

STEPS OF THE NATION: LATVIAN DANCE AND IDENTITY IN THE DIASPORA

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Abstract

This research investigates the impact of folk culture and folk dance groups on civic and cultural identity building in the Latvian diaspora. It presents a case study of an American-Latvian folk dance group, using a mixed-methods approach to analyse the historical background, attitudes and preferences of dancers. The author argues that participation in folk culture provides access to the Latvian nation and an element of Latvian identity, regardless of ethno-linguistic background or home country. The ritual of rehearsal, performance and party provide individuals the opportunity to engage together in community building that not only strengthens the relationships of individuals, but also builds the social capital of the community and the ability to develop a cultural appreciation that contributes to the Latvian nation.

Keywords: *folk dance, diaspora, identity, civil society.*

Latvia is well known as “the land that sings” – folk melodies and patriotic songs are key builders of national pride and identity in the Latvian and Baltic context. Yet Latvia is not only a nation of singers, but also a multi-cultural country of dancers. Dance, like song, has played and continues to play a critical role in the development of the nation. In particular, the evolution of folk dance and its performance rituals on local, national and international stages has provided an access point to Latvia beyond the nation’s physical and ethnic borders.

Though small in area, Latvia crosses many of these physical and ethnic boundaries. The population is highly diverse, including large minority populations stemming from the legacy of Soviet-era migration policies. Moreover, members of the ethnic Latvian nation have been flung across the globe as a result of war and

economic upheaval. As such, these displaced population groups have, to some extent, developed separately from the Latvian nation, whether as a minority or as a diaspora. But is there a point of overlap? When do these tangentially Latvian populations become subsumed into the larger Latvian nation? I argue that practices and displays of folk culture are a particularly relevant point of overlap for Latvia's minority and diaspora communities, particularly through the institution that is the Song and Dance Celebration, and iterations thereof. Participation in living folk culture provides access to the Latvian nation and an element of Latvian identity, regardless of ethno-linguistic background. I argue this is the case for both minorities within the country (Ekmanis, forthcoming) and the extended diaspora. National cultural expression provides access to a Latvian identity attained through the process of preparation and participation. This article explores this concept using a case study of an amateur folk dance group stemming from World War II-era Latvian émigrés – Seattle's *Trejdeksnītis*.¹

The Song and Dance Celebration² is no small part of an effort to maintain and develop this link to the Latvian Nation. The Celebration is arguably the most externalized display of Latvian national identity, both in the country and abroad. Developed as an adaptation of German festivals and as a culmination of choir activities throughout the 19th century, it has evolved into regional, national, youth and diaspora iterations over the past 150 years, expanding in both size and content. In its modern nationwide form, the Song and Dance Celebration brings together participants and audience members in the hundreds of thousands from Latvia and across the world every five years; other smaller or youth-centered festivals are held in the interim. The folk dance exhibition was formally incorporated into the Celebration only in 1948, but is now a standard element of the mass display of folk culture. For many artistic groups, access to the Song and Dance Celebration is a working goal. However, the process of preparation has also much to tell us about the development of the Latvian Nation, particularly its maintenance in the diaspora. Referring to the multitudes of dancers performing in the folk dance exhibition (*tautas deju skate*), Elga Drulle, author of *Latvija Dejo* ("Latvia Dances"), says,

"With increasing force, dance as a vital bridge has united generations from antiquity until today and grown into a beautifully ornamented quilt covering the vast arena of the Daugava Stadium, building national awareness and strengthening the dignity of belonging to this nation" [Drulle 2013: 11].

¹ An analysis of civic-cultural identity from the minority population perspective is forthcoming.

² The major concert of the Celebration prioritizes groups/collectives practicing national stage dance. I use the term "folk dance" generally, reflecting its use in the diaspora; here, this term does not solely reference the strict ethnographic understanding of folk dance.

For modern folk dance groups in the diaspora, working to earn a spot in the Daugava Stadium is a point of deep national pride, representing a commitment to Latvian heritage identity. This article provides a brief historical background of folk dance trends in Latvia and World War II diaspora communities, and it focuses on an in-depth case study of Seattle's *Trejdeksnītis* surrounding and following their participation in the 2013 Nationwide Dance Celebration.

Historical background

Dance of a nation

Ancient beliefs, foreign invasions, and political awakenings impacted the development of Latvian folk dance in its national form. In the literature on the progress of the Latvian nation, folk dance takes a back seat to the power of song with regard to national awakening and cultural renaissance. However, folk dances were already performed on stage as early as 1888. The father of Latvian folk poetry (*dainas*), Krišjānis Barons, included some choreographic notes in the fifth volume of his publication *Latvju dainas* ("Latvian Dainas") (of six volumes published from 1894 to 1915). Andrejs Jurjāns, best known for his musical contributions to Latvian culture, also collected work-life/folk choreographies starting in the second half of the 19th century. From his collection efforts, he generated two volumes of the series *Latvju tautas mūzikas materiāli* ("Latvian Folk Music Materials"), which contained not only folk tunes, but also included descriptions of dances and games (*rotāļas*) for many melodies. Importantly, these books also reflected the folk dances that remained alive among the Latvian people in the second half of the 19th century, as well as the ways in which performed dances preserved ancient elements and incorporated international influences [Saulīte 2005]. The late 19th century and the early years of the 1900s gave birth to a folk dance movement that would carry on in the century to come.

Following European trends, folk dance culture flourished during the birth of the Latvian state, particularly in the later years of this independence period (until the start of World War II). Johanna Rinka, a physical education teacher turned choreographer, is credited as having one of the largest impacts on the folk dance renaissance in Latvia, along with colleagues Jānis Ošs, a journalist, and Jēkabs Stumbrs, a publisher and Latvia's first professional choreographer. Their work flourished in the 1920s, about a decade into the existence of the first Latvian Republic, as they began gathering folk choreographies and creating their own. In these early years, Johanna Rinka, Jānis Ošs, and colleagues Emīls Melngailis and Elza Siliņa conducted field work in the Latvian countryside, collecting choreographies. These were published in four booklets in the series *Latvju tautas dejas* ("Latvian folk dances") in the 1930s, which included a total of 33 dances,

largely from Courland (Kurzeme) and Vidzeme. Jēkabs Stumbrs' *Dejosim latviski* ("Let's dance Latvian") followed in 1938 and 1940, in which an additional 19 dances were recorded [Šmita-Kalēja 1985]. As the first professional Latvian folk dance choreographer, Stumbrs also recorded his own dances, which were performed in Riga in 1935. Large-scale folk dance performance also took root in this period, often linked with mass gymnastic demonstrations [Saulīte, 2005].

World War II and the subsequent Soviet occupation of the Baltic States greatly changed the trajectory of folk dance development in Latvia. War and occupation pushed many of the first "trailblazers" into exile; however, folk dancing was not erased from the Soviet Latvian landscape. While the debate on what qualified as true "folk dance" was active in the Baltics prior to World War II,¹ during the early Soviet years, dance collectives were founded with the intent of bringing folk dances to the level of performance art (i.e. national stage dance), incorporating a high level of body discipline and an infusion of classical ballet [Kapper 2016; Sūna 1984]. Kapper argues an "especially high technical level of Latvian stage folk dance provided the most pronounced expression of Soviet colonial mimicry" [2016: 99]. However, though clothed in the Soviet mantra of "national in form, socialist in content," folk dance also remained a relevant element of Latvian national expression during the Soviet period. In the Estonian case, Kapper concedes that "hybridity of national stage dance expressed the contradictory situation of folk dance and general cultural reality in Soviet Estonia – the conformity with colonial power, on the one hand, and still a certain portion of national self-pride, on the other" [2016: 100].

Dance was first incorporated as an official part of the Latvian (Soviet Socialist Republic) Nationwide Song Celebration in 1948. This was not only the first festival officially including dance as part of the repertoire, but also the first Latvian song festival in the post-WWII period, in which 920 dancers participated [Saulite 2005; Sūna 1984]. Following Tsarist strategy, in the Soviet period organizers linked mass celebrations to significant dates in the history of the USSR. Soviet symbols were incorporated into the performance and themes often revolved around the worker, Young Pioneer, and other Soviet motifs. However, Saulīte contends, "festival organisers always knew how to include dances "for the heart" in the programme, through which the dancers and the audience could feel the breath of genuine,

¹ While folklorists argued that "folk dance" could only consist of those choreographies defined in folklore records, choreographers contended that, by bringing folk dances to the stage, they were subject to the rules of theater arts expression [Sūna 1984: 640]. Choreographers such as H. Sūna, I. Saulīte and E. Drulle were authors of national stage dances, as well as principal conductors of Dance Celebrations held during the Soviet period.

living folk art”¹ [2005: 352]. Despite the socialist flavor of the Celebration, it still retained national importance to many Latvians.

Dancing Diaspora

World War II and the Soviet occupation of the Baltic States created 200,000 Latvian refugees, many living, first, in refugee camps in Germany, then spreading to Latvian communities across the world [Plakans 2011]. Though far from home, the tradition of Song Festivals and the interwar interest in folk dances continued to flourish among diaspora populations. Latvian refugees in Germany incorporated folk dancing into school events; they also established dance groups from the early years of exile [interviews 2015; Saulīte 2005]. Displaced persons (DP) camps were an incubator for exile Latvians (*trimdas latvieši*) to maintain their cultural identity. Prevented from organizing politically, DPs – many of whom were artists or members of the intelligentsia – turned their attention to cultural organizations, such as choirs and dance groups [Carpenter 1996]. Immediate post-WWII life in refugee camps was “a time of intense cultural activism, a crucial training ground ... for a subsequently viable exile society” [1996: 93]. Latvians recreated the traditions of the homeland in their new environs with a “diaspora consciousness”, with the belief that they were preserving authentic Latvian traditions that would be lost in the Soviet occupation [Fishman 1983].

A living folk dance tradition persevered in the diaspora as Latvians settled in communities abroad. One of the first groups, *Diždancis* (dir. Freds Aigars), was founded in Toronto, Canada, in 1948. By 1959, 38 groups were active in the diaspora. In 1971, 66 groups existed in post-WWII exile communities, as compared with 322 groups in Latvia [Šmita-Kalēja 1985]. The Song and Dance Celebration tradition took root in Latvian communities abroad, both as an outlet for folk culture, and as a mechanism for preserving Latvian national identity. In addition to preserving the folk spirit of dance in the Song Celebration tradition, new dances, utilizing historical elements, were continually created. *88 Latviešu tautas dejas un apdares* (“88 Latvian folk dances and variations”), published in 1973, became the “bible” of exile Latvian dancers, containing the 52 original folk dances collected in the 1930s and 1940s, as well as variations and diaspora choreographies already considered to be close to folk dances themselves [Šmita-Kalēja 1985].

Diaspora dancers felt the first waves of renewed Latvian independence euphoria in the 1990 Song and Dance Celebration in Riga. This was the first Celebration

¹ This article does not attempt to delve deeply into the discussion of what is “true” folk art or folk dance, though this debate surrounding folklorists, choreographers and Soviet values is referenced. For a postcolonial perspective of the Soviet influence on Baltic folk dance, see Kapper, 2016.

in which exile Latvians returned to the country to dance. Among the 421 dance groups (1000 participants), 13 were from diaspora communities in England, Canada, Sweden, and the US, including Seattle's *Trejdeksnītis*. "Rejoining" the nation through dance solidified the connection between folk culture and national identity for diaspora Latvians. Observing the Daugava Stadium during the dance finale, Toronto *Diždancis* director Zigurds Miezītis said: "Look, look at these thousands upon thousands in our dance family, we are all dancing in one smooth step. Our work [abroad] has not been in vain" [Dariusa 2011].

Case Study: Seattle's *Trejdeksnītis*

How does the history of Latvian diaspora and identity map onto the folk dance groups still active today? This piece focuses on one diaspora group: Seattle's *Trejdeksnītis*. During the period of study, *Trejdeksnītis* was considered in the upper echelon of diaspora amateur groups in North America, with a comparatively intense practice schedule and consistent attendance.¹ Data for this case study have been collected using multiple methods. The researcher as member has experienced several years of deeply imbedded participation observation. This has included regular rehearsal attendance during the *Trejdeksnītis* season (October through June, on average), participation in around 30 performances in a variety of community-center and public settings over the past several years, and organization of and attendance at many group festivities and informal group gatherings/parties. While not all participation was conducted with a social research process in mind,² this deep history has provided the researcher with a strong background in group dynamics and "the necessary 'invisible' dimension of body knowledge, inevitably taken into consideration in dance research" [Kapper 2016]. This has provided an extraordinary insight into the function, social interaction, and meaning that members derive from being part of the *Trejdeksnītis* group. This is data that could not be accessed by an outsider; I argue it is an appropriate case study through which to view the question of Latvian identity and culture in the diaspora.

In addition to this long-term participant observation, I conducted multiple in-depth, open-ended interviews with 13 participants. These were partially structured interviews, primarily conducted in small groups or individually, with both long-time members and relatively new participants. Informants have diverse backgrounds in their relation to the group; several have Latvian heritage on both sides of their family, others on one side, some not at all. They have various levels

¹ This piece reflects in-depth knowledge of *Trejdeksnītis* and comparative knowledge of Latvian dance groups in North America, but does not analyse diaspora activities on other continents.

² Formalized in the 2014–2015 season.

of involvement in the local Latvian community (outside of the group), as well as varying levels of Latvian linguistic knowledge, age, marital status and occupation. Informants reflect the diversity of the group in the state it was during 2015.

A quantitative portion of the data comes from a survey of participation, values and attitudes distributed to active¹ and former group members. Survey questions were partially based on the example of the 2013 post-Song and Dance Celebration survey conducted by the Latvian Academy of Culture [Laķe & Grīnberga 2014]. Overall, a survey distributed to 64 former and current members achieved a 58% response rate (37).² For active dancers, 17 of 19 returned the survey for an 89% response rate.³ Given extensive participant observation and in-depth interviews, I argue the survey responses correspond with alternative methodologies and are appropriate reflections of the attitudes and practices of the group in general.

Seattle's *Trejdeksnītis*

Seattle's *Trejdeksnītis* finds its roots in the DP camps of post-WWII West Germany and the Latvian cultural preservation that began in the exile context. The group has been active for more than 50 years under the leadership of several artistic directors and with the participation of about 10 to 30 dancers in each performance season. It was formally founded in 1962 at the University of Washington, though Latvian folk dance had a significant presence in the Seattle community for many years prior, including multiple small groups of young people led by several Latvian women. Irene Beleiciks, a WWII émigré, headed *Trejdeksnītis* in its first formal iteration. A refugee in Germany, Beleiciks studied under Johanna Rinka and was part of the early diaspora cultural consciousness formation. As her daughter remembers, Beleiciks felt deeply connected to her identity as a Latvian from Daugavpils and devoted much of her free time to the Seattle Latvian community [Olsen 2015]. Beleiciks herself was of mixed Latvian and Russian parentage, and was also active in the Seattle Russian community's folk dance group and the Russian Orthodox Church. This was somewhat problematic for her role in the Latvian exile community, a community of largely war refugees who tended to equate the "taboo territory of "Soviet" Latvia" with the ethnic Russian invasion [Carpenter 1996: 94]. Accordingly, Beleiciks sought to separate Russian elements from the Latvian folk dances she taught in *Trejdeksnītis* to maintain a distinct Latvian identity. As her daughter now reflects, "It is interesting to me to see how much [Latvian dance in

¹ Active members refers to individuals who regularly participated in *Trejdeksnītis* during the 2013–2015 seasons.

² 9.4% margin of error and a confidence rate of 91%.

³ 6.46% margin of error and a confidence rate of 86%.

the diaspora] has evolved”— elements from Russian dance (for example, lifts) are now not only accepted as part of the repertoire, but expected [Olsen 2015].

As in many areas, rivalries and rifts between individuals and community group dynamics developed in exile Latvian communities. This is the case in *Trejdeksnītis* as well, which went through several iterations with various group leaders throughout the 1970s and 1980s. Until the 1990s, it was very difficult for American-Latvians with mixed parentage or low Latvian language skills to become involved in Seattle Latvian community events and groups. Many who now dance in *Trejdeksnītis* felt a sense of exile from the community during their youth because of this “language barrier.” However, as the barrier began to break down in the 1990s, dancers with low Latvian language skills (both of Latvian heritage and not) began to participate in the group.

By 1990, the choreographer Vilnis Birnbaums, a son of World War II émigrés, had assumed leadership of the group. His tenure fell in line with the crumbling of the Soviet Union, and in 1990 *Trejdeksnītis* became one of the first Latvian diaspora groups to be included in the Nationwide Song and Dance Celebration in Latvia. This “emotionally supercharged” moment was a first opportunity for children of exile Latvians to reconnect with the country whose cultural expressions they had upheld in absentia [Carpenter 1996]. Elga Drulle writes, “Latvian dance groups from the USA, Canada, Australia and Germany brought Latvian dances with them, which had been created during a long and distant exile from their homeland and, nonetheless, vividly expressed Latvian patriotism and a sense of belonging to Latvia” [Drulle 2013: 38–9]. Carpenter, in her analysis of diaspora choir members participating in 1990 writes, “for the exiles, meaning derived from the restoration of the familiar to native soil... Experienced in the homeland, the song festival for exiles also effected a shift in the experience of ‘being Latvian’”, i.e. shifting the experience of Latvian as “other” to Latvian as dominant [Carpenter 1996: 108].

In 1993, *Trejdeksnītis* participated again in the Nationwide Song and Dance Celebration, in which Birnbaums actively took part in the artistic leadership of the festival’s XI Dance Celebration exhibition itself. *Trejdeksnītis* returned to the XII Dance Celebration in 1998, this time under the leadership of Inese Raistere, a daughter of WWII émigrés. These early experiences traveling to Latvia as part of a group in the initial stages of transition from Soviet occupation were, among individuals interviewed, some of their most compelling experiences, as dancers, individuals and Latvians. Reflecting on her first Latvian song festival trip in 1990, Raistere said, “It was very special. I’ll never forget standing on that far track in *Daugavas Stadions* (Daugava Stadium) waiting to come on when they announced that we were the dancers from outside of Latvia. It was an incredible feeling”



Figure 1. *Trejdeksnītis* group photo for the XX Nationwide Song and X Dance Celebration program. Personal archives of Inese Raistere.

[2015]. One dancer of mixed Latvian and American parentage reflected on the emotional and spiritual connection to Latvia the 1993 experience provided her, “It didn’t matter that I didn’t speak the language, it didn’t matter that my sister [a participant in the choir] couldn’t understand it all. There was something that went beyond it” [middle-age female, 2015]. As in Carpenter’s analysis of exile singers, participation in the festival “mediates the physical and imagined Latvia” in the act of dance and song, to produce Latvia through movement or as a “song-scape” [Carpenter 1996: 95]. Its place, idea, and experience resonate in the physical movement of people, their closeness and cooperation on the stadium floor. Dance provides access to this “embodied Latvia” in particular to those who do not feel empowered to produce the Latvian language.

Kathrine Young, of mixed Latvian-American parentage, took over group leadership in 2008. During her tenure, the group has moved away from Latvian-language practices, favoring English instead. Guest instructors often revert to Latvian, but a majority of the group functions in English, both formally and conversationally. *Trejdeksnītis* returned to Latvia in 2013 for the most recent Nationwide Song and Dance Celebration; in preparation for this event, the group reached out to former leadership (Birnbauts and Raistere), who also reinstated some instruction in Latvian to prepare the group for Latvian-language rehearsals in Latvia.

The fall of the Soviet Union and the increased human and artistic exchange between Latvia’s Latvians and the diaspora Latvians has increased the presence of artistic stage folk dance in diaspora group repertoires. Though North American diaspora groups are decidedly less formalized than top-ranking Latvian collectives,

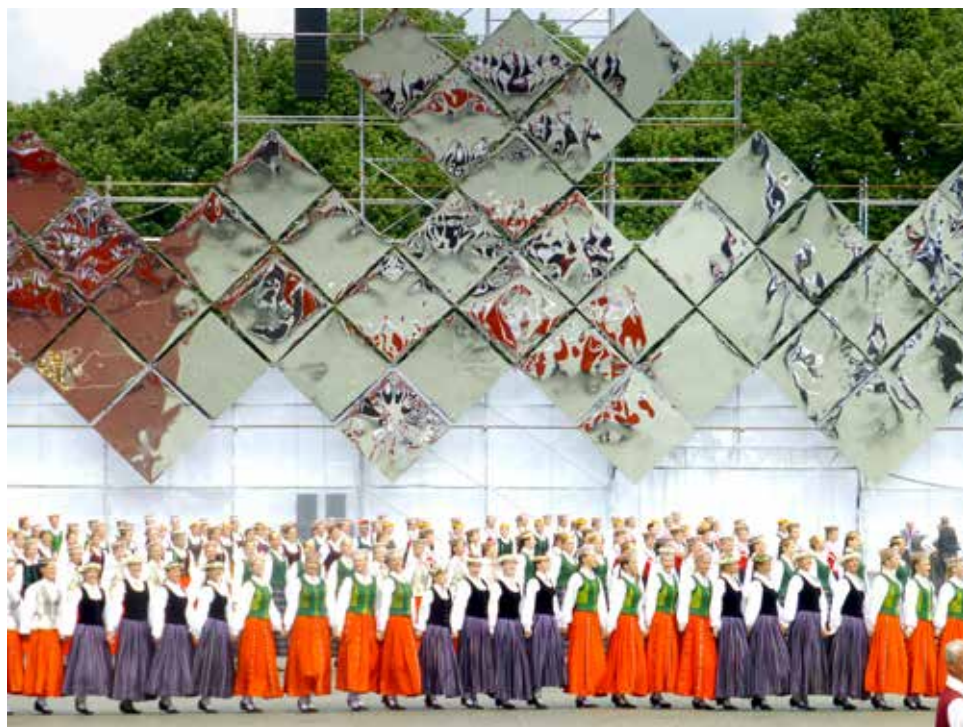


Figure 2. 2013 Dance Festival in Riga, Latvia. Photo: Indra Ekmanis.

there has been a push to work towards the current Latvian standard in national stage dance.¹ As an amateur diaspora group, *Trejdeksnītis* increased its rehearsal intensity and attention to detail to qualify for the 2013 Dance Celebration, developing a sense of both national and artistic pride within the group.²

For some current group members, many of whom are between 20 and 30 years old, the 2013 Celebration was their first experience dancing in Latvia. For some, it was their first trip to Latvia ever. As one college-aged male reflected on the experience, “I recall running multiple times with a member of our dance group, dodging people left and right with chills running down my spine because I had reached the mecca of dance in Latvia and all our hard work was coming to an amazing crescendo” (20-year-old male, first time in Latvia) [Survey 2015]. Another college-aged male said, “Going to the Latvian song and dance festival in 2013 was an incredible experience. Being one of the few foreign groups invited

¹ See the 2012 North American Song and Dance Celebration in Milwaukee, Wisconsin, program.

² *Trejdeksnītis* qualified for the highest placement (B2) in the 2013 Celebration of any North American diaspora dance group.

to dance was really fortunate, as well as being able to dance with 10,000 other dancers. I felt more connected with my Latvian culture than I ever had before” (22-year-old male) [Survey 2015].

Even over a 25-year time span, participation in the Nationwide Latvian Song and Dance Festival has maintained meaning for *Trejdeksnītis* dancers. Sharing in the “mecca of Latvian dance” provides not only a connection to Latvia by participating on native soil, but also a reevaluation of dancers’ sense of heritage within the greater Latvian nation. As part of a 15,000-person dance performance, members of this diaspora group become physically connected to other members of the Latvian nation, some for the first time. But what happens when the physical connection no longer exists? Opportunities to dance in the Latvian Celebration are rare – what motivates dancers to participate in the interim?

Motivation

Data collected through the distributed survey and interviews indicate that *Trejdeksnītis* is a critical space for participants to build an identity with a distinct cultural background; particularly as most are generations removed from the experience of Latvia (i.e. parents or grandparents were WWII refugees). However, it is also a critical space for socializing as part of the Latvian community; this builds social capital among members who, while similar in their cultural pursuits and interests, are demographically diverse.

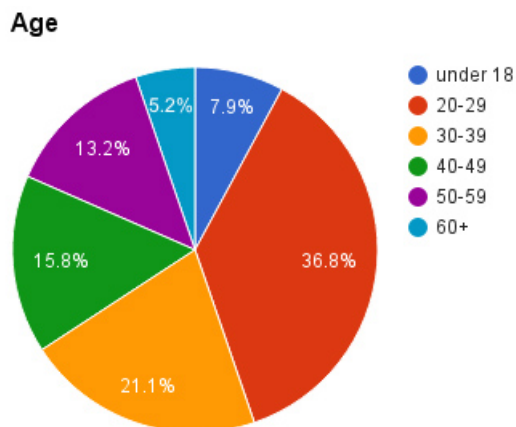


Figure 3. Reported age of *Trejdeksnītis* dancers in 2015 season. (Survey data)

Meet socially outside of practice

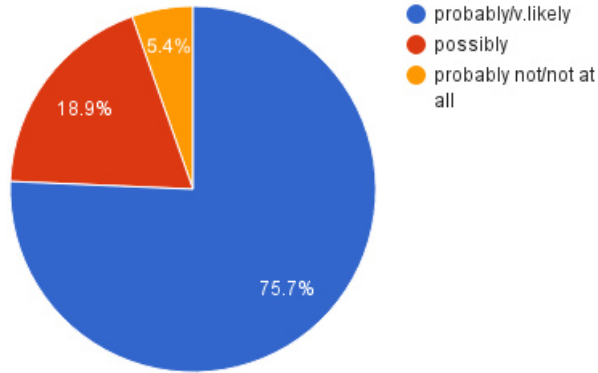


Figure 4. Interest of *Trejdeksnītis* dancers to meet socially outside of practice. (Survey data)

Go out recreationally after practices or performances

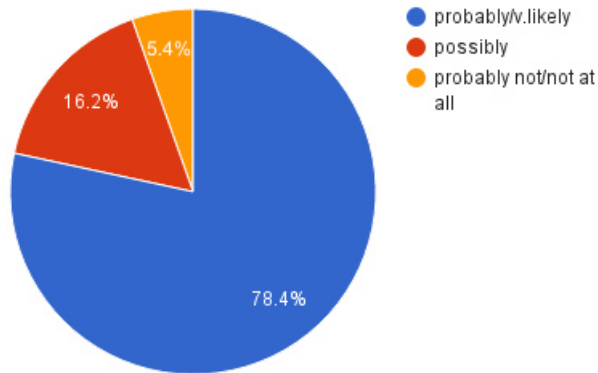


Figure 5. Interest of *Trejdeksnītis* dancers to go out recreationally after performances. (Survey data)

A third of dancers indicate that they are likely or very likely to engage socially with other dancers outside of practice (figures 1, 2 & 3). About another third of dancers say that they are open to doing so. The strongest relationship is in socialization directly after practices or performances, which indicates a sense of camaraderie (indeed, all participants indicated that commitment to the group was important). However, nearly as many individuals also indicate that they are very likely or likely to engage socially outside of group functions.

Use connections built through dance to contribute to professional goals

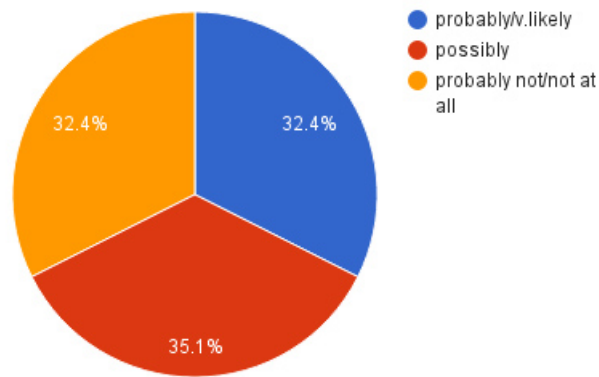


Figure 6. Interest of *Trejeksniitis* dancers to use a relationship built through dance to contribute to professional goals. (Survey data)

Engage in a romantic relationship with a dancer

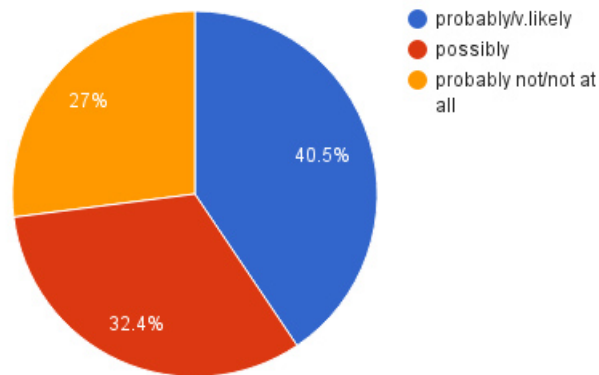


Figure 7. Interest of *Trejeksniitis* dancers to engage in a romantic relationship with a fellow dancer. (Survey data)

Connections formed through participation in the group are deeper than casual friendships. More than two thirds of all dancers indicated that they would possibly or likely engage in a romantic relationship with a dancer – more than half of current dancers said they were likely or very likely to do so (figure 7). As one long-time male dancer put it, “The guys join it because there are girls, cute girls that they get to meet. I don’t think there’s any doubt about it!” [interview 2015]. Social ties formed at dance practice extend beyond personal relationships; two

thirds indicate the possibility of tapping into these relationships to contribute to career or professional goals (figure 6). Like the bowling leagues to which Putnam points as builders of American civil society, folk dance groups share similar characteristic in forming trust-building relationships that extend beyond casual friendships to meaningful connections [Putnam 2000]. *Trejdeksnītis*, as such, becomes a critical space not only for cultural preservation, but also for civic-cultural identity formation in the Latvian diaspora, providing a regular meeting place and time for socialization. This socialization extends beyond the group, and encourages a stronger connection with individuals in daily life, the local Latvian community, and the Latvian nation in general.

Cultural connections

Through the development of civic-cultural ties to the local community, the folk dance group becomes an unthreatening mechanism for tapping into the Latvian nation from the diaspora. Importantly, it does not require a divorce from other cultural ties. In the early days of *Trejdeksnītis*, the group was a mechanism bridging multi-national identities. Even with mixed Latvian-Russian parentage and cultural awareness at the height of diaspora consciousness, Beleiciks was able to use folk dance as a mechanism to connect with both her Latvian and Russian identities. Similarly, folk dance groups strengthen connections between individuals who have varying levels of investment in other Latvian cultural activities, thereby strengthening the overall cultural identity of the group. A current dancer of mixed Latvian and American heritage said, “The dance group was like the entry point

How do you identify your family connection to Latvia?

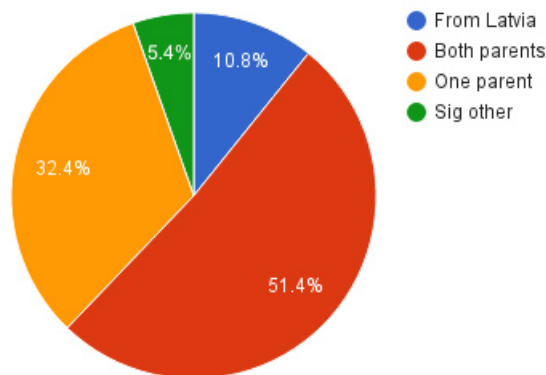


Figure 8. *Trejdeksnītis* dancers' family connection to Latvia. (Survey data)

into the culture for me. It was a way that I felt accepted, because I didn't have so much of the Latvian school. I didn't know the language, but I could dance... It made me feel more comfortable participating in other [Latvian] things" [28-year-old female, 2015].

Very few dancers in *Trejdeksnītis* are directly from Latvia or would identify as solely Latvian (4 out of the 37 surveyed); a slight majority of dancers come from families where both parents are Latvian. However, a third have only one parent of Latvian heritage – two current dancers have no Latvian background at all. For most dancers having a personal connection to Latvia is much less important than having respect for Latvian culture in general (figure 4). Indeed, in-depth interviews with the two Americans who currently dance in the group show that engagement with the culture does not necessarily transform their identity from American to Latvian, but allows them to build a connection to Latvia into their personal identity.¹ One middle-aged male interview respondent noted that being part of the dance group and tapping into Latvian culture, “lets me create ‘I am’ statements” [2015]. While he does not feel he is Latvian, he feels a connectedness to Latvia. Indeed, he has gone through the effort of co-choreographing a dance for *Trejdeksnītis*. Despite differences in his ethnic background, he is not a passive recipient of a Latvian cultural identity, but has contributed to its formation in the diaspora. While they may not “become Latvian” in the way that individuals with Latvian heritage express their developing connection to the Latvian nation, participation in *Trejdeksnītis* allows ethnic non-Latvians to adopt a civic-cultural identity in the Latvian community.

Conclusions

Connection to the Latvian Nation is not synonymous with a conscious desire to return to the Latvian state. Émigré Latvians and their descendants abroad have not lived in stasis, but have actively developed their own “personal and collective identity through deeply creolized cultural forms” [Carpenter 1996: 96]. However, by participating in displays and rituals of Latvian folk culture, they are able to remain part of the Latvian nation from their position in the post WWII diaspora. Participation in diaspora folk culture groups provides an opportunity to build not only cultural identity, but civic identity as well. The ritual of rehearsal, performance and socialization provides individuals the opportunity to engage together in

¹ Both dancers have been with the group for more than ten years, are married to American-Latvians of mixed heritage (neither of whom speak Latvian or had a comparatively strong Latvian-influenced upbringing). Both of these couples also incorporated Latvian dance as part of their wedding. Both have danced with the group in Latvia at least once; one did so completely without a romantic relationship with his significant other at the time.

community building that not only strengthens the relationships of individuals, but also builds the social capital of the community and the ability to develop a cultural appreciation that contributes to the formation of Latvian identity.

The civic-cultural identity formed through participation in *Trejdeksnītis* does not by definition conflict with individuals' diverse ethnic backgrounds or attachment to an American heritage. Rather, they are able to develop, integrate and contribute to the Latvian nation through civic and cultural involvement. Said a dancer of mixed American-Latvian parentage, "In the act of dancing, I cooperate with other beings, co-creating community and meaning, joy and purpose, embodying something greater than ourselves. The music connects us all, dancers and audience; we blend with the symbols we created out of our own bodies. It is a primal, earthy thing, this participation in the community of Latvian dance" [interview 2015].

Folk dance is not an ancient relic, but a living, breathing element of Latvian culture. It is also one that has been and remains accessible to participants beyond the titular nation, both within Latvia's borders and in the diaspora. It has thus become a site of collaboration between ethnic and non-ethnic Latvians, and an important cultural space for the evaluation and expansion of integration studies. Folk dance has a long history of national development and as an instrument of integration in Latvia, as illustrated by Alfreds Goba in the interwar period:

"[P]ulled into dance, actively participating, individuals are also more likely to come closer to other Latvian social forms. This, then, also contributes to the return to the Latvian nation of Latvians assimilated [russified] in the times of dependency [Tsarist times], and also contributes to non-Latvians melting into the Latvian element" ([1936] trans.).

Goba's sentiment remains relevant in a modern context, indicating the powerful effect of dance on building an inclusive nation with diverse members. Folk dance, in its traditional and stage iterations, continues to embody patriotism and national identity in the Baltics [Kapper 2016: 102]. It is, therefore, much more than ancient recreation. The ritual of folk dancing has the potential to serve as modern mechanism for cultural integration that not only extends beyond Latvians living in the state, but also broadens the scope of inclusion in national culture. For Latvians in the diaspora, dancing "in Latvian" is a mechanism that develops civic-cultural Latvian identity, and connects them to each other and the cultural movements of the Latvian nation.

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