

Dance Festival Links Traditions to Africa

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As instructors for the 2011 New Orleans Dance Festival, Danys “La Mora” PÃ©rez and her husband and drummer, Francisco Mora Catlet, hope to impart to students more than simply the physical movements of dance. The duo is focused on enlightening dancers as to the cultural history of the dance forms being taught.



Danys “La Mora” PÃ©rez works with participants at the New Orleans Dance Festival, being held this week on the Tulane uptown campus. She is a choreographer, teacher and ethnologist. (Photo by Ryan Rivet)

“All of the disciplines being presented here ? Afro-Cuban, Haitian, Congolese and Brazilian ? have an intrinsic connection with New Orleans,” says Catlet. “An example of this is the concept of call-and-response. It's in the African American church, it's in the second-line and it's in the Mardi Gras Indian tradition. This originated in Africa.”

PÃ©rez, a native of Santiago de Cuba, Cuba, is a choreographer, teacher and ethnologist who believes that younger generations don't know enough about the cultures behind the dances they study. As artistic director of [Oyu Oro](#) and instructor at the [Ailey Extension](#) of the Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater in New York, PÃ©rez regularly stresses the importance of going beyond the music and

movement.

“It's very important to know the history. The language of the dance is the body, and to read the language of the body you need to know the history,” says PÃ©rez.

“When you know the history, your body can talk in the correct way to give the information to the audience.”

Before a Monday (June 27) afternoon class in McWilliams Hall, PÃ©rez asked each of the participants to share any Spanish word they knew. Each person obliged with responses ranging from “hola” to “¿Donde esta el baÃ±o?” PÃ©rez offered students three new words to remember for the ensuing 90 minutes: “respecto, amor y paz” (respect, love and peace).

The [New Orleans Dance Festival](#) continues through Saturday (July 2).