In 2001 and 2003 I observed the January Festival of the town of Chiapa de Corzo, in the state of Chiapas, Mexico. La Feria de Enero or the January Festival honors the city’s patron, Saint Sebastián the Martyr, and celebrates the colonial legend of Doña María de Angulo. The January Festival, which officially began in 1599, is held every year January 8th-23rd as the principal festival of Chiapa de Corzo. This festival offers an interesting example of a flexibility of gender roles. In the parading and dancing that accompanies the honoring of a local patron saint and a colonial legend, men dress and participate as Chunta, a role traditionally filled by women. Like wise, women dress and participate as Parachico dancers, a role traditionally preserved for men, while also contesting and reclaiming their role as Chunta, as they negotiate their gender roles in the community, especially in the festival setting. Today, I want to argue that the January Festival is a site for challenging as well as reconstructing gender identity.

(I will show as series of photographers, along with traditional music from the festival.)

According to oral tradition, La Feria de Enero originates from a mid-sixteenth century colonial legend in which Doña María de Angulo, a wealthy Spanish woman, traveled to Mexico in search of a cure for her nine-year-old paralytic son. Doña María sought the help of healers (curanderos) from Soctón Nanadalumí, the capital city of the Los Chiapas nation. Immediately after the boy was healed, a horrible drought struck the town. The community then told Doña María that in order for the drought to cease, she needed to
offer a gift to the gods. She placed her son on a post for an entire day, without food or drink, as an offering. As dusk fell so did the first raindrops, signifying that the gods were satisfied with her offering. The child was then taken down and returned to his mother. While in Chiapas, Doña María de Angulo observed the state of poverty in which the indigenous people lived. To demonstrate her gratitude, she employed her male and female servants (Chunta) to distribute meat, vegetables, grains and gold coins. The community returned the favor by inviting Doña María and her son to an indigenous ceremony displaying adoration for the gods and gratitude for their benevolence towards the people. The participants specifically for Saint Sebastian dedicate the dance to her child. While praying and dancing they would call out para el chico (for the child). Thus the term and dance “Parachico” was created and gave way to the formation of the La Feria de Enero (January Festival).

Historically, both men and women may participate in a variety of roles, such as Parachico dancers, Musician, Artesano/a, Prisote (spiritual leader), Chunta, Comidera (cook), and Chiapaneca, in accordance to their gender. Traditionally, men participate as Parachico dancers, in day procession honoring the festival saints, particularly Saint Sebastián. While women enact the role of Chunta, dancing and distributing food to the community portraying the servants of Doña María in evening processions. Both of these roles will be the focus of this paper.

Although this festival is not an everyday event, ritual performance deeply affects every day lives of Chiapacorzeños (inhabitants of Chiapa de Corzo). It is during this festival period that Chiapacorzeños may explore and make visible the ambiguities and unrealized potentialities in the changing social structure of everyday life.
While participation reaffirms the community’s sense of history and allegiance to tradition, the festival is an active present day site for gender contention and negotiation. Therefore, it is important to consider the implications of identity formation in terms of the participant’s gender in public ritual performance. In fact, through festival participation the formation of women’s identity is influenced in four dimensions. These dimensions are the challenging of traditional roles, the formation and perpetuation of self-assurance, the blurring of gender roles, and the creation and continuity of cultural identity.

(I’ll begin with the first dimension) when women participate in this traditionally male role, they exhibit the same desire and physical endurance as men. This creates a sense of equality for the women. This sense of empowerment is frequently transferred into their homes, thus liberating them from social prescribed roles as domestic workers during the Festival period. A second dimension is that women participants become more confident and expressive and are eager to learn about their history and culture. This feature is especially true for adolescent girls.

“I know how to dance and very well. I learned to dance like the men dance. When I would participate, men would lift my mask and would say, ‘Oh, you are a little girl!’ They were surprised and it would cause them a sense of pride to see that I was female.”

The verbal affirmation from the community that accompanies festival involvement has also been influential in cultivating the voices of female participants. Participation has influenced many women’s sense of self-worth and confidence on a physical level; it is a step towards a sense of agency. Yrene, who has participated as a Parachico for several years, conveys this idea of self-assurance best, “You really take pleasure in participating in La Feria de Enero, you’re delighted that we can dance in the manner that men do.”
The dance of the Parachico is a collective effort. It is danced in a circular nature, while the dancer himself or herself turns within a larger group. But again this is traditionally a male role, thus the dance is physically demanding; given the layers of clothing, mask and head piece, used to create the image of a Parachico, as well as the execution of rigid upper body movement, in addition to the footwork. And in accordance to a male positioning, the placement of the upper body requires that both arms be held out, the left hand held open, while the right hand energetically shakes a rattle. So, it becomes interesting when women take part in this male dance.

In fact, some men feel opposition to women’s participation. In my interviews, women disclose the kind of sentiment that their male counterparts experience. Elena, a female Parachico dancer expresses, “The [men] tell me, ‘My wife can’t participate as a Parachico. It’s that I don’t like it and she has already tried and decided against it.’ As you can see there are people that withhold women and don’t allow them [women] to participate.”

When women dance as Parachicos they are stepping out of their traditional roles, hence opposing male censorship. Ultimately, they are demonstrating that women do have the physique to partake in a physical demanding role.

Interestingly enough, in the dance, other social factors associated with a participant’s identity can become insignificant in festival setting. Alicia, a Parachico dancer, states that Mexico is a classist society, but that during the January Festival this idea of classism seems to disappear. Likewise, Soraya, a Chunta, mentions that education is not a factor for participation, “In the group of Chunta, they [participants] are from all types of professions. They are from all levels, laborer, students and professionals.” David, a homosexual Chunta, also brings up an interesting point concerning gender. He states, “If you see people in a procession you cannot tell whether one is a man or a woman, because
they are all dressed the same...their faces are covered with masks.” Finally, Elena brings up the fact that age is evidently also blurred during participation in the festival,

“When we dance, for example as Chunta, an older woman can dance just the same as a young girl, the same, their participation is the same. There is nothing that says, ‘Well you can’t dance because you’re old’.

The festival, then, provides a place where individuals can experience a “liminal space” where set gender, economic, and social roles are blurred.

Through my research, I have found that the navigation of gender at the individual and community level is an intricate process. The major issues that the population faces include the maintenance of gender identity, request for balance of gendered participation, respect for gender boundaries and the resistance of traditional gendered roles.

However, while gender boundaries may be blurred contradictions remain in the way that dancers continue to experience gender identity. This becomes evident dancer’s interpretation of crossing dressing. The act of cross-dressing is an act of empowerment. Many participants experience it as a challenge to gender boundaries. Yet they maintain their individual gender identity.

For example, Soraya expresses, “although we go out as Parachico dancers we are still women.” Although homosexual men do participate in this festival, for most participants the act of cross-dressing is not a manifestation of homosexuality. David, a homosexual man who participates as Chunta, concurs with Soraya’s comment, “...Just because men dress as women they don’t stop being men.” Therefore, the individual is not attempting to assume the gender identity of the opposite sex.
Women have also voiced that a balance of participation based on gender should be maintained in the Chunta role of the festival. This need for gender balance is especially pointed in light of the fact that men started replacing women’s traditional role as Chunta in the festival. It is important for women to play their roles, because it allows her to be active outside of social prescribed ideals of femininity. Creating a space for women is important in order to provide a vehicle for women to express themselves and to contribute to this significant event in the community’s culture.

There are a few roles in the January Festival where traditional gender boundaries must be adhered. Luis, who participates as a Chunta, narrates;

“Men have infiltrated the roles of women, clearly it has happened. But if a man were to infiltrate into one of the women’s roles such as Doña María de Angulo, well no! The community will hang him, they would burn him alive! Surely, you see there are certain margins that we have to respect just like in any society.”

Yet, it is important to note the blurring of gender boundaries in respect to the Chunta role occurred as a response to the perceived needs of the community. Men entered the role of Chunta to protect the women from harassment while participating. Men also served the purpose of maintaining the almost extinct Chunta role.

Through the act of entering a traditional male role, such as a Parachico dancer, women are able to exhibit self-expression of individuality and voice. This is but one way that these women are able to subvert traditional values and norms, which exist in a patriarchal context. Although today most of the community of Chiapa de Corzo tolerates women Parachico dancers, historically young women fulfilling this role were not accepted. It used to be that most young women participating as Parachico dancers did so in spite of their parent’s traditional beliefs that women should not participate in this role.
customarily reserved for males. These women were proving that they can move in and out of spaces that have been traditionally reserved for men. With women’s participation in the male dominated role of Parachicos, she is capable of fulfilling two objectives: obtaining respect from her community and family; and obtaining a certain degree of male privilege while posing as a male.

In conclusion, these are the findings that my research has shown thus far. In the January Festival, women are actively reclaiming their space within the role of Chunta, as well as engaging in acts of social resistance. They are recapturing the idea of public space and are now recreating new spaces for themselves within their community as well as within their culture. While they are certainly being honored within their families, communities and within the January festival and there is a wide spread tolerance of female Parachicos, there are those that continue to be critical.

My research also begins to illuminate the ways in which participation can create and reaffirm individual cultural identities for both women and men, while maintaining the cultural traditions of their community. In essence, the January Festival creates a temporary state of empowerment among all of its participants.

I feel this investigation is important because it begins the process of filling the gaps of missing documentation on women’s participation and their experiences in this festival. This study will foster a better understanding and appreciation of these women’s efforts in La Feria de Enero, in their home community, and in academia.

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1 Soctón Nandalumí was the indigenous name for the city of Chiapa de Corzo.  
The actual chant of the Parachico is (Parachico me pediste, Parachico te daré con tu mascara de palo y tu chin-chin te sonaré) “Parachico you asked [of me], Parachico I give to you, with your mask made of wood and my chin-chin [rattle] I will play.” (My translation)

During an informal conversation with my host family I asked the 80-year uncle, who also participated as a Chunta, when did men began to participate in the role of women. To his knowledge men had participate in this particular role even before he begun to participate as a Chunta in the mid 1930’s.