edu/bho/statistics.htm>.

complications, increased functional disability, poorer compliance with treatment recommendations, and higher medical costs.”⁸³ Overall, the border region of South Texas is an area of main concern due to its high rate of chronic diseases related to unhealthy lifestyles.

Mediating Health Culture

Zumba instructors in the Valley model fitness to a culture entrenched in a “super-size me” mentality where a sedentary lifestyle is becoming the norm. McAllen Zumba instructor Marianela Aguirre told local Univision Channel 48 how her life changed when she started participating in Zumba after “Unidos por ti” decided to host a Zumbathon in the Valley.⁸⁴ She mentioned how her body fat was reduced and replaced with muscle. Marianela pointed out that it is a bonus when personal health and happiness spills over into the community, and this is exactly what happens at the Zumbathons held throughout the RGV almost every weekend. These Zumbathons are put together through partnerships between local Zumba instructors and non-profit organizations. By attending these events throughout the course of my research, I had the opportunity to support leukemia, lymphoma, and breast cancer research, to help specific cancer patients, to benefit mens’ health, local cheerleaders, non-profits who serve low-income families in South Texas, Red Cross, Good Samaritan, Angels of Love, Relay for Life, elementary school special needs programs, the Arthritis Foundation, and to help battle childhood obesity.

⁸³ Nelda Mier et al., “Clinical Depressive Symptoms and Diabetes in a Binational Border Population,” *Journal of the American Board of Family Medicine* 21, No. 3 (May-June 2008): 223-233. doi: 10.3122/jabfm.2008.03.070255.

⁸⁴ Maia Elite Studio, uploaded by *maiaelitestudio* on Apr 23, 2010 <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LYRh-Ro0xnQ>.

Through Zumba, local participants are discovering that fitness can be fun. They are proud of their sore muscles, because they see changes in their body, in their energy levels, and in their enthusiasm towards life. Repeatedly, I have been told by participants—especially women—how Zumba helps them de-stress at the end of a long day. Mothers who are concerned about their children, teachers and nurses who dedicate their careers to serving others, and those struggling to find a job, find a place where they can pause all the worries in life and invest in their personal wellness.

Here I share the stories of three different women who have been impacted by participating in Zumba classes.

Bryana is a second generation Mexican-American who works as a border patrol officer. She told me, “I wanted to hang out with other women, because at my work it’s mostly guys. So at Zumba I made new friends.” Even though Bryana was already very fit from the rigorous training required by her job, she still enjoyed Zumba classes where she could socialize and decompress from the high stress of monitoring border safety. “When I met my friends from Zumba,” she shared, “it was like, ‘let’s go to Zumba and then let’s go have yogurt.’” Besides acquiring new friends, she got to enjoy dancing without feeling any pressure. “When I go to a quinceañera, I would feel embarrassed to go up and dance in front of everyone, but in Zumba I felt so comfortable.” Bryana has been attending Zumba classes at a gym in the Valley for at least two years now, and claims it is a great workout because, “When you go to Zumba you forget everything else!”

Another Zumba participant that I had the privilege of interviewing is originally from Nuevo Leon, and keeps in contact with Zumba instructors throughout the Valley and in Mexico.

Right away she told me how Zumba had changed her life by helping her lose 90 pounds within the first year that she attended classes at a local gym. “Tengo un año en el gimnasio, pero creo que rebajé con Zumba, porque sudas bastante,” Hilda told me. (I went to the gym for a year, but I believe that I lost weight with Zumba because you sweat so much.) Inspired by her instructors, after two years of taking Zumba classes, Hilda became certified as an instructor. She is still in the process of putting together her own routines, and is communicating with a choreographer in Chiapas to create original movements. Hilda wants to offer fresh new choreographies to the community, but still enjoys going to Zumba classes and following other instructors. She says, “Yo pienso que Zumba es salud, es la familia, es ejercicio. Zumba es cumbia, salsa, merengue, ranchera, polka, huapango.” (“I think that Zumba is health, it is family, it is exercise....”)

One of the interviews that affected me the most was my conversation with Gaby Gutierrez right after she finished hosting a Zumbathon to raise support for Leukemia and Lymphoma research. I found out about the event through a posting on facebook, and read more on Gaby’s wall:

Friends, recently I made the decision to contribute to the foundation for the cure for cancer with the Leukemia and Lymphoma Society. Together with their training program, I will run 26.2 miles in the Rock’n’Roll marathon in San Antonio the November 11th. Six years ago I became a lymphoma cancer patient and I want to help others to have the same successful recovery as I did. The Lymphoma and Leukemia Society utilizes funds for research of the best treatments, and thanks to those advances, the rates of survival for this type of cancer have risen considerably. With this in mind, the Zumba family—19 of the best instructors in the Valley and yours truly, will give the shout [celebrating the

day of Mexico's Independence] this September 15th with a Mexican-style Zumbathon where all the funds will be designated for this cause. September 15th, 10 in the morning, Ice House, bring your friends and your *sombrero*!)

On the morning of September 15th, Zumba participants came from as far as Monterrey, MX and San Antonio to support Gaby's cause. Her family was there, as well as the Zumba family. Walking to the back of the Old Ice House (renovated into a bar in McAllen) I found many of the other instructors I had come to know. Everyone was getting ready for the Zumbathon, taking pictures together, doing each other's hair, and cutting up their new shirts to add style and flair to the occasion. To start off the event, the folkloric dance group "Raices de Dos Tierras" performed in bright, traditional costumes, then we did one warm-up song with all the instructors leading together from the stage. After the warm-up, the first song was a cumbia tribalera, which I taped for the transcription that is in chapter two. Everyone sweated out their Mexican pride for two hours while the DJ played cumbias, banda, and reggaeton.

At the end of the cool-down song, everyone rushed to the stage to take pictures together before leaving. Instructors and participants from all parts of the Valley had shared their love for Zumba, Mexico, and continued medical research. After everyone left, Gaby very graciously told me the story of how she had gotten involved with Zumba Fitness.

I had always been active and loved dancing, but after college I stopped when I was diagnosed with lymphoma. After I recovered I wanted to do a fundraiser for people in the Valley that had cancer but could not afford treatment. Around the same time I started doing Zumba with Liza Chavez, and she mentioned to me that I should do a Zumbathon since I wanted to help raise funds

for cancer research. At first nobody knew what a Zumbathon was, but since she was from Florida she had seen them done there before. I noticed the spirit that Zumba inspired in people ...doing community events...and after we did the Zumbathon I kept going to Zumba. Sometimes the instructor would say, “Do the class for me,” and eventually I got certified. I work full-time at the Cancer Center at Renaissance Hospital, but Zumba is my hobby. I teach Zumba at [a local gym] and once a month at the hospital we have a Zumba class for cancer patients and survivors.

All three of these Zumba participants have become cultural mediators by working to improve their own health, socializing with others through Zumba, communicating across borders about music and dance styles, and investing themselves in the community through participation in Zumbathons. Zumba instructors especially hold a role of influence, representing a healthy philosophy while connecting to participants in a way they can relate to through favorite songs and engaging dance steps.

Instructors as Cultural DJs

At the 2010 Tejano Conjunto/Norteño Music Convening held at South Texas College in Weslaco, TX, anthropologist Cecilia Ballí discussed the role of Tejano radio dee-jays. Her description of them as cultural brokers has resonated with me as I analyze the role of Zumba instructors. Catherine Ragland has also pointed out a similar cultural mediation performed by *sonideros* that DJ Mexican dances in New York and New Jersey. Compounding these thoughts with my own experiences, I have seen how instructors resemble both radio disc-jockeys and club

DJs. They fit the role of selecting music, gauging their audience's interests, and responding to popular trends, while interjecting up-and-coming releases or old classics. Radio DJs tend to draw from a playlist pre-determined by the national music industry, while DJs trying to fill a dance floor may have a wider range of selections, or a thicker library within certain locally popular genres. Zumba instructors do have access to music specifically produced by Zumba Fitness, but they also add in their own favorites, and certain songs that connect to their participants. Most of all, instructors must take into account which styles will best accommodate the energy-level needed for a good workout. International DJ, model and media personality Sky Nellor commented to *Z-life* magazine about how the role of an instructor compares to a disc jockey:

It's no different from being in a club. You want to take the crowd—the class participants—on a ride. You create a playlist by going, OK, for the fast-paced set, we're going to get everybody's heart pumping, then we're going to cool down to something more calming and soothing. That's basically how I look at it: We're going on a musical journey, and it's going to be a fun ride, so let's go!⁸⁵

Not only do Zumba instructors handle the music which drives Zumba classes, but they guide participants in interpreting the music by displaying enthusiastic attitudes and expressive choreography that participants can latch on to. Therefore, instructors hold the dual-purpose of playing popular music, while also influencing what becomes popular. This also fits the description of the Jamaican club DJ, described in the *Caribbean Quarterly* as “a key ontological

⁸⁵ Arielle Castillo, “Life of the Party: Internationally-renowned DJ Sky Nellor Talks Players, Play Lists and Playing to the Crowd,” *Zlife: Powered by Zumba* (Fall, 2012).

figure and agency in the operation of the sound system as art..[spawning] the musical style in which most of the younger generations of Jamaicans have located their popular aesthetic sense, time and space.”⁸⁶ The DJ possesses a role of influence as he monitors current tastes while spicing them up slightly in order to prep the culture’s palate for innovative musical flavorings about to be served up on the next platter fresh out of the music industry’s kitchen.

DJs keep track of the cultural pulse while they pay attention to the groove of each track they play. Their ears are tuned to the track now playing and the next one coming up, in order to create a smooth rhythmic transition between the two. DJ Krinjah (Theo Bakker) and sociologist Hans Bakker describe club DJs in their article for the *Society for the Study of Symbolic Interaction*: “They must be able to listen to music of one tempo in one ear and then adjust another song until it is the right tempo in the other ear. This process is called ‘beat- matching’ by DJs.”⁸⁷ I propose that Zumba instructors perform a cultural “beat-matching” process in several ways as they mediate a philosophy of health for local participants. Zumba instructors select music and choreographies for their classes, while constantly drawing from various sources to inspire their classes. Participants look to their instructor to help them reach their fitness goals.

Zumba instructors are mindful of their roles as tour guides leading their passengers on a journey through a land of “*salud, energia, y bienestar*” (health, energy, and well-being) as some signs read outside of local Zumba studios. One Valley instructor told me that she can see it on their faces when participants feel a sense of accomplishment from a good workout. She described this reaction to me in a recent interview: “You are listening to the music you like, the

⁸⁶ Clinton Hutton, “Forging Identity And Community Through Aestheticism and Entertainment: The SoundSystem and The Rise Of The DJ,” *Caribbean Quarterly* 53, No. 4, Pioneering Icons of Jamaican Popular Music (Dec. 2007), stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/40654996>.

⁸⁷ J.I. (Hans) Bakker and T.R.A (Theo) Bakker, “The Club DJ: A Semiotic and Interactionist Analysis,” *Symbolic Interaction* 29, No. 1 (Winter 2006), stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/10.1525/si.2006.29.1.71>.

music that is just coming in to popularity. They love it when they start to sweat during the first song. You don't have to go running to sweat. After an hour you leave completely sweaty and drenched....⁸⁸” Zumba instructors must be skilled cultural mediators as they select music that connects with their class, and lead participants in movement that is both physically intense and yet simple enough to be learned quickly. The effectiveness of the instructor in these two areas culminates in a class where all participants feel excited about the healthy changes they are making in their lives.

Driving home from a Zumba studio in a rural part of the Valley I pondered how artfully the instructor had woven together her playlist, choice of dance moves, and pace of the class. Leading a group of middle-aged women who sweated it out in the stucco-clad Zumba hall while their children played outside, this young instructor clearly knew her participants. She knew their abilities and limits, yet challenged them to reach for more, and she was in touch with their favorite music genres. In between songs you could hear your heart pounding to the beat of the last disco song or oldies ranchera. She included tribal and some newer Zumba songs, but kept some upbeat standards from decades ago. Never mind that we were surrounded by horse stables and Texas ranch land, for that hour we felt as if we had been transported to *México lindo*.

Mexican Identity in Valley Zumba Classes

For Zumba instructors and participants who have moved here from Mexico, music and dance styles in local Zumba classes validate their identity by incorporating Mexicanness into an iconic pan-Latino identity, portrayed as sexy and stylish. Coming to a country where they

⁸⁸ Sharon Rangel, personal communication.

often feel a push to assimilate into mainstream, English-speaking culture, recent immigrants experience a release in the space Zumba provides to re-live cultural memories and associate with a Latino identity in the diaspora. This experience is heightened in classes where the instructor and a majority of participants share collective memories of dancing to the same song when it was a hit in Mexico. While each individual may have initially interacted with the music in separate locations, the fact that it calls to mind happy times in the same homeland creates a sense of connection between participants who can relate to each other through these experiences. The music, therefore is the primary mediator which serves as a vehicle to take people back in time, to their home across the river. It is the music that makes Zumba feel like a home away from home for those remembering their Mexican roots. The music serves as a link between individual participants, sharing the same feelings of cultural pride and displacement. Therefore, Zumba classes facilitate the process of semiotic mediation⁸⁹ where music serves as a sign that brings people together through the meanings they attach to certain songs. Asif Agha, in explaining this process, points out that perceivable signs such as “utterances, gestures, textual artifacts” help participants to communicate the impact an activity has on their personhood. When participants share with each other how the music moves them, they contribute to the re-appropriation of a song as a shared bond, a way to relate to one another, a common possession, even a type of social capital. A beloved song in Zumba class bridges the space between two people dancing side by side as they discover, “That’s my favorite, too!”

As I frequented Zumba classes at one location near the border, I observed the instructor taking requests towards the end of her morning classes. Week after week, participants requested

⁸⁹ “Semiotic mediation is the generic process whereby signs connect persons to each other through various forms of cognition, communication and interaction. It is a process that bridges or links moments of thought/action/conduct involving persons to each other through the use of perceivable signs, making such moments jointly relevant to persons and their subsequent activities.” Asif Agha, “Large and Small Scales of Personhood”, *Language & Communication* 31 (2011): 171–180.

the same songs from popular Mexican bands that they knew everyone liked there. And sure enough, the whole class responded to these songs, not only with the physical movements they had learned, but also with every bit of emotion and enthusiasm they had left. The instructor sang along to these favorites, participants mimicked the lyrics with their motions, and finally the whole class erupted in applause at the last notes of the requested song. “That was a good one,” they would shout, gasping for breath, “Request another!” As I watched and participated, I realized that my Zumba classmates were re-living the “good times” they associated with these songs. For me, and a handful of participants who were not born into Mexican culture, we were creating memories of these songs based on our experience of them from class to class. Yet for many participants, the class added another layer of new associations to their bank of memories linked to these regional songs. Participants would often request the same song again the next day because they remembered how good they felt dancing it in Zumba class the day before. By allowing participants to make requests, the instructor included her class in the active role of mediating culture. This is similar to the way Mexican deejays in the northeast engage their audience through the act of reading dedications that are taped and sent to friends and family back in Mexico.

Referring to Mexican deejays, Ragland writes of their role in shaping cultural spaces away from the homeland. In her description, I read details that also apply to Zumba instructors who dance through time and space on little stages while bridging experiences between different worlds. Even though Zumba classes are not purely social as youth dances in New York might be, they do share a place in society that allows participants to connect to cultural expressions from the U.S. and Mexico through the mediation of a cultural DJ.

In these weekend dances, the deejay, or sonidero as he is known, together with those in attendance, creates a powerful transnational musical and social experience. By manipulating music and simultaneously reconfiguring time and place, they turn feelings of displacement and marginalization into a collective sense of identity and connectedness, generating what Appadurai (1996) has called a "diasporic public sphere." In the process they dramatize and mediate their own experiences of a modern life that oscillates between and encompasses both Mexico and the US. They effectively portray and create a modernity animated by both real and imagined interpretations of history and culture, and by their shared experiences of travel, dislocation and a reinvention of their lives as both Mexicans and Americans.⁹⁰

Besides connecting recent immigrants to their homeland, Zumba has also become a way for others to participate in a constructed Mexican identity. For me, dancing to genres such as reggaeton and merengue that I remember hearing on the streets of Reynosa makes me feel like I am taking part in the local/transnational border culture that originally attracted me to move to this region. For others, such as instructor Candace Foxx, involvement in Zumba is a way to connect to a lost family heritage. Raised in the Valley by her mother, who is half Native American and half African American, Candace never had the opportunity to tap into her father's Mexican culture until she started going to Zumba. By submerging herself into Latin party music she feels a connection to the Mexican culture, and has started teaching many of her classes in Spanish. "I got to know my Mexican side through Zumba," she told me. This was an unexpected bonus along with the health benefits of participating in Zumba for Candace, who

⁹⁰ Cathy Ragland, "Mexican Deejays and the Transnational Space of Youth Dances in New York and New Jersey," *Ethnomusicology* 47, No. 3 (Fall 2003), stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/3113938>.

originally started going to classes because they were the “cheapest way to learn how to dance.”

Married to a native Colombian, her Zumba-acquired dance moves also come in handy at family get gatherings where she can now join her husband in all styles of Latin dances.

CONCLUSION

ZUMBA IN A GLOBAL SOCIETY

As our world shrinks due to technological advances and global migration, the role of the ethnomusicologist becomes vital to tap into changing social patterns revolving around musical practices. Wherever communities of displaced people are found, communication back and forth between the homeland and the diaspora occur, and along with it we see immigrants remembering and reappropriating cultural traditions. In the case of Zumba, Mexican culture merges its love for dance with pan-Latino and other world styles to express self-confidence through performing inherited and constructed identities. We live in a society where everyone chooses who they want to be—what identity they want to associate with—and in Zumba we find a place where a basic human need to be healthy and fit is shared through various forms of corporeal expression. It is group participation in guided choreography that allows for individual modification based on personal creativity and physical ability.

Social Connections to Zumba

Looking at the way Zumba is received in the Valley, I take into account not only the history of Zumba itself, the path it has travelled to arrive here, and the results it offers, but more fully—the individual and social factors contributing to the way people in the Valley connect with Zumba. Local interpretations are formed through the process of reception which Harris Berger says, includes, “all of the ways in which a person engages a work, from the immediate activities of sense making by which words and gestures have their mundane meanings for us... as well as all forms of affective, sensual, or bodily responses to works of expressive culture.”⁹¹ It is through this process of making sense of Zumba that Valley residents assign it meaning as a cultural expression, exercise, therapy, and an intercultural socializer.

The question I have been asking is: “how is the reception of Zumba here in the border region unique?” Aside from the health benefits that Zumba participants experience, a large part of Zumba’s success in the Valley can be attributed to a direct link between the music used in Zumba class and the popular culture already present in this region. As one sought-after Zumba instructor in Harlingen told me, “A lot of people here already associate this kind of music with happy memories.” He explained how the psychological connections between *tejano* music and family barbeques or between cumbias and social gatherings can uplift people, exclaiming, “its happy music!”⁹² This statement shaped the way I came to view Zumba as a performance of shared cultural memory, bringing people together around a local, expressive culture.

Due to the influences of two nations, overlapping in a geographical location, and the cultural characteristics which are a product of the tension between preserving ethnic heritage and

⁹¹ Harris M. Berger, *Stance: Ideas About Emotion, Style, and Meaning for the Study of Expressive Culture* (Wesleyan University Press, 2009).

⁹² Homer Longoria, personal communication, December 2010.

assimilating to mainstream mentalities, a hybrid society occurs within the space between the border check-point in Falfurrias, and the international bridges in Brownsville, Pharr, McAllen, and Mission. As ethnomusicologist Catherine Ragland told me, it is like living in a “different Mexico.” In this region, social gatherings are marked by food, drink, music and dancing. Whether a weekend *barbacoa*⁹³, a *quinceañera*⁹⁴, *pachanga*⁹⁵, wedding, or a dance at the local *pulga*⁹⁶, the community looks forward to being fed and entertained all night long. These cultural events result in the passing-on of family traditions through interactions around the grill (for men and boys), in the kitchen (for women and girls), and on the dance floor (where gender roles are further reinforced and acted out). Generation to generation, local identity is performed and shared as children watch their *tios* and *tias* dancing to the accordion, *bajo sexto*, electric bass, and drums.

Through conducting this study on Zumba as a cultural mediator, I have intended to examine the way my local community engages with music and is affected by these experiences. Participants come to Zumba classes because they want to see changes in their bodies, but in the process of getting fit they enjoy themselves because they become a participatory audience as they join the Zumba instructor in performing both familiar and exotic images of health through dancing to vivacious, upbeat music. Not only is their physical health impacted, but participants are stimulated mentally to follow rhythmic patterns and to assimilate movements that are representative of many different world music genres. In a single class, participants are often exposed to multiple languages, styles, and rhythmic motifs. As they master movements correlating to distant peoples and places, participants experience the sensation of having partaken

⁹³ A special cook-out where the meat is slow-cooked in a hole in the ground.

⁹⁴ A ritualistic celebration often related to Catholic ceremonies which marks a girl's fifteenth birthday, or coming-of-age.

⁹⁵ A party or political event, usually part of a campaign, where music and food are central elements.

⁹⁶ A flea market.

in other cultural practices. This adds to an individual's self-confidence and pride in their ability to shift back and forth between different modes of expression and to relate to diverse cultures. Without leaving the gym class, participants travel the world by interacting with global beats and sampling choreographies as they follow an instructor who acts as a tour-guide, leading each Zumba class through a maze of intriguing, world artifacts.

Mediating Multiple Cultures

In conclusion, we see cultural mediation occurring in the Zumba context through the music, the instructors, and the participants. In Zumba, music is central in communicating a health philosophy to all cultures that claims "fitness can be fun," and , "being healthy is sexy." It also introduces global images of various cultural identities. Instructors mediate both health culture and world cultures. They model health to participants by leading a fit lifestyle and challenging others to enjoy the process of burning calories and toning muscle. Participants then in turn communicate to their friends and others that these changes are socially acceptable, and worth the effort. By inviting others to Zumba events, and reaffirming friendships made through Zumba, participants further popularize these activities, forming a community of practice around health.

World cultures are also mediated through Zumba as instructors and participants embody expressions of other identities through dance styles. As I have witnessed the widespread popularity of Zumba in the Valley, I have come to see it as an expression of local culture blending with the rest of the world. Valley residents faithfully attend Zumba classes together because they feel passionate about the music and dances encountered there, some well-loved and

familiar—others exciting and new. By connecting to the heart through music and dance that relates to local and global identities, Zumba has met success in the Valley—not as an imposition of outside philosophies or cultures, but as a way of expressing who we are and who we hope to become.

One instructor told me, “I think Beto Perez wanted to create a family. He brought together all the dances of the world. It’s a mix. He made a family.”⁹⁷ Whether you call it a family, a community or a culture, Zumba has developed into a phenomenon that is picking up speed in the Rio Grande Valley. Much more than a form of exercise, it is a cultural event that people on both sides of the border participate in to de-stress and re-invigorate their lives. In a time when our international bridges and ports are riddled with conflict, the charismatic atmosphere of Zumba classes relieves tension and reminds us that the joy of music and dance knows no boundaries.

⁹⁷ Sharon Rangel, personal communication, 2012.

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APPENDIX A

APPENDIX A

INTERVIEWS

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Ana Rosa Prado, Zumba instructor, McAllen, TX. February 2012.

Bryana Fayett, Zumba participant, Mission, TX. September 19, 2012

Candace Foxx, Zumba instructor, Pharr, TX. July 2012.

Clara Mata, Zumba Education Specialist, Reynosa, MX. July, 2012.

Edith Gonzalez, Zumba instructor, Pharr, TX. July, 2012.

Gabriela Gutierrez, Zumba instructor, McAllen, TX. September 15, 2012

Guillermo Mendez, Zumba Jammer, McAllen, TX. July, 2012.

Elda Espinoza, Zumba instructor, Harlingen, TX. December, 2010.

Hilda Garza, Zumba instructor, Harlingen, TX. September 15, 2012

Homer Longoria, Zumba instructor, Harlingen, TX. December 2010

Jeffrey Perlman, CMO at Zumba Fitness LLC. Facebook communication, 2010

Jesse Parrish, Zumba participant, Harlingen, TX. September, 2012

Liza Chavez, Zumba instructor—first certified instructor to teach Zumba in the Rio Grande Valley. October, 2012.

Maria Rosas, Zumba instructor, Brownsville, TX. September, 2012.

Mayra Martinez, Zumba instructor, Weslaco, TX. August, 2012.

Roxanne Rodriguez, Zumba instructor, McAllen, TX. July, 2012.

Sharon Rangel, Zumba instructor, Harlingen, TX.

Taty Asia, Zumba instructor, McAllen, TX. July, 2012.

BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH

Cora Elizabeth Durain earned her bachelor's in music education from Howard Payne University in 2009 with an emphasis in piano and a minor in Spanish. In 2012 she completed her master's of music in ethnomusicology at the University of Texas-Pan American. She is currently in her fourth year of teaching elementary music in Harlingen, TX. Other interests of hers in the field of ethnomusicology include underground hip hop, Texas-Mexican conjunto and orquesta, hybridity, globalization, performance theory, identity issues, global methods of music pedagogy, and dance. Cora and her fiancé enjoy hiking and biking in local state parks and wildlife refuges in the Valley, and they look forward to making their home together in Pharr. Mailing address: 129 E Jones Ave, Pharr, TX 78577.