Hello, my name is Malique Pye, I am a senior, soon to be graduate, photography major here at Pacific Northwest College of Art. Bienvenidos a my thesis "BAILE." Baile is a photographic documentation of the practice of Ballet Folklorico with an emphasis on showing the perspective of the dancers and the community within.

Ballet Folklorico is a style of dance that combines Mexican folk dances with the ideals and practices of more theatrical dances like ballet, and influences from dances of other countries.This project has been approximately 2 years in the making, and one that I will be continuing in the future, but I will get more into that later. This project brings together several aspects of my practice and life experiences, representation, movement and dance, cultural experiences, and community.

A little bit about myself
I grew up in Georgia, most of my childhood was spent in college park but we moved around quite frequently. As a result I was exposed to a multitude of cultures and experiences. the communities I was around were more commonly black and Mexican cultures.

As a child, I was influenced by many different things around me, I saw creativity and inspiration everywhere, and I still do. From the way a spaghetti sauce stained a stove top and looked like a cartoon giraffe, to documentaries about nature and animals that fueled my passion to be around animals and explore nature.

I was a sponge to my surroundings. Artistically one of my first and strongest influences growing up came from going to the corner store. Every time I went, you could find me at some point looking through the magazine stand. I always found the Lowrider Magazines. From there I learned about the west coast, Chicano art, and aspects of Mexican American culture, before I could even understand what it was. I fell in love with the artwork on the cars the airbrushing is mind blowing, the clothing, the graffiti, and all of the paintings and murals; so much so that I would draw and paint of the Aztec and Mayan imagery I would see. Even then, I could realize the power and pride felt in the mexican culture.

Outside of art, I was welcomed into the families of my friends. My closest relationships developed with my friends of Mexican descent. Every friend became a brother, the warmth and love i was shown by their families has only been replicated by my own family.

Emilio inviting me over to play hot wheels and his mom always having some amazing food for us to eat. Jonathan teaching me how to write graffiti and how not to be a toy. And later watching novelas con mi madre to going to work con mi padre o mi tia y mis hermanos. The love I have been shown then, and now, have made it possible for me to feel at home even as I am states away.

My sophomore year in high school I met Alberto and Bruno through a church youth group.Two brothers who became my best friends, and ultimately mis hermanos. We bonded almost instantly and From then on their family took me in and became my family. We did everything together, random bike trips on a whim, late night waffle house adventures, playstation marathons, all the dumb highschool things kids do. One day while we were playing games, their mom told Bruno to sacas la basura, without realizing it I got up and started to out the trash. We all stopped and realized, I was learning spanish, but i still took out the trash. After two years of a mandatory class, I was finally understanding spanish, all it took was being submerged in the environment almost everyday. But more than that, I was realizing how significant of a relationship we established.

There is one memory i return to often that has solidified this, it wasn't the quinces, family parties, or watching novelas with madre. In 2012 my older brother, Girona Lydell Pye II, passed away; just months after I moved to florida by myself. I arrived home shortly after receiving the news, immediately going to grieve and be with my mom and my sister. I also went to be with my other family, my hermanos, padres, and mis amigos. We sat in silence, I spoke the little bit that i could, they all embraced me and cried with me. I dont remember arriving at their house, and I dont remember leaving, but I will not forget the feeling of safety and love I felt in that moment.

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Being an artist is my childhood dream. My mom could tell you stories on stories, how she knew my trajectory would be creative from claims i made while i was still in diapers. I am still going to be the greatest artist in the world mom.

Photography was an unexpected creative shift for me. I started with drawing and painting, I began taking photos as reference for paintings and it slowly built from there. When I was in florida, one of the many jobs i had was working in a dog daycare, i became the person in charge of the social media posts and emailing updates to parents about their pets. Equipped with an ipod touch and a gopro 3, I wanted more exciting pictures of play time with the dogs.

So I started to play while photographing them. Jumping in the pools, playing chase, all the fun stuff. I started to bring my camera to get higher quality images too, began composing more intentionally and making the photo. Concurrently I was playing rugby, I started photographing the games when I wasnt playing.

There is so much energy in motion and to capture the energy, the excitement of something that passes in the moment and getting to relive it again and again, is where my desire to photograph motion started. It went from Rugby and dogs, to cars, skaters, football, and anything else that would move.

The entire time I have been photographing I have wanted to photograph dance. It wasn't until I reached out to a dance company in Florida, who runs a dance festival, that I was able to photograph a dance event. Since then I have continually sought out dance photography. Photographing Krump battles and jams, modern and contemporary dancers, breakers and ballerinas. I have always admired the athleticism of dance. Until now I have not been taught any formal dancing, but on my own I learned breakdancing and tumbling from a friend. More so because I love to try new things and sports, but also from a geniune curiosity of the art form.

BREATHE WATER

I began Baile in the fall semester of 2024. I took a large format photography class taught by Sally Schoolmaster. At this time I did not know where this would lead. This course gave me the opportunity to learn how to use a 4x5 camera, a technical and unique camera. If you dont know, it's the kind where you will see someone with a blanket over their head as they take their photo, I felt real Portland doing this. It also gave me the opportunity to work on a singular body of work for the entire semester.

As a class we discussed potential ideas, my mind immediately went to photographing dance. Can I use a camera that is historically used for landscape or portraiture where the subject it stationary, and can i capture the element of motion with it? I started looking back at previous photoshoots I've done to generate ideas of dancers to reach out to.

Looking at photographers, I went back to the work of Lois Greenfield. A prominent figure within the dance photography community, and a photographer I was referred to from dance instructors I worked with because of similarities in our work.

However as I looked through her books and online archive, as well as my images, I felt there was something missing. The images were dynamic, beautiful, and carried grace; but there was a singular feeling of emotion throughout every image. It felt too perfect almost.

I came back to images I captured of Ballet Papalotl, a ballet folklorico dance group in Portland, Or led by Dr. Kenya Marquez. I photographed for their Cinco de Mayo performance at Woodburn Community College. There I saw the movement, the colors, and energy; but there was also a feeling of pride and joy from not only the dancers but the audience, vendors, and musicians. Looking at the images brought me back to the event, I wanted to feel that again. So I reached out to Kenya, talked to her about my concept and asked if I could photograph performances with her group. To which she agreed.

As the project progressed, I began to learn so much more than I expected. I learned about the origins and history of Ballet Folklorico, the many different states that make up Mexico and that each state has its own folk dances. I learned more about dia de los muertos, and its origins and influences, but mostly I learned, or I realized, that there is not a lot of representation of Mexican & Mexican american culture around me, and even less of ballet folklorico.

As I looked for references and resources, I was met mostly with short video clips of news channels talking with a local dance group about a performance. I am able to find multiple videos on ballet, modern, breakdancing etc, and learn about the lives of the dancers, their experiences, and practices, but when I searched for ballet folklorico the main source I found were these short promotional videos about an upcoming performance or videos of a performance itself.

This resonated with me. Growing up I often felt unseen being a black artist. My family fully supported me, dont get me wrong, but in school we are taught the "classics" renaissance painters, dali, van goh, and when it comes to black art we were only shown the harlem renaissance or african arts. I felt weird, I painted and drew like renaissance but no one of that era looked like me, and the artist who do look like me dont paint or draw like me.

It wasnt until middle school that I finally saw work from an artist I felt connected to and hopeful about pursuing art truly. That feeling was life changing, and when I think about the struggles I have faced looking for references of this dance and culture, I think of that same emotion from the dancers. It was this revelation that determined what my thesis would be.

It's funny, I have been thinking about my thesis since I got to PNCA. I planned that it would be about lived experience, trauma, or childhood experiences that I don't talk about often at all, but want to find ways to. When I had my admittance meeting with my advisor Teresa Christiansen, I remember getting excited when she explained what the thesis is and we talked about potential ideas.

During every photo class I took, I would think to myself can I use this project to lead into my thesis somehow. I thought I would continue my series 'Sanctuary'; a project about my reestablished relationship with bodies of water since my brother's passing. The connection I had to Baile somehow felt more personal, something I couldn't explain at the time.

BREATHE

In the following semester, spring of 2025, I studied at Luca School of Arts in Brussels, Belgium. There I worked on 2 thesis level projects. One photographing dance and the other focusing on youth rugby. During this time abroad, I continued working on Baile.

Emailing dancers back in portland and vancouver, contacting people who have written on ballet folklorico, dress makers in Texas, I had a brief exchange with the dance company ballet folklorico de mexico, and I was almost able to go to Paris to photograph with a Folkloric dance group there. I spent a large amount of my spare time from my other projects researching. This is when I started talking to plan photoshoots and event photography for the summer.

When I got back my primary source of research was first person. Being present without the camera, building relationships, going to performances, rehearsals, paying attention, and being in the community.

I got back to the states July 10, arriving to arizona to stay with a friend. I left Arizona on the 12th to make it back to portland for a photoshoot on the 14th with Vancouver Ballet Folklorico. A week later was a pride parade with Corazones Alegres, the dance group established by Latino Network. Then another shoot about a week later. The dance season is at its busiest in the summer/fall.

Stylized photo shoots and performances, practices, Amongst trying to find work myself, and trying to find time to sleep. This was my life until school started at the end of August and I haven't stopped yet. Over the summer I worked with all 3 dance groups. VBF, BP, and CA. What I noticed quickly is that each group has its own unique aesthetic and feeling.

Vancouver Ballet is the larger active group. With 3 different dance groups that do different repertoires, for the younger kids, intermediate dancers, and older and advanced dancers. Their practices and rehearsals happen often at the Arts Centered facility in vancouver, wa.

Ballet Papalotl is the smaller of the 3 groups. Their performances have ranged from small and intimate settings like performing at a birthday parties, to performing at the Thorns and Timbers games during halftime. Practices held in the home studio built on Kenyas property.

With Corazones Alegres I was only able to photograph them perform twice due to a pause in their performances as results of the ongoing stress and fear around ICE and detention threats. All 3 groups have started for different reasons but they share the common thread, of existing to spread the representation and education of the Mexican culture through Ballet Folklorico.

I did not only notice the nuanced differences in the groups but I myself went through moments of change and growth. As much as community resonates with me and is something i seek out subconsciously, it wasn't until practicing my proposal speech with a friend that a major factor was addressed.

They told me that a lot of my work has had a consistent community feeling. They felt this was more of a celebration of the culture and the influence it has had on me and my place in it, and that I am not an outsider but a part of the community. Once this realization hit, a door of inspiration appeared. It has been so hard to talk about some of the things I have been doing because this is how I'm supposed to do them. I am supposed to engage with people in this personal way because i always have, I am supposed to consider their perspectives because we should all be doing this, talking about this is important because I would love for someone to talk about something I care about with respect and dignity too.

BREATHE
DRINK WATER

Throughout the project, I have asked myself on multiple occasions, how can I create authentically and what does that entail? I have seen many photographers photograph a community or a culture, they seem to be heavily involved and once the work is produced they do not refer or return to the subject matter. I thought about my voice and what it was, how was I trying to use it, what was i trying to say?

I began to look more intentionally at Mexican and Mexican american photographers; Enryque Leyva,Alejandro Castro, and Luvia Lazo to name a few. I felt this was important because I wanted to know if there were any commonalities, traits, or perspectives that resonated with the mexican culture. It made me realize something I had noticed and thought of myself, but didnt comprehend the gravity, how much nature and natural lighting is present and its importance. Even studio shoots would have a feeling of real life, and not feel over produced. This realization has led to doing more outdoor shoots and location scouting for future shoots.

My approach meant I needed to be intentional, respectful, aware, present, and inclusive. There were times where I knew I did not need to photograph, I cannot learn if I am solely focused on photographing moments.

I have shared meals and conversation with many different people, asking about them and their interest, how their day has been, and genuinely got to know people. Ultimately I interacted with everyone the same way I interact with my families back home.

I worked on my spanish comprehension and speech, to open myself to more resources that i find written in spanish but to also talk and connect with people. I want to be able to speak with members of the community in a way that shows them my heart and intention. If i am coming to you for this connection, then it is on me to extend the effort of connection first.

I have had several feedback and viewing sessions with dancers, one of the first with VBF. During this session I showed them images I captured of their events and shoots, asked for their thoughts and opinions, we discussed several prints. They informed me the posing of one dancer acted against the representation and meaning of La Catrina, they talked about the connections they felt outside of dance from the images, and we talked about the paper type and print sizes. I spoke with 2 of our janitorial staff here as well,Gloria and Eva. I have had general conversations with them throughout the year, working on my spanish but also just connecting with 2 individuals and who i feel like are often seen as just their positions.

Through our conversations I found out that Eva is from Oaxaca and Gloria is from Guatemala. I asked if they knew about ballet folklorico and if they would like to see the prints from my project. If they had critiques, amazing, but I really wanted to see how it would land with them in general. They both enjoyed the images, Eva was explaining details to Gloria and myself about the dance from Oaxaca and the specific regalia in the images.

I also have been showing images of this series in galleries, I placed a couple of images in the Student of Color Collective showing at The Black Gallery, a solo showing at La Casita Art Gallery and Culture Center in Vancouver, Wa and several pieces are still up currently as part of a group showing. At each of these I went to be present and noticed as people engaged with the work, and had several conversations with them.

This has allowed me more feedback from the greater community. My image of the vendor has had the most warming response, almost everyone I have talked to about this image have said he reminds them of their tio. Hearing this I know that I have been able to capture a candid moment that many people have felt connected to and felt that this stranger is someone they know, their family. This is exactly what i have wanted to do with my photos. To create this familiarity.

I began learning the dances and practicing with Ballet Papalotl. It has been an interesting experience, I feel like I am a kid again. learning a new skill from scratch and there is no way I can expect myself to be perfect as much as i wish i was. From it I have gained a new insight, thoughts on different angles to consider when photographing, but mostly I am walking away grateful for the opportunity to learn and perform the dances and be there. I have taken these experiences as insight for not only my images, but the set up as well.

BREATHE

The space we are in together has been meticulously planned. Commonly we give our speeches in one of the student galleries or a classroom, and our audience is seated in rows of chairs, with our work displayed. I felt that idea of presentation was too sterile, I did not want to present my work in an environment that would reduce the vibrancy and energy of the images.

When I go to events, whether its an art showing, the El Grito Festival, XV, or a family gathering, the common feeling is togetherness. There will be food & drinks, music, and community. I wanted to replicate the feeling of these places.

You are sitting at a table with friends and/or strangers as one, sharing food and drink and hopefully conversation with one another. I have spent countless moments sitting at the dinner table having pan dulce and cafecito or juice and just talking with mi familia. Im apologize, but I couldn't afford the drinks for this event, I got you next time though.

We are in the atrium, were majority of students will eat or come to hang out during the lunch hour. The space itself is to feel open, vibrant and engaging. With natural light and the space above extending the openness. I have chosen to print 10 images, 30"x 42". I decided on printing 10 images to challenge myself. It would be easy to select a larger grouping of images, but can I effectively encompass this project with just 10 images?

I want you to be able to see the images up close and far away, the closer you are the more you're pulled into the image and as you step back you feel the full image itself. The images themselves are all of moments that influence the performance, the casual moments in passing, the faces of community, kids being kids, and also having and commanding such a power and grace within themselves.

On the tables and hopefully passed around, I have put together several booklets. These booklets are to give a some context to my research, you will find information on Ballet folklorico, 2 regions and 2 of the more familiar dances you may have seen, day of the dead, and information on the 3 groups I have worked with and a sampling of the 8,000 photos I have accumulated over the project so far.

The booklet itself is a very rough draft. As you may be able to tell already from the handwritten corrections, I am learning how to contextualize, format properly, and create an even flow. Every experience is a learning experience, and I will be using this information for the future of this project and other photobooks I will create.

BREATHE - SLOW DOWN

So, how so? And What is next? Well for one, I will be making more of an effort to actively practice my spanish, I am still getting over the hump of feeling embarrassed of speaking poorly. Maybe taking an immersive class if possible, pero yo mirare Caso Cerrado de nuevo.

In terms of Baile, this project has revealed that I have LOTS to learn and more places I want to go. I will be continuing researching and learning, and photographing dance. I will be working with another dance group El Ballet Folklorico Cempuchil Grupo Infantil, from Milwaukee, Oregon led by Karina Ramirez Valezquez. I will be performing with Ballet Papalotl at an event next month, we are going to test my skills.

This fall, I will be going to Puebla, Mexico in October for 2 weeks over Dia de Muertos, where I will experience the celebrations first hand, learning the craft and importance of paper mache, and working to photograph with dance groups to the area.

My goal is to visit several more locations in Mexico and photograph traditional folk dancing, ballet folklorico performances of local dance groups and professional dance groups. Creating a catalog of images that captures the differences and similarities of all dance and all levels. The big end goal with this project is to produce a book, similar to similar elements of the booklet. I want to create a book that could be used to locate information, provide examples, and documentation. A book that I would have used if i were to come across it in the beginning of this process.

As I have been finding more styles and types of dances, I have been intrigued to carry this project over to other countries as well. Colombia, Cuba, and South Africa to start. Hearing the dancers talk about the dances of the regions their family is from struck a chord with me. Envious mostly. I have always wished I knew anything of where my family came from. I see similarities in movement from some african dances and dances that I would see my peers or adults doing growing up. How do we create these same movements while being continents away? Is there a way to use the study of dance to learn of my ancestry?

Looking outside of my cultural dance work, there are so many different ways of creating I wish to pursue. Whether it's pushing my advertising and marketing concepts, freelance work with sports and motion, or working towards more culturally relevant ideas. I will be showing a series of work merging both sports and dance at blue sky gallery this July. A series I have begun to expand and focus in on the similarities and commonalities of the art of dance and the art of sport. I have started with Rugby and Contact Improv dance, and I will be continuing with combat sports and ballet and modern dance. I LOVE talking about my ideas, if you want to know more

Bueno, a mi comunidad, Gracias a todos por estar aqui. Gracias todo por apoyo y ayudar. Thank you all for coming, for welcoming me and all of the support you have shown and given. This project has truly been a life changing and eye opening experience, and made me feel like I'm surrounded with family. Thank you to my friends who have helped me polish my speech, given feedback and critique. My mentor Rachel Wolf, for pushing me and helping me throughout this process, I love this project, but I did hit a burnout from school life and your guidance during this time was pivotal. Gracias everyone

BREATHE

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