DANCING IDENTITIES: DEBUNKING THE LATINA MYTH

by

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THESIS ABSTRACT

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This qualitative and experiential investigation is concerned with the body as a site of knowledge and manufacture of one's identity. Focusing on U.S. Visual Popular Culture, the study identifies the assumption of a *Latina Myth* and uses it as a source for exploration of choreography and identity. Consequently, the research constitutes the conceptual frame in which *Not About Me*, a 30-minute solo theatrical dance piece, was conceived. The project advocates for postmodern or contemporary dance as a way to destabilize, disrupt or debunk cultural stereotypes in which the dancing body is inscribed. The research is a first-person perspective and intends to contribute to the understanding of identities and Latinidad as a contextual and always-evolving process.

A supplemental file of the video Not About Me is included with this thesis.

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DEDICATION

A mi mamá y mi papá, a mi esposo Kenji y a mis hermanos, Dania e Iván, quienes son mi familia más cercana.

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CHAPTER I

ORIENTATION OF THE STUDY

Introduction

In 2010, I came to the United States as a Fulbright scholar from Colombia. I arrived at the University of Oregon eager to continue the dance journey I had embarked on years earlier while finishing my undergraduate studies in psychology. I found myself dancing as a way to recover and reveal some sort of self-knowledge and self-expression I was putting aside while going to college. By exploring my movement possibilities, I reconciled my interest as a psychologist in thinking and theorizing about the body with producing knowledge and artistic expression from the body. My intention then to pursue an M.F.A in dance has been to expand my understanding of dance as a field of knowledge that allows for significant reflections about the primacy of bodies and movement in the construction and negotiation of identities.

Aware of the time required to adapt to a new context, but also conscious of my strong Spanish accent while speaking in English, I noticed relatively soon after my arriving in the U.S., that my presence represents difference within the predominantly white, mostly American context, in which academic dance takes place. While I cannot claim I have suffered from open discrimination at the University of Oregon, or in the Department of Dance, it is obvious that I am a "foreigner." I know that because of my physiognomy and the new context in which I live and

create art now I cannot escape the social and cultural constructions with which I am sometimes perceived.

For example, my tan body has triggered questions such as: “So what´s your ethnicity?” “What kind of dance do you study -salsa?” “Are you hunting for a husband here?” or sometimes, I notice people seem very surprised that I speak English. This led me to think that not just in the movies and literature, but in everyday interactions there are still undeniable cultural stereotypes at work that create tension in the social sphere. In my case, I became aware that to some extent in the U.S., Latinos/as are in fact being racially stereotyped; Latinas are considered ‘natural’ dancers looking for American guys to marry them, and over all, they cannot be intelligent or multilingual.

Although I could differentiate my own experience from all of the above affirmations, I could not ignore that these assumptions had an effect on me. On one hand, these cultural stereotypes were not completely unknown to me, and on the other, I felt forced to confront my own identity in terms that I had not experienced before. Living in Colombia, my tan body never represented a racial or ethnic issue. As a Colombian, I have always been aware of the history of colonization that has made of our country a mixed race population as well as a rich and diverse culture. As Colombians, we are children of a complex and long history of biological and intercultural intersections between Spaniards, Africans and Indigenous people.

Consequently, faced by this cultural clash I was having in my new reality as an international student, I started asking myself what it meant to be a woman and a dancer from Colombia and if (and how) I really identify myself as a Latina. I questioned where these ideas/stereotypes associated with Latinas/os come from, and overall, why we continue to reproduce such notions that affect our interactions, exoticize and diminish people and cultures. Furthermore, doesn't this contradict the "melting pot" concept of North America?

Although I grew up in a culture in which dancing is integral to our customs and people hardly imagine a Colombian woman not being a dancer, at some level, my immersion and fascination with dance developed not until my last years of college, when I was already in my early twenties. Moreover, this side step from becoming a psychologist to a dancer did not start with my interest in Colombian traditional dances – such as salsa, but with contemporary dance[1]. My fascination with this

[1] My notion of contemporary dance follows Ann Cooper Albright´s definition, in which she specifies contemporary dance as the experimental dance that took place approximately a decade before she wrote her book *Choreographing Difference. The Body and Identity in Contemporary Dance* in 1997. She argues that much of that work takes on the hybridity of contemporary culture, which is simultaneously both deconstructionist and visionary. She also claims her use of the term contemporary as a way to avoid any confusion with the historical term postmodern dance, originated in the early 60s. This consideration will allow me to use the expression contemporary dance to refer to the practice of modern dance encompassed within a postmodern way of thinking and doing dance that includes the experimental Colombian dance practices in which I have been trained. That is, particular release techniques, contact and dance improvisation in the way they developed in Colombia in the past two-three decades. In this thesis, however, I will also use the term postmodern dance. I will use it not to differentiate it from contemporary dance but to add Elizabeth Dempster´s insights into its consideration. Dempster argues that postmodern dance is not a specific form of dance but a way of thinking of and making dance that has been emphasized since the 80s, after what has canonically been called postmodern dance. Thus, I will refer to

practice grew rapidly, partially because I found in it, a place to make sense of my particular need for movement[2]. But also because dance, as a field of knowledge, gave me insights into modes of inquiry that I felt I could not imagine within the field of psychology. More importantly, I discovered through the years and my professional experience that dance could be a means to transform realities and the way we perceive ourselves, others, and by extension, the social context that we inhabit.

My professional experience as a researcher and dancer has been influenced by my work with *ConCuerpos*, a non-profit dance organization that integrates people with and without disabilities in their pedagogic and creative processes throughout Colombia. Therefore, I am familiar with dance as a powerful tool to gain social knowledge and find personal agency. I am committed to this work because I have always been intrigued by the dual relationship which we as humans experience our bodies. Besides *having* a body we *are* our bodies, consequently we are constantly negotiating between objective and subjective ways of experiencing the body.

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contemporary dance as the practice of dance, which is framed by a postmodern way of thinking.

[2] Since early in my life, I have been a very active kid. I learned to "social" dance when I was 4-5 years old and enjoyed every social opportunity to dance with family members and friends. I also loved hiking with my dad and games that involved a great amount of physical activity. Throughout my schooling years I also participated in dance activities and was highly engaged with different types of sports such as gymnastics, swimming, basketball, and softball. At the end of my high school, and mostly when I began my psychology studies in college, these activities were drastically reduced due to lack of time and possibilities. This was an aspect that I missed the first years of college and what forced me to look for extra-curriculum activities that eventually led me to encounter a dance studio outside the university.

In the case of people with disabilities, this consideration has taken special importance because the 'disabled' body has been historically objectified and associated with negative connotations, especially in the context of expression in concert dance where virtuosity has had a focus. Through the exploration of creative movement, and in a collaborative experience between people with and without disabilities, ConCuerpos, following and contributing to the work of others, has been able to debunk negative assumptions that dehumanize the person with disabilities and his or her capacity for self and artistic expression. Moreover, with the implementation of integrated dance[3], it has been possible to bring awareness about issues of inclusion and equality in a country like Colombia, where it is paramount to work reconciling the gap between social differences.

Dance constitutes then, the means through which I have found a way to unveil stereotypes and more importantly transform them. Because integrated dance recognizes that every body is unique, the artistic and expressive movement is created and discovered by the person participating in the experience. In these terms, there is no preconceived notion of dance to be followed, but rather a discovery of a dance to be invented. This is why in an integrated dance workshop or creative process, self-expression, creativity and agency are triggered and desired

[3] Integrated dance is an umbrella name that has been used globally to describe the creative work between dancers with and without disabilities. Another name that is commonly used for this practice is mixed-ability dance.

elements. As a dancer, I have been mostly trained in this frame of thinking and creating. I have learned that although our bodies are marked by social and cultural categories of meaning, as individuals we have the power to reaffirm, resist and/or reinvent them. By these means art, and in my case dance, has presented beautiful ways in which that can be possible. As a performer and as a choreographer, I have been able to embody imaginary worlds, interact creatively with different bodies from my own, and more interesting, create physical metaphors that speak about my unique phenomenological experience in this world.

As a woman, my body has always been a center of inquiry. Particularly in my adolescence, I found myself struggling with the models I was supposed to follow and accept as a girl/woman. I felt that I was supposed to organize my body and behave in very specific forms dictated by social context and culture that did not always match my personal sensibility. Even more, I felt that my education, rooted in Catholic values, reinforced the Western body/mind dualism on which our thinking and way of perceiving ourselves is based. This caused for me, a sort of "dislocation" in my identity process. It took me a long time to realize that the tension inherent in this double reality of our bodies – the objective and the subjective – does not necessarily have to pull us in opposite directions. Furthermore, this dislocation regarding the mind and the body, or the cultural and the personal, has always made me question who I am.

Not surprisingly, the subjects of identity, gender and the body became the focus of my psychology studies. My undergraduate studies did shed some light on these issues; however, I was dissatisfied in the way psychology approached such matters. Even into the late 90s, I felt my psychology program was still permeated by this dualism that has troubled, or at least greatly affected our Western way of thinking. With its focus on the mind and in scientific ways of explaining it, I did not find a place for my body and its sentient and material nature. I turned then, to other disciplines and immersed myself in dance, experiencing and learning that the body constitutes an epistemological locus -a site of important and valid knowledge. I realized that the body in its understanding, reveals the need to look for inter- and transdisciplinary approaches. Even more, I affirmed that it is ultimately, and only with some bodily expression, that we can give an account of our holistic, subjective and complex realities.

This is why, during the last three years, while pursuing my MFA in dance at the University of Oregon, I focused on growing mostly in two directions: as a performer and as a choreographer. Particularly choreographing has been the way I have been able to shape my artistry while continuing my identity quest. That is, my creative processes have been the means through which I inquire about myself in relationship with others and the social and cultural narratives in which I am immersed.

This way, I have been giving form to a particular way of speaking to the community that surrounds me. I have had the opportunity to create work that includes dancers with physical disabilities, different cultural backgrounds and that speaks to my subjective experience of being a woman and a person who strives for social awareness and celebrates diversity. I have also created and participated in site-specific works. My interest has always been placed in keeping the dance rooted in what is essential to the subjective experience of the dancers and myself. Accordingly, I almost always create work that is collaborative in nature.

For this study, because my experience at the University of Oregon has continuously been marked by my international status[4], and as I was confronted with the fact that my physical appearance reveals my "Latina-ness," I decided to embark in a choreographic research that allowed me to elaborate and give voice to my experience here. I wanted to give a place to this cultural clash that was causing me to question my identity as a woman and dancer from Colombia.

[4] My first two years at the University of Oregon, I was also part of the International Cultural Service Program (ICSP) offered by the Office of International Affairs of the University. The program partially supported my tuition in exchange of some work with the community. I often visited schools in Eugene and classes at the University. I told people about my country, my culture and my experience here. Sometimes, I even taught dance workshops about traditional dances from Colombia. I also led language circles in Spanish, for students interested in practicing their conversational skills. Additionally, in the M.F.A program, I was one out of the only two international students enrolled.

The project took form particularly by studying with Professor Priscilla Ovalle[5], author of *Dance and The Hollywood Latina: Race, Sex, and Stardom* (2011). In her book, I found some explanation of the cultural stereotypes that I was experiencing. Moreover, I located US Visual Popular Culture – specially Hollywood – as a main social force that shapes a predominant view of what Latinas are. In her examination, Ovalle unveils how a century of cinematic representations of Latinas as "natural dancers" plays an important role in the construction of a popular myth that has laden their brown bodies with racial ambiguity, and sexual connotations. She states that by using the kinesthetic and symbolic power of dance, what has been portrayed historically on screen has evoked images of either a diminished ethnic "other" or displayed the hyper sexuality of the brown body, suggesting that Latinas are inherently both passionate and promiscuous (1-23).

In my choreographic research I wished to explore such hegemonic and dominant assumptions about Latinas and their collective identity critically. Does it mean that because I am from Colombia, my body was being read in the same way as it is portrayed in movies, TV series, commercials and music videos? Does the *Latina Myth* apply to all women from Latin America? Above all, does it apply to me? I saw this project as a way toward answering these questions and others, as well as a

[5] Professor Ovalle´s interests reside in film and media studies, particularly in the representation of race, dance and sexuality in film, archival research and media production.

continuation of my interest in identity, having my body as the central focus. In other words, I sought to debunk the *Latina Myth* by establishing a dialogue with my particular experience.

In doing so, I combined a series of theories that also posit dance as a great means for identity inquiry. The theories served as the conceptual frame on which I explored movement and choreographed *Not About Me,* a solo dance piece for myself, performed at the Dougherty Dance Theatre at the University of Oregon. The video is included with this thesis as a supplemental file. I chose to choreograph as way to "speak back" to the cultural confrontation I have had in this new context, and share it with other students and the surrounding community. On a bigger scale, I sought to question this dominant representation of Latina bodies within American popular culture.

I framed my research project advocating for postmodern dance as a means to deconstruct, disrupt or destabilize hegemonic and dominant images. This notion is based on Elizabeth Dempster´s arguments that "the postmodern is not a newly defined dance language but a strategy and a method of inquiry, which challenge and interrogate the process of representation itself" (232). I also combined feminist dance studies with critical film, Latino/a and critical visual arts studies to support my artistic exploration. Likewise, I interviewed and studied with Miguel Gutierrez, a New York born dance artist, whose parents are from Colombia. Additionally, I investigated creative processes in

multidisciplinary performative works. I drew upon all these sources in my movement and choreographic process.

This all assured me the rigor of choreographing as a research practice. I considered the choreographic process as a "...prolonged interaction between artistic conception (research purpose) and medium (data)" (Hanstein 24). This implies that it was a

> "problem-finding and solving, discovery -oriented process, ... the emerging work guiding the artistic thinking of the researcher and the evolving idea in turn impacting the shaping of the medium –the research learning about the work as the process unfolds" (Hanstein 24).

The intention of this artistic project was then to make visible the tensions and negotiations by which one´s identity is inscribed. Ann Cooper Albright has emphasized this consideration in regard to the dancing body as an important aspect that requires scrutiny within the dance field. She claims the importance of addressing "the gap between the stereotypes and the reality of the dancer's physical life" (4). In these terms, my artistic exploration was a process of self-discovery in relation to the dominant narratives embedded in the *Latina Myth* that mark the bodies of Latinas within the American popular culture. I expected, by extension, to celebrate diversity, key elements in the constitution of my identity. Finally, I expected that this phenomenological inquiry could reveal some insights about the politics of the female body that exist in contemporary dance.

Statement of Purpose

The purpose of this phenomenological and artistic inquiry was to critically explore the *Latina Myth* as defined by Ovalle (2011), through movement, using it as a source of creation for choreography. Having identity as the subject matter of the investigation, I sought to debunk some assumptions embedded in this *Myth* that circulate in American popular culture. I focused on my physical body and experience as an international student and artist living in the U.S.

As a woman and as a dancer from Colombia, I wished to confront the popular American cultural assumption that oversimplifies the dance of Latinas as an entertainment of pleasure and as the commodification of a sexualized body. While reflecting upon my experience, I conceived and examined stereotypes of Latinas in the U.S. I was interested in questioning and exposing the cultural meaning of the "brown" body—my own body—in order to poetically share my unique way of moving and rediscovering myself as a Latina as a reaction to, and rejection of, those stereotypes. Accordingly, I used different qualitative methods and performative tools to facilitate both my movement exploration and the crafting of the choreography.

Significance of the Study

This research posits dance making or choreography as a powerful means for inquiry into identity. Grounded in Ann Cooper Albright´s theorizations about the social and cultural significance of looking at

dancing bodies, it suggests that dance may be one of the most salient ways to explore personal identity. I see this investigation as a contribution to the groundswell of investigations into dancing bodies as sites of knowledge, history and power, while demonstrating the multidisciplinary character of dance studies. This is consonant with current studies in critical and body theory that emphasize the constructed and performative nature of all subjectivities in which the body is accounted as interplay of biological (individual) and cultural forces (Mendible 3).

Within the dance field, this overriding interest in making clear or visible the operations by which a dancing body is affected and in tight interrelation with its cultural representation, can be rooted in the 1980s. Artists such as Bill T. Jones, Blondell Cummings, Johanna Boyce, David Dorfman[6], Ralph Lemon (Daly 80-87), to mention a few, are illustrative figures within the U.S. context of these kinds of explorations in their artistic work. Now, according to Susan L. Foster, "in this world of accessorizing identity" there is a claim in some spheres that we have moved beyond discriminatory practices based on size, shape, skin color, gender, or otherwise. However, her genealogic analysis of meanings associated with choreography, kinesthesia, and empathy has shown that the histories of classification of difference that these meanings embrace,

[6] These artists have been analyzed by Cooper Albright. See "Dancing Bodies and the Stories They Tell" and "Embodying History. Epic Narrative and Cultural Identity in African-American Dance" in *Choreographing Difference. The Body and Identity in Contemporary Dance. Wesleyan University Press.* 1997.

bear down upon the present. Thus, Foster argues, contemporary dance artists keep facing the "problematics established in the ways that choreography, kinesthesia, and empathy have worked together over time to create dominant and dominating sets of assumptions about identity" (179).

Consequently, this study is part of a current wave by dance artists concerned with recapitulating or working against dominant conceptions about the self, gender and cultural difference (Foster 179). It touches on a broader subject that I see as a global concern in the practice of contemporary dance, namely the exploration and questioning of hegemonic ways of representing the female dancing body as a predominantly white, thin, young and able body (Cooper Albright 3-10). Particularly in the case of Latina/o Studies, it contributes to the analysis of Latinidad as a situated, contingent and negotiable work-in-progress category (Mendible 5). In these terms, Latinidad, as Ramón H. Rivera-Servera explains, refers to the identification process and sedimentation of Latina/o identities. Thus conceived, it accentuates the process-based nature of identity and seeks to articulate the ways the category is both a social construct and performative effect of cultural practice. In other words, "Latinidad accentuates the process, and it is through serial acts like the performances (theatrical and quotidian) … that it becomes a legible, although fluid identity position" (278).

Likewise, the research underscores the value of generating movement and creating art from subjective experience as a way of exercising agency and empowerment. This agency and empowerment is understood as the ability to affirm self and give voice to pluralistic expressions of identity through the dancing body (Paris 20). Implied in the reflection is the struggle that one encounters when asking how to affirm sense of unity without "essentializing" the body and falling into eugenic stereotypes (Cooper Albright 8). This way, within the dance piece, I worked to expose myths and move away from the stereotypes associated with Latina bodies, through the particularities of my dancing body and experience. Likewise, I moved away from the general assumption that Latina dancers are merely interested in Latin ballroom rhythms and in performing the commodification of a sexualized body. On a different level, the nature of the dance piece reflects the collaborative and multidisciplinary character of dance study and making.

Delimitations of the Study

In order to narrow the scope of my project I identified the following delimitations:

1. I borrowed and explored the notion of the *Latina Myth* based on Ovalle´s examinations of U.S. visual popular culture. Consequently, I equated my movement exploration/consideration of American popular culture to my concentrated research on Hollywood movies, TV shows and music videos.

2. Because my focus is the exploration of discourses regarding the Latin female body, my interest is narrowed to representations of Latina bodies.
3. The focus was my own body as the site of knowledge with which, and upon which, to confront some of the dominant narratives embedded in the *Latina Myth.*
4. In terms of methodology, this project was approached in a postmodern manner, which indicates a tendency toward the contextual, historical, and ethnographic, as well as it is concerned with bringing the margins to the center (Banes xv).

Limitations of the Study

In this research I was limited to the time assigned for the development of the project. Although I deliberately used some time during the Summer 2012 to conceive some ideas, my exploration took place mainly during the period covered by the ten weeks of Fall term and 8 weeks of Winter Term 2012-13. Also, I was limited by my own creative capacity and ability to communicate with other people who collaborated with me in the project. Furthermore, I was limited as well by my personal biases, and own ability to see beyond the social *myth* by which I am both surrounded and constructed.

CHAPTER II

LITERATURE REVIEW

Introduction

My research project stems from a scholarly desire invested in understanding the primacy of the body as a site of knowledge and agency in the construction of identities. As I have alluded to earlier, this understanding argues for inter and transdisciplinary approaches that can give an account of such a complex statement. As much as this investigation aims to shed light on this assertion, it does not pretend to be exhaustive. Consequently, I will be ultimately offering a first-person perspective that seeks to link personal experience to a postmodern feminist theoretical framework.

By a postmodern feminist theoretical framework I refer to the body of scholarly work that I have threaded together by others to reflect on my own personal and "situated" experience as a dancer and woman from Colombia, living and creating work in the U.S. This position is definitive in tandem with one of the main beliefs of postmodern theory, that there are no universal scientific truths. The benefit of this approach to research resides in that it offers ways to identify hegemonic discourses and the power relationships that operate within (Cosgrove 98).

Furthermore, this consideration with regard to identity categories suggests that identities are complex phenomena. That is, as demonstrated by recent studies in the humanities and social sciences,

they are an unstable process always in flux, influenced by the mutual constitution of categories such as race, class, age, ethnicity and gender, among others (Hames-Garcia 1-38). Thus, from a postmodern feminist perspective what is at stake in the production of knowledge is how the human experience gets mediated, negotiated, and produced: “It is not individuals who have experience, but subjects who are constituted through their experience” (Scott 25–27). It is this assertion that my creative project intends to underline through my dancing, moving body.

Within the dance field, the postmodernist perspective, consonant with the previous considerations, has its own implications. It indicates both a historical movement in dance and a method of analyzing (Banes xii) and, I accentuate, making dance. In its historical consideration, postmodern dance refers to a descriptive expression that embraces the emergence of a new generation of dance artists that arose in the early 60s. Since then, their concerns have been putting into question and expanding the traditional ways in which modern dance has been conceived.

As a method of analyzing and dance making, postmodernism develops from an analytical, abstract and minimalistic phase to a metaphoric phase that in the 80s was characterized by abundance, appropriation, and theatricality. As the term postmodernism has taken a broader cultural and interdisciplinary meaning, dancers and choreographers have aligned their work with other conceptualizations

theorized across the disciplines. Thus, postmodern dance has become a prescriptive approach, a project that takes postmodernism and poststructuralist theory as a set of guidelines (Banes 301-309).

These contemplations allow for the development of dance studies that:

> "… are concerned with crossovers between 'high' and 'low' dance cultures –the avant-garde, the popular, the commercial and the vernacular… analyzes relationships between main-stream dance and its counterstreams, which contest, challenge, subvert, and undermine the mainstream traditions" (Banes xiv).

Because of the nature of my investigation, these aspects were relevant in the conception and development of my creative process.

In this literature review, I will indicate how dance can constitute a great means for identity inquiry in order to articulate the importance of critically examining, through movement, the *Latina Myth* as a dominant and hegemonic discourse that complicates my experience. This being said, my interested in identities is at the level of my subjective experience, as an evolving process of tensions and negotiations between my personal sentient and the dominant discourse or narratives that I encounter as a Latina.

Dance as the Means of Identity Inquiry

Jens Giersdorf argues that Dance Studies is anchored, as its matter of inquiry, to dance, choreography and *corporeality*[7] (319). This assertion heightens my attention to an important aspect of dance, the

[7] The accent is mine.

one that smoothly made my slippage from psychology to dance: the focus on the body and its politics. This implies that, as dancers and choreographers, there is a legitimate motivation to link the vast field of dance with larger concerns in the humanities and social sciences. Overall, dance has always been rooted in a desire to express the human engagement with the world through movement. In the early 30s, Doris Humphrey already reminded us, dancers would revaluate their mission statements by asking: "What I am dancing about?" "Is it worthy in the light of the kind of person I am and the kind of world I live in?" "But if not, what other kind of dance shall there be, and how should it be organized?"[8]

In her book *Choreographing Difference. The Body and Identity in Contemporary Dance* (1997), Ann Cooper Albright claims a special place for dance as a "crucial discourse" to analyze the moment in which she was writing. Although her book was published over two decades ago her insights are still current. Her arguments are helpful in the understanding of dance as both a practice and theory able to shed light on the most relevant debates about how cultural identities are negotiated and embodied. Furthermore, as she states, her approach challenges the way in which the body (and, by extension, dance) has been situated within Western epistemology (xv-xxvi).

[8] Doris Humphrey cited by Susan L. Foster (52)

Cooper Albright´s main contribution resides in that, through a close analysis of dances and feminist theories, she strives to assess the power of bodily movement. From her approach, it is possible to formulate that movement may be a great method to comprehend the tension in which one´s body is inescapably entangled. Inasmuch as identities involve the interplay of biological, social and cultural factors. For Cooper Albright, dance comprises what she calls "a double moment of representation." This means that there is a poignant recognition of bodies both producing and being produced by cultural discourses of gender, race, ability, sexuality, and age (xiii). This is further explained by her consideration of a dancer´s somatic identity (the experience of one´s physicality) and cultural one (how one´s body renders meaning in society) (xv-xxvi).

In practical terms, what this suggests for the dancing body is that audiences recognize it through social and cultural constructions of visual identity categories, once she or he is onstage.[9] This inevitable operation, Cooper Albright states, opens the question to see if the kinesthetic meaning embedded in the dancing itself, tell us (audiences), something about the treatment of such categories. "Is the style of movement consistent or resistant to the configuration of normative social categories?" "Does the performance situation (staging, lighting,

[9] Cooper Albright´s analysis is specifically referring to the theatre´s stage; however, I think we can extend the stage to which any space in which the dancing body is performing.

costuming, etc.) reinforce or refuse these categorizations?" This inquiry regarding movement and meaning is what much contemporary dance is concerned with, giving great examples of how physical bodies are both shaped by and resistant to cultural representations of identity (xiv).

In addition, dance historian Sally Banes also states that dance has the power to affect the way in which society constructs social meanings for the body. For Banes dance is in this constant interrelation with its social context. Dance then is a product of the meanings of its society at the same time that it produces meaning for society (43-50)**.** In these terms, based on this dialectic relation, my interest in the intersection between dance and the identity and representation of Latina bodies within American popular culture takes its relevance. I see my project can contribute to the general understanding of dancing bodies as sites of knowledge, history and power, while demonstrating the multidisciplinary character of dance studies.

Moreover, there is a point from Cooper Albright´s analysis that is highly useful to me for my creative exploration. She asserts that bodies in Western Culture are imbued with a network of different social ideologies full of able-ist, racist, classist, sexist, and repressive ideals. However, bodies, while inscribed by such social practices, are neither passive nor merely vessels of these structures of meaning. Rather bodies, she claims, are inherently unstable and in a paradoxical process of becoming, in fact, becoming undone (5).

That the physical body in dance is at the center of its own representation indicates that dance is not just about bodies, but subjectivity. Cooper Albright defines subjectivity as a process of positioning and responding to the world, namely, "how the dancing body is positioned as well as the ways that particular body responds to the world" (4). Thus, what is more interesting from this analysis is that the dancing body is simultaneously being formed at the very moment that it is creating its own representation. Thus, dancers are "in-the-doing"[10] of forming and producing their own bodies, their own identities, and by extension, reciprocally impacting the ways in which society creates, sees and values bodies, that is, people.

Therefore, it is possible to state the appropriateness of dance, an always-evolving phenomenon and field, to approach this transformative character of the body. And because our bodies are integrally intertwined with who we are, a consideration of the body is a consideration of our own identities. As a method, I see the importance of dance in its postmodern logic, in its power to reveal the intrinsic tensions and negotiations undergone through the identity process. In dance, from my perspective, what we as dancers strive for is for an open, versatile body, always able to change and transform. And this is possible just by the constant reflection of one´s own somatic identity in relation to its cultural one.

[10] By the movement they exert and the meaning that the performative situation creates (Cooper Albright 5).

So far I have set the foundation for considering dance as a fruitful framework and method in which to explore identities, more specifically subjectivities. This is possible because, having the body and its movement as its center of analysis, it allows for a close inspection of the interplay of one´s physical experience –somatic identity, and the social and cultural discourses – cultural identity, in which that particular body is immersed. Likewise, my revision of Cooper Albright´s arguments speak to the importance of having agency and power in responding through the body – the dancing body to normative assumptions of looking at and understanding bodies. This is especially relevant in the case of bodies that are negatively market and discriminated against in contexts in which an Andro-Ethno-Euro-Anglocentric order and views of the world are the norm. As a woman and dancer from Colombia, I feel affected by this vision and so compelled to explore and give shape to my own position or perspective with regard to what I have identified as the *Latina Myth*.

Exploring the *Latina Myth*: The Mainstream as the Point of Departure

In the introduction of *Latino/a Popular Culture,* editors Romero and Habel-Pallan (2002), offer a general overview of important aspects in the consideration of Latino/a identity and representations in the United States. Their approach puts popular culture at the center of analysis. Drawing from Stuart Hall´s assertions, they claim (American) popular culture as a site where the dominant cultural discourses are assimilated

and/or contested and resisted. In the case of Latinos and Latinas, it seems like their presence in mainstream news and in popular culture reinforces the "much-heralded Latin Explosion." Yet the images themselves are often contradictory (1-24).

This reflection supports my interest in focusing on U.S. visual American popular culture in order to explore what I have identified as the *Latina Myth.* I have borrowed and distilled this expression from Ovalle´s analysis, in which she examines the role of Latinas in Hollywood from the early era of Silent Films up to now. The notion of a popular *Latina Myth*, as Ovalle explains, is built upon Ronald Barthes´ (1972) use of the term *mythology*. In Ovalle´s examination the process of myths "transforming history into nature" is of great relevance (2). According to Barthes, and adding to the definition of myths, Michelle Bloom well summarizes that:

> "myths are societal ideals that lack roots in any sort of immediate concrete reality but come to construct social ideas of truth. Through the perpetuation of myths we, as a society, sustain certain ideologies that come to compose our truths. Myths both construct and maintain societal conventions" (9).

In her book *Dance and the Hollywood Latina*, Ovalle focuses on five mainstream Hollywood actresses: Dolores del Rio, Carmen Miranda, Rita Hayworth, Rita Moreno and Jennifer Lopez. With different roles on the screen, these actresses, among others, have contributed to a building up of a fixed image of what Latinas are. At the core of Ovalle´s analysis are the concepts of "inbetween-ness" and "racial mobility." These notions

highlight the fact that, by playing with cultural codes, the dancing brown body on screen has been used to navigate within the racial tensions of blackness and whiteness in the United States (1-23).

Latinas have been portrayed with either "white" or "black" features depending on the intentions of cultural projects that have helped the U.S to create national identity. Moreover, through dance Hollywood has been able to visually crystalize a cultural representation of Latinas that showcases them as exotic "others" and merely sexy women (Ovalle 1-23). This is so, Ovalle offers in explanation, because:

> … the myth of the Hollywood Latina buries the colonial and imperial history of the Americas … Since the Spanish Conquest and Manifest Destiny, this myth has been built upon a succession of colonial relationships organized around race, gender, and sexuality; its visualization and perpetuation in the twentieth century, however, have relied on collapsed, codified, and reiterated depictions of dance and racialized sexuality that signify the Latina´s amoral behavior and impermanence (2).

In my exploration, I verified Ovalle´s assertions with other critical analyses made in films, which made it possible to establish Latina stereotypes. A general reflection on stereotypes as a cognitive process is neither bad nor good, explains Charles Ramírez Berg. It is about creating categories to recognize things. Even more, we all create categories. In these terms, he further explains, stereotypes can be understood as category-making (14). The case of Latina and Latino stereotyping in mass media involves a discursive system that might be called "Latinism" (a play on Edward Said´s Orientalism): the construction of Latin America

and its inhabitants and of Latinas/os in the U.S to justify the United States´ imperialistic goals. This has been operationalized externally as the Monroe Doctrine and internally as Manifest Destiny; U.S imperialism has been based on the notion that the nation should control the entire hemisphere, willing to fight any one who disagreed. On the whole, Hollywood endorsed North American dominance of this hemisphere, and as often as it depicted that hegemony uncritically, movies helped to perpetuate general assumptions (Ramírez Berg 14).

From this perspective, Ramírez Berg concludes that stereotypes can be defined as the result of a negative generalization used by an in-group (Us) about an out- group (Them): category-making –ethnocentrism - prejudice – stereotyping. Stereotypes are applied with rigid logic, "If you are …, then you must." As a result he claims fixity is a key element "in the ideological construction of otherness" (15).

Stereotypes grossly simplify generalizations that assume Out-group homogeneity; they even ignore individual agency and variety. Therefore, stereotypes are uncontextualized and ahistorical; instead stereotyping creates facile abbreviations that by virtue of their regular repetition create their own history. Even worse, the virtual history (stereotypical) can replace the actual (lived) or the stereotypical images can become familiar to the point that they eventually seem normal, even natural (Ramírez Berg16-17).

In the particular case of Latinas, Ramírez Berg has identified three female stereotypes: *The Harlot, the Female Clown and Dark Lady* (39). This is consonant with Ovalle´s ideas, as well as complementary of other examinations. For instance, from a more intra cultural perspective, playwright Josefina López (1996) and Chicana scholar Gloria Anzaldúa (2007) have identified the generalization of Latinas as "virgins, mothers and whores." Anzaldúa refers to this cultural assumption even as a "cultural tyranny." Analyzing her own context, she points out the patriarchal order of Latina/o Culture in which women are at the bottom of the hierarchy of power and respect. Latinas, she states, seem to be in need of protection and under the orders of men. Thus, their voice is mostly passive, they are detached from their own bodies, and their place/role in society is reserved for very narrow spaces ("the house, the church, or the streets" (39). For my creative process I combined these analyses, and based on the movies and videos I watched, I identified four main stereotypes: submissive, fierce, slutty and voluptuous.

That stereotypes and general assumptions about a group of people – Latinas – can be identified does not mean, however, that they cannot be challenged. On the contrary, Anzaldúa dedicated her writing on cultural, feminist and queer theory to emancipatory ends. Her concept of borderlands is very helpful to understanding that, predefined notions (about women but also men) transmitted culturally, can be in fact challenged and questioned. She claims, while "culture forms our beliefs"

and influences the way we perceive reality and ourselves, our personal experiences or las experiencias de la gente[11], disrupt this order and constantly transform it. Taking into account again, that people form culture and culture forms people reciprocally, Anzaldúa empowered those who feel they are not in one place at a time geographically, psychologically or otherwise. By coining her new concept of borderlands in which one can be female *and* masculine, from the south *and* from the north, Anzaldúa brings light and pride to those who "cross over, or go through the confines of the normal" by challenging exclusive social categories of identity (25).

Considerations about Latina/o identity in the U.S.

My desire to embark on a choreographic process that inquires about my cultural identity as a Latina, speaks of my precarious reflection about my self-identification with a category that confronts me with issues of race and ethnicity. In my search for possible ways to understand what a Latina/o identity might encompass, I encountered an interesting discussion that approaches the complexity of touching on subjects of race and ethnicity while referring to people from Latin America.

In her discussion about if Latina/o is a racial identity, Linda Martín Alcoff underlines a very interesting point. She suggests that Latina/o identity ´s relationship to the conventional categories of race that have been historically dominant in the United States is a

[11] The experience of a people. The translation is mine.

particularly vexing one. Moreover, she states "to put it straightforwardly, we simply don´t fit" (23). She argues that this is because racialized identities in the Unite States, the institutional and ideological forms that racism has taken in the U.S, are generally not analogues to those in Latin America. This consideration however, does not mean that in Latin America color is not a relevant factor for marriage, and that anti-black racism and condescension towards the indigenous people do not operate. It is just that, as she articulates, we are not homogenous by race (24).

Alcoff further notes something that highly resonates with me:

> "This is why many of us find our identity as well as our social status changing as we step off the plane or cross the river: race suddenly becomes an all-important aspect of our identity, and sometimes our racial identity dramatically changes in ways over which it feels as if we have no control"(24).

Since, racialized identities in the U.S have long connoted homogeneity, easily visible identifying features, and that is not the case of Latinas/os, Alcoff suggests revising the problem from a different perspective. She turns to think of Latina/os in terms of *ethnicity* instead (25).

Ethnicity, she indicates, would avoid the problem of racial diversity within Latina/o communities and yet recognize the cultural links among Latinas/os in the North (Alcoff 25). Furthermore that would acknowledge what better unites Latinas/os both across and even within, our specific national cultures. That is not race or phenotype but precisely those features associated with culture: language, religious traditions, cultural values, characteristics of comportment, etc. (34). The consideration of

ethnicity as the best account for Latina/o identity could recognize the salient aspects of social identity, allow for more internal heterogeneity, and resist the racializing that so often mischaracterizes our own sense of self. However, Alcoff warns us, it is important to recognize that the "ethnic option" is not fully adequate to the contemporary social realities we face, and may inhibit the development of useful political strategies for our diverse communities (25).

With this in mind, Alcoff continues her analysis advocating for ethnicity as a better way to approach Latina/o identity. She suggests that another way to respond to the forced racialization is to argue for, and self-identify as, an ethnic group that encompasses different nationalities and races within it. She invites us to see why an ethnic category will be more useful than race:

- Our identity is more about culture and nationality than race. But in the U.S cultural, national, ethnic, religious and other forms of identification are constantly subordinated to race. This leads to a biological essentialism (34).
- A representation by ethnic terms rather than racial ones confers agency on a people; it invokes historical experience as well as cultural and linguistic practices, all of which are associations with human subjectivity, not objectivity. In contrast, race is often said to be something one has no control over, something one can´t help… the goal here, of course, is not only to change white´s assumptions about racialized groups, but also to help alter the self-image of people in those groups themselves toward a more affirming identity, an identity in which on can take justifiable pride (35).

However, Alcoff finishes her analysis by stating that perceived racial identity often does trump ethnic or cultural identity (37). Therefore, she appeals to the use of *ethnorace*, a term coined by David Theo Goldberg. Unlike race, she explains, *ethnorace* does not imply a common descent, which is what entangles race in notions of biological determinism. Additionally, she argues, *ethnorace* might embrace the human agency and subjectivity implied in the consideration of ethnicity. That is, it will encompass an identity that:

> "is the product of self-creation –at the same time that acknowledges the uncontrolled racializing aspects associated with the visible body. And the term will remind us that there are at least two concepts, rather than one, that are vitally necessary for the understanding of Latina/o identity in the United States: ethnicity and race" (42).

Intersections: Postmodern Dance and Latina Identity and Representation in American Popular Culture

In her book *Writing Dance in the Age of Postmodernism* (1994), Banes claims that the reflection of dance in postmodern terms is framed in the uneasy space that the treatment of dance, music, visual arts and theater occupy in American society. Thus, for the author, the discussion between "high" and "low" art and between the acceptable, desirable and the margins constitutes the terms in which postmodernism and its roots in modernism have come to be defined. Furthermore, she states that in dance, postmodernism refers simultaneously to a historical moment (post American avant-garde dance of the sixties) and a method of

analyzing dance. Although Banes recognizes that what has been labeled as postmodern dance has changed since she began writing about it in the seventies; one enduring aspect of it is an increased concern for its content over the form, particularly with the politics of identity (vii).

Demographically speaking that means that its practitioners have become more multicultural. Especially during the nineties, she states:

> "postmodern dance has become multicultural in every sense: it is multiethnic; it advocates diversity of gender, sexual choice, age and physical ability; and includes within its vocabulary every available genre of dance, gleaned from the entire hierarchy of cultural levels. Further, it restores the speaking voice to the dancer´s body. It is a historically conscious movement that reproduces, recycles, and renews dances from different eras (xiv)."

In the 80s for the first time, a new wave of young choreographers identified themselves as bicultural in a specific avant-garde way among which can be found Latinas/os and postmodernists. Although there is little literature on this topic, Banes claims that for this generation, at least in New York, its work was informed both by their postmodern dance heritage and their particular political identity. In her analysis she notes that the articulation of gender identity, the recognition of sexual identities, and the affirmation of ethnic identity are at times elements interwoven in Latino postmodern dances. Moreover, Banes states that the analysis of pursuing identity in dance, in this case of Latina/o identity challenges the master narratives and myths of homogeneity in

American culture as well as the specific discursive practices of mainstream dance (328).

Although the Latin community in the United States is quite varied, its representation in American popular culture tends to embrace it as a homogenous whole. Banes highlights however, the fact that Latinas/os share some sense of unity: on one hand partly because of their exclusion from the main stream American culture, and on the other because of Spanish as a main shared language[12]. In that sense, it can be asserted that Latina/o identity in the arts, particularly in dance, is a unity, yet not a homogeneous arena. What has happened, in the best cases, is that postmodern techniques have been adapted to create a political identity leaving its content in the interest of the specific community (Banes, 1994:329). This has been the case, Banes documents, of artist such as Puerto Rican Viveca Vázquez[13] and Mexican Merian Soto[14].

From another perspective, Juliet McMains examines representations of latinness in American ballroom practices and reality TV shows such as *Dancing with the Stars* and states that Latin dance practices have been appropriated and redefined, at the cost of erasing

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[12] This however excludes Brazilian people whose language is Portuguese.

[13] In her analysis Banes refers to Vázquez´s piece *Mascando Inglés* (Chewing English) (1984), in which the artist exposes through movement the difficulty of assimilating a new languge for Latin community. "Forced to speak a new language, Vázquez forces the body to do the same " (Banes 329).

[14] Her piece *No Regrets* (1988) mixes live performance with specifically Latin popular genres such as soap operas on Spanish TVand the fotonovela. In the piece cultural popular is appreciated, but it is also parodied (Banes 330).

and displacing traditions of Latin dance by Latin people. She notes that for more than a century, Europeans and North Americans in their inclusion of Latin dances in studios, competitions, ballrooms and parties, have somehow simplified the rhythms, minimized their improvisatory elements, and have incorporated balletic aesthetics including straight legs, vertical postures and extended limbs (266). She reveals that popular practices and mass media reinforce a dangerous misconception that balleticized Latin dance is a more evolved (i.e. superior) expression than the "cruder" Latin original form. By extension, ethnic and racial hierarchies are reinforced, which implies that "Latin Americans who developed "primitive" Latin dances are inferior to the North Americans and Europeans who "refine" them (MacMains 267).

In the specific case of Latinas, Ovalle shows how Hollywood has been able to visually crystalize a cultural representation of Latinas that showcases them as exotic "others" and merely sexy women. Thus, the career of Jennifer Lopez as dancer, singer, actress and magnate, for example, shows the malleability of the iconographic Latina body. Her career has proved how self-commodification has negotiated her representation within mass media and beyond. In most of the cases then, Latina stars have been able to reproduce (sometimes also resist) the cultural images that mainstream Hollywood and mass media have been willing to transmit, depending on what has been most lucrative at a certain time (Ovalle 126-144).

Whether by the kinesthetic power of movement or by the way the filmic scenes are framed, it can be asserted that Hollywood has taken advantage of what is at the core of our realities. That is, that culture is not merely a production and transmission of meaning encoded primarily in words and artifacts, but a bodily experience in which humans inscribe fundamental principles of being a member of a particular group or society (Polhemus 6). Within the dance field, these theories regarding culture and the symbolic power of movement have enriched the conceptualization, creation and production of dance art, predominantly since the 80s.

Within that framework, I see a more critical position though, one in which dance can be investigated in another way (perhaps more liberating) to see and recreate Latina bodies. As a Latina, I feel concern about my position within this hierarchy of cultural representations, in which, though somehow accepted, it is a fact that Latinos/as do not enjoy of the privilege of white culture. This is also reflected in the history of dance, in which one can learn that Latina American vernacular art has been relegated to the margins of what is considered at the center of dance art.

As a woman, I also see the commodification of the Latina body as an element to be closely questioned in the U.S., and to an extent in Western culture. Within the dance field authors such as Banes, Foster, Dempster, Daly, Cooper Albright, among others have shown the close

relationship between dance and feminist theory. Banes (1998) exposes how choreographers have inquired about the different roles of women in society, through the content of their dances and the use of different pedagogies in the generation of movement. This means that the field of dance has been a territory sensitive to changes in society, being a medium in which gender identities (and others) can be explored.

On the other hand, Jane Wolff claims that there are problems with using the female body for feminist ends. “Its pre-existing meanings, as sex object, as object of the male gaze, always can prevail and reappropriate the body, despite the intentions of the woman herself” (415). Since the female body has been particularly repressed and oppressed in Western culture with specific practices, ideologies and discourses, Wolff states that what is repressed may threaten to erupt and challenge the established order. So there is every reason also to propose the body as a privileged site of political intervention, precisely because it is the site of oppression and possession (415).

Dance and women have been historically intertwined; moreover, from the beginning of the twentieth century dance has been seen as an important breakthrough for women. In a more effective way, postmodern dance has questioned and thus changed the ways female bodies have been represented on stage. By a consideration of women´s bodies, stories and lives, dance has led me to conclude that it is a good medium for political and aesthetic transgression. However, Wolff states dance can

only be subversive when it questions and exposes the construction of bodies in culture. When the operations and actions of the body are made clear, that is, the body itself is the subject of inquiry, she claims, the body can indeed provide a site for a radical cultural politics. So, it is pressing to create and provide contextualized representations that defy hegemonic and dominant discourses (414-425).

In my own case, I embarked on such a quest. As a dance artist, I am already on the journey of finding the means to prove, as Dempster states, how one´s body has the capacity to both speak and be spoken about, in many different ways. With these reflections, I have become more aware of my own cultural background. Also, I have discovered more reasons to think in dance – a practice, which is always in flux, that deals with these bodies, which are also always in flux. This postmodern perspective is the source of my inspiration. Agreeing with Dempster, through my art I am interested in presenting neither perfect, ideal nor unified forms, nor bodies driven by inner imperatives, but bodies of bones, muscles and flesh speaking of and for themselves. That is, I strive to assert a writing of the body, including of my own body, that is conditional, circumstantial and over all transitory, a body that is subject to multiple representations (233).

CHAPTER III

METHODOLOGY

Introduction

As a result of my artistic inquiry, *Not About Me* came to life as a 30-minute theatrical dance piece that I performed on March 1, 2013, in the Dougherty Dance Theatre at the University of Oregon. I shared the evening performance with fellow graduate student Laura Black. The movement exploration culminated being a solo work that used video, music, and theatrical elements to communicate a contextualized and particular story of a Latina. I focused on the subjective experience of my physical, dancing body in relation to some of the dominant narratives embedded in the *Latina Myth* that circulate in American Popular Culture. In this way, I approached my own body and identity as a Colombian Latina, who currently studies, lives and creates art in the Unites States.

Not About Me, however, had different beginnings, twists and turns throughout the creative process. Consequently, the piece turned out to be a complex journey-process, challenging to describe in a linear way. As a choreographer and performer, I was also interested in finding my own strategies for the exploration of movement, as well as having the freedom to adjust and redesign both the creative process and ultimately, the piece as it informed the project. This parallels to some extent the evolving and always in process nature of my subject matter -identity. Yet the methodology remained constant, becoming an important frame that

shaped both my movement exploration and the creative process. I knew that in my attempt to debunk the *Latina Myth* I wanted to explore at least three spheres that I have outlined as follow:

1. Expose the main narratives embedded in the *Latina Myth* relevant to me.

2. Show my subjective position with regard to the *Latina Myth* by examining my personal story as a Colombian woman.

3. Celebrate the vibrant artistic possibility of diversity on stage.

In order to explore these spheres that instigate enriching reflections about my identity, I used a series of methods that combined phases of: data gathering, inner dialogue or data analysis, expression or presentation of results, and outer dialogue or regulating feedback. Theses phases have been thoroughly described by Robyn Flaum Cruz and Cynthia F. Berrol (188-189). Dance artists and researchers have found them useful in the validation of artistic inquiry. Liana Conyers used them in her creative process of her M.F.A thesis *Shedding Skin in Art-Making: Choreographing Identity of the Black Female Self through Exploration of Cultural Autobiographies* (2012), which had common aspects with my own. Therefore, I threaded my methods following a similar structure, as I engaged with the three intellectual spheres I have previously outlined.

Because of the subjective and exploratory nature of this investigation, I have taken some time to describe moments that

happened earlier in the process and did not appear in the final performance. Yet, they were of great importance in the conception of *Not About Me*. Though I removed much of the initial material I worked out for a relatively long period of time, I am now aware that I would have not have been able to conceive of the final version had I not gone through the entire process, i.e., working with a group, rechoreographing on myself, etc. My experience, reflections and decisions going through the gestation of *Not About Me* are what I can ultimately offer in this choreographic journey.

Description of Methods

Group and Solo Work Exploration:

Not About Me was always primarily thought of as a solo work since my cultural identity was at the core of the inquiry and exploration. However, I initially chose to recruit a small group of dancers to work on ideas. Three were students from the dance program with different cultural backgrounds (Finnish, Japanese and Filipino), and the fourth was a dancer from the Eugene community, from the United States, who is a wheelchair user. My original intention was to extend my personal inquiry about cultural stereotypes to the other dancers and other social realms by exploring their subjective experiences. I sought to broaden the reflection and link it with other social constructions that represent "otherness" in Western Culture and drastically influence the way we conceive the normative dancing body. Having a dancer with a physical

disability made sense because of my experience working in integrated dance settings. This could contrast the assumption that Latinas are merely dedicated to Latin dances and could also show my real understanding of dance and movement.

Dancers other than me were not present in the final performance, however. Although they contributed to the development and revealing of important elements that led me to distill and shape my final decisions, their participation in the final performance was not essential to my inquiry. I experienced in the midst of the process that the reflection about my own identity was already a huge endeavor. This required a more personal and introspective reflection that did not leave time for a thorough exploration of the other dancers' subjectivities, as was my initial intention. Rather than crafting a piece that would lack integrity, I decided to spend more time focusing just on myself, elaborating and articulating in depth what I was finding was revealed to me during the process.

Miguel Gutierrez as an Artistic Discourse:

Miguel Gutierrez is a dance and music artist from Brooklyn, whose parents are from Colombia. He creates solo and group dances and focuses on creating real situations in which the body´s sensations and non-rational reactions are prioritized. For him, dance itself is a mode of perceptual inquiry. His work is permeated with feelings and existential inquiry and is also framed inside a legacy of process-focused

experimental dance.[15] My interest in Gutierrez´s work stemmed from one of my elective classes during the Winter 2012[16]. In addition, he was also suggested as a source for my inquiry during my prospectus approval. I was thrilled to know more about his experimental approach to dance and the collaborative nature of his ensemble, the Powerful People, as he calls his collaborators.

I contacted him through a personal email, in which I exposed my interest in his work and my curiosity about his thinking in relation to issues of identity. In July 2012, I visited New York City and interviewed him. We met for over an hour, during which Gutierrez shared his opinions with regard to a series of questions that I prepared in advanced. My questions were meant to be a structure for our conversation rather than a questionnaire, leaving room for Gutierrez to express freely about the topic at hand (See Appendix A). I recorded the interview on my computer, which allowed me to transcribe it later and to analyze the information (See Appendix B).

Later, in September, I had the opportunity to take master classes with him in Portland, Oregon at the TBA:12 Festival. In December, I attended his workshop "Making Work" in NYC. Through this multi-faceted and extended exposure, I obtained practical, creative tools that I

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[15] *miguelgutierrez.org*. 24 April 2013
http://www.miguelgutierrez.org/powerfulpeople/miguel-gutierrez/

[16] Contemporary Views offered by Assistant Professor Shannon Mockli at the University of Oregon.

later used in my own process and revealed myself as a performer. My notes during these experiences helped me keep track of my insights.

Visual Imaginary Exploration:

Essential for the conception and development of the project was my literature review from which I extracted the notion of the *Latina Myth* from Ovalle´s book *Dance and the Hollywood Latina. Race, Sex and Stardom* (2011). This led me to source mainstream U.S visual Popular Culture, since this is where the notion of a *Latina Myth* comes from, or where the dancing Latina constitutes an important element of national imagination. Thus, I spent the summer watching movies, music videos, TV shows and peeking at magazines in which Latinas are at the center of attention[17]. I searched for images of Latina popular artists from the past and the present. I was interested in finding common features in their visual representations as well as in documenting how dance and what kind of movements, constitute this stereotyped representation.

In that search, I confirmed, as Ovalle (2011) affirms in her book, Latinas have mainly been represented under specific roles and features in the movies, TV shows and music videos. Artists such as Jennifer López, SofíaVergara, Selena Gómez, Salma Hayek, Shakira Mebarak, Rita Moreno, Carmen Miranda among others who are considered Latina icons in American Popular Culture have received a common treatment in their

[17] I watch movies and TV shows such as: *Maid in Manhattan*, *The Wedding Planner*, *Roadracers*, *54*, *Selena*, *Flashdance*, *Colombiana*, *West Side Story* and *Modern Family* TV show.

image. Although myths, as social constructions, are complex and vary depending on the specific social context and through time, I identified outstanding features that persist and intersected in my literature and visual investigation. These features are displayed through visual depictions of Latinas being submissive, fierce, passionate, slutty, funny, sexy and voluptuous women. This condenses their exoticism and otherness within American popular culture. This analysis corresponds with critical analysis made in film, visual and cultural studies.[18]

Video Collaboration and Photography:

A central aspect of the project was my collaboration with multimedia artist Shannon Knight. Because of the nature of my inquiry, its relation with American Popular Culture and visual representations, I wanted to work with video from the beginning of the creative process. This would add depth and meaning to my final work.

Knight is a sensitive and creative person, and her art is framed by a desire to explore and experiment with different media (movement, video, painting, and photography). Our collaborative discussion centered on the value of pushing against stereotypes. She is, among other things,

[18] See for example, *Latino Images in Film: Stereotypes, Subversion and Resistance* by Charles Ramírez-Berg, *Latina/o Starts in U.S Eyes: The Making and Meaning in Film and TV Stardom* by Mary Beltrán, and *From Bananas to Buttocks: The Latina Body in Popular Film and Culture* by Myra Mendible.

a certified DanceAbility teacher[19]; therefore she comes with vast experience working with people with and without disabilities. This background connected us. To some extent, this is evidence of her openness to reflection on subjects of difference and otherness within the dance field. I knew that she would be a great person with whom to interact with and that her approach to the subject of my movement project would benefit the creative process.

She was part of the creative process in different ways. Initially, we used photography, a medium that allowed me to explore U.S popular visual imaginary applied to my own body. A photo shoot turned out to be a key process that helped in the processes of distilling narratives embedded in the *Latina Myth* as well as my movement explorations afterward. Knight also participated in some studio movement and creative studies I used in a more advanced phase of the creative process. Her feedback in the end pushed my skills as a performer. Our main collaboration, still, consisted in the creation of three short videos that accompanied the final piece.

Music Collaboration:

In search of elements that would add depth and meaning to my final work, I collaborated as well with my husband and musician Kenji Ota. In addition to our extended experience working in past creative

[19] DanceAbility teacher certification is a specific dance method, developed by Alito Alessi, thatenablespeopletoworkwithintegratedgroups of mixed-abilitiesparticipants. For more information see: http://www.danceability.com/teacher.php

processes, I was interested in Ota composing the music for the dance piece because we share the same cultural background; he is also Colombian. Likewise, he moved to Eugene with me to support my studies, which positions us both in a similar foreign situation. I knew he would understand and share my questions, feelings, and concerns in regard to my inquiry.

Although his approach to music is diverse, part of his interest has been to re-appropriate folkloric rhythms from Colombia and Latin America in his musical creations.[20] During my time in the United States, Latin music has become a relevant element that revives movement histories and memories in my body. My intention then, was to access these stories either by finding existing musical themes or by his original compositions.

Ota composed different music tracks during the creative process. Initially he composed a *cumbia* theme that triggered, in an early stage of the process, important explorations of movement in which I improvised to the music. He also composed music for my showings, when I used a tentative choreography structure to show to my Thesis Committee. Lastly, he composed the final music and edited some of the text-sound of *Not About Me.* My advisor, Christian Cherry also helped in the editing of some of the text-sound for the piece.

[20] Ota has two original songs *Exhala and Aire al Fuego* composed and written by him in his album Varío that uses *bambuco* and *porro* rhtyms from Colombian folklore, respectively. He also interprets *bossa* nova rhythms from Brazil.

Studio Work and Video Documentation:

All of the above elements led to a rich time of work in the dance studio in which I explored movement through improvisation using different strategies. I also video documented most of the rehearsal process, which enabled me to choreograph *Not About Me* on my body. Although my movement exploration started at the end of the summer coming into the studio for two weeks, three times each week[21], most of the exploration and choreographic process happened during Fall and Winter term 2012-13, before the dance concert in which it was presented. During the Fall, I came into the dance studio for sessions of two hours to work by myself, at least once a week, during the 10 weeks of the term. In this same period, I met eight times with the group for sessions of two hours as well. I occasionally met with one or two dancers to develop duet material. During these sessions the use of video recording was paramount to my process. This was the way I kept track of my explorations, especially of solo work. Video constituted the way I could have an "external" eye on myself, essential for my choreographic process. I followed the movement exploration with some personal notes

[21] These first two weeks I improvised moving continuously with music and without music for periods of over an hour. I video recorded these sessions and watched them afterwards. I was interested in looking at my diverse ways of moving spontaneously. Sometimes I did it in silence, some others I played randomly music from my computer´s music library. This practice simulated an exercise I did in Miguel Gutierrez´s master class at the TBA:12, which he calls "continuous movement". It consists in moving constantly for a certain period of time. In his class we moved constantly for about 15-20 minutes.

that constituted a sort of journal, which supported my reflections and creative process as well.

Feedback:

Lastly, I engaged in Liz Lerman´s Critical Response Process (see Appendix C) in order to help me shape my final product and set a dialogue about my reflections with others. For this purpose, I invited fellow graduate dance student Katie Scherman and choreographer and dancer Cynthia Gutierrez-Garner. I had two feedback sessions with them, one at the end of Fall term before my first showing to my Thesis Committee, and another close to the performance, after my second showing to my Thesis Committee. Although we did not follow the Liz Lerman´s Critical Response Process with my Thesis Committee, their feedback fed the creative and final crafting of the piece. So did my other "hundred" conversations I had with my other graduate dance student fellows, Colombian friends, family, and other dancers and choreographers such as Sarah Ebert, Miguel Gutierrez and Mark Haim.

CHAPTER IV

DISCUSSION

Description of *Not About Me*

Not About Me starts with an open, dark stage in which some objects: two small tables, papers, bottles, a handbag, dresses and shoes are strewn across the floor resembling a "party-mess" that needs to be cleaned up. The audience can see this while sitting. I enter through one of the side doors of the theatre, located on the opposite from the entrance the audience came through. The door closes heavily after me, which warns the audience that the performance has begun. I am dressed as a maid, and I bring with me a backpack, an umbrella, and a pair of black heavy boots that I leave in front of the stage once the lights are turned on, as a sensor "effect," as if activated with my presence. The maid has come to work. I bring a boombox playing a song in Spanish about Latin America. I pause, see the space, drink some water, arrange my uniform and take a deep breath in an act of preparation for the cleaning. I clean and clear up the space, I act and move in a functional way; I am literally cleaning up and I use different tools such as a duster, a basket, napkins, etc. While doing so, a change of lights surprises me; they dim and a video is projected in the background. I keep working but my attention is directed now to what is happening on screen. The images on screen change. The images are of me acting and dancing as a "Latina star," wearing the different character costumes: *the maid, Chiquita banana,* the

salsa and *fierce-elegant* dresses. Images get layered. The visuals on screen are mostly frontal shots of me walking, smiling at the audience, shaking my arms, hands, shoulders, dancing, singing, dressing and putting on make up. The presence of the maid working on stage contrasts the dreamy and fancy reality of the "movie stars" on screen. At the end of the video projection, the curtains close and this is the transition into the next moment of the piece.

The following section is more intimate and confrontational. Right before the curtain closes completely, I sneak out and stand in front of the curtain before the audience. A spotlight coming from the front of the house, that makes me feel vulnerable and exposed, illuminates me. I stand there; I can feel the audience very close; I even hear the breath of some people. I perform slow, gestural movements while my voice over the sound system asks some questions of the character on stage. My face shows how uncomfortable I feel, my head and hands adopt submissive postures. The questions reveal the Latin, foreign and low-income status of the maid, some questions are indeed in Spanish. She may not even understand English, and she is working to support her family whom she does not see very often, probably. Perhaps she did not have many choices to make in her life in regard to the education and profession she has. Slowly this character takes off the maid uniform, which exposes her even more; now she is wearing red underwear. The questions continue, but now the interpolation is different. The new woman, or this other

version of the Latina, is being questioned about her sexuality. Perhaps she is very slutty, promiscuous. She may even have tried to marry an American guy. My face in this moment exposes this new vulnerability. I feel sort of naked and embarrassed, humiliated. I go back to putting on my heavy black boots, the boots that the maid has brought with her. The boots make me feel strong, and bring a little confidence to the character. Now she looks more assertive; she is empowered, sexy, a fierce Latina, "ready for action."

A lyrical guitar soundtrack comes in; I start moving my arms. The arms remain close to my torso, face, and head, showing tension in the movement. This is followed by my arms holding my hair, first as a gesture of recognition of my long straight hair; later in an act of discomfort in which I pull my hair side to the side, causing me to go down to the floor or turning. After this section, the curtains open and, while I step back into the stage space, a video is projected again on the background. On the screen is me once more, now getting covered by paint that is thrown at me. In the screen, I receive the paint splatter in a sort of stoic way and then I move and dance, sensing the paint on my body; these are big movements that take space and spiral around. My arms keep moving while I back up; this time in an agitated way. I stop upstage, I keep moving my arms, these are "why" gestures. The questions inside my mind are "Why?" "Why do I have to answer so many questions?" "Why do we sexualize women?" "Why am I called a woman of

color?" At this moment, I feel released from my close contact with the audience, however, I also feel frustration; frustration of being objectified, at the same time that I feel vulnerable having shown myself in these ways.

The following section, after the video ends, begins with me realizing, via a spot light, that there is a stack of books on one side of the stage. I walk over to read them and, acting in a seductive way, I manipulate the books and pile a few of them in a different spot on stage. I walk with my heavy boots which make me trip and fall down to the floor. Then, a short "battle" between my boots and me starts. I dance with the boots on, but I keep falling and not being able to fully move, the boots are just too heavy. I end up realizing that it was a bad idea to have put them on. I take them off and sit down in the new pile of books that I have put down on the floor. Then I stand on them and dance showing some anger with the books, frustrated, perhaps because I did not find in them an answer to my questions. This act has been accompanied by music, first ambient music that has some tension in it, later by music with lyrics – at the beginning with voices that cannot be understood – that turn into the lyrics of the "Chiquita Banana" commercial of the 40s. This section ends with me sliding off on the books I have thrown previously during my dance. I notice I have sort of lost control of the situation and that I am still in my red underwear and my hair is messy. I look back at the original pile of books and run behind them. I try to hide.

The audience can just see my head coming out from behind the stack of books.

While feeling sort of helpless in this situation, a dress gets thrown to the stage from the left wing, upstage. I run towards it, looking for something to put on. A black out follows. When the lights come back again, I am dressed in the *Chiquita banana* dress. I agitatedly move my arms again and roll down and up. The soundtrack that has started again is a part of the popular Lady Gaga´s song "I Was Born This Way." While I am standing there moving my arms, some bananas are thrown at me, I pick one up, open it and take a bite, while walking energetically down stage closer to the audience. A microphone is waiting for me, I exchange the banana for the microphone, and while moving, with popular dance moves, I sing the chorus of the song "I´m beautiful in my way, cause God make no mistakes, I´m on the right track, baby I was born this way… baby I was born this way…" The song stops.

The next section is followed by some recorded text. It is my voice again, this time talking to myself. I speak in Spanish, and talk about what has just happened. I say in Spanish,

> this is a joke, this is a joke right? How could this even occur to me, how did I even came to this question? Who even cares? Well, maybe I am the only one who cares about these things, well but the important thing is that I care, and that this is important to the people I love; that this makes sense to me.

While this text is being spoken, I take the dress off to start moving and dancing again, this time to a text that is spoken by Karen Daly and me. The text is the answer to the three questions we used during the creative process: “Who cares?” “Can you tell?” and, “What if?” This dance is a phrase I created distilling material that I found in my different improvisations during the creative process. This ends by me putting on the heavy black boots again that are still on stage. At this point another video is projected in the background. It is me running backwards in black shorts and a top, the same clothing that I am wearing on stage. I step offstage and come back wearing a dress from my personal wardrobe. I hold a book in my hands and run to the front, close to the audience, as I was at the beginning of the piece. I look at them, it is me, the real me this time! I am dressed as I normally dress. The heavy black boots are also part of my personal wardrobe. I have a Hawaiian hair flower that I clip on my hair, the lights go off, I step back onto the stage, the lights come up and I bow. The performance is over.

Reflections about the Creative Process

The process of choreographing *Not About Me* was a rich endeavor that challenged me in multiple ways: as a choreographer, performer, and certainly, as a person. Albeit at times the nature of the project felt overwhelming, I am thankful I took this opportunity to make art, and a rigorous reflection, out of my conceptual and personal concerns. Overall, I am very satisfied with the exploration of movement in this project. It

turned out to be revelatory in aspects of identity, showing me different sides of myself that I did not expect. I discovered, beyond the *Latina Myth*, that my body could be read both as vulnerable and strong. Likewise, I faced that my Latina identity is composed of multiple aspects that cannot be reduced to a single view of the Latin culture. Furthermore, I learned that my body carries histories of which I was not previously aware, and that it is sensitive and contingent upon its context. Ultimately, I experienced that have the power to turn my identity inquires into art, putting into motion a larger dialogue about human existence.

However, during the process I found myself with different problem-solving situations that often changed my creative course. For example, I struggled to narrow down the scope of my investigation, not foreseeing the complexity of reviewing and working with one´s own identity. This affected particularly my clarity about how to relate with the other dancers´ cultural identities. This caused me to eliminate a large part of choreography with which I worked for a very long period of time; all resulted in not having any other dancer on stage rather than me for the final performance. Similarly, it took me a while to realize that the work speaks by itself, even though it is framed by specific explorations. When I interviewed Miguel Gutierrez, in an initial phase of my investigation, talking about the practical way he works in his creative processes, he discussed something that is noted in his artistic statement; which is:

> I think in the moment of making something (work) you get involved, or I get involved in the thingness of it; of what the thing is, if the thing would go here, or better here or here, and I think, it is hard not to do this, but you try to not be too heady yourself and be like: what is the impact of the thing? … I would be stupid to not say at some moment AND it's (the thing) a huge cultural icon (he is describing his cellphone), so I can´t just not treat it as an object I have to treat it as a sort of anchor of meaning; so as a maker you are balancing those two things because if you only get invested in the anchor of meaning then you can´t do anything or, I think, you can´t move forward, everything become objectified and represented… so I am aware of both, but I think I work more with the first way in making in the studio, because I also like to be surprised by the work, in how a piece goes… I can have all this highfalutin conceptions about things but then it´s about, the piece tells you what it is about, and again, it gets back to this question of the mind of the body, the mind is not the most important part; specially in intellectual circles, we place a lot of value on this idea that we can know, but I actually, I think that life and the body it´s way more complicated than what we think we can know, we find out through working where our values are, we find out in relationship, how we feel (Miguel Gutierrez, personal interview. 27 July 2012).

After this moment in our conversation, I told him that I had the idea of finding different dresses (costumes) and props that would evoke the popular iconic representation of Latinas. I also shared other images that I had in mind, sourced in my readings, as ideas to be worked with in the studio. At that moment, I expressed the concern I felt with the commodification of the Latina body; that I was feeling I was in a dual position in relationship to the *Myth,* or this specific performing of a certain kind of Latina identity, or body in the media. One part of me felt angry that Latinas kept reproducing these fixed and stereotypical images.

For instance, Sofía Vergara has gained a lot of popularity in the U.S. with her character Gloria, a sexy Colombian, in the TV show *Modern Family*.[22] Another part of me however thinks it is actually funny to address the cultural stereotypes in such a direct way, which to some extent reveal some sort of truth, because, as a Colombian, I can recognize them. So I felt confronted with the paradox of not wanting everybody to see me just as a Latina (one dimensional view), but also not having to reject all the stereotypes out of hand. Stereotypes are not necessarily easy to reject because they carry historical significance. To my concerns Miguel replied:

> … all your ideas are great, this is what is driving you, but then when you put the costumes on, your body will tell you; and then feel what it actually feels like to be in the costume; do you feel small? Do you feel big? Do you feel like being still? Do you feel funny? Get the somatic truth, get into the somatic truth of the situation, create the conditions, create the conditions for yourself through these images… (Miguel Gutierrez, personal interview. 27 July 2012).

I think that trusting in the power of my somatic experience, as well as believing in the process itself was a realization that I did not have until the very end of the process. Looking back, I consider I spent too much time trying to give shape to abstract concepts. Initially, I was excessively concerned with the idea of representing or translating my

[22] In the TV show on ABC, Gloria is a Latina who is married to Jay, an older American guy. She is the mother of Manny, her son from a previous relationship. She is feisty, fun, and loving. One of her main traits in the show is her strong Colombian accent. She is oftentimes unwise and careless about what she says. And of course, the fact that she is very attractive is highlighted in the way she moves and dresses up.

literature review's findings. For example, the idea of a manipulated image of the Latina body kept resonating in my mind. Ovalle´s book actually ends pointing out that the *Latina Myth* promoted by Hollywood has continued to exist because of its ubiquity. Ovalle argues that the Latina dominant hegemonic image is so hyper-visible that it becomes to some extent invisible. Nonwhite female pop performers have managed to look and sound alike making evident the marketable racial in-betweenness that Jennifer López has opened up and lately popularized. Ovalle sums up that this commodification might suggest, "the next Hollywood Latina may not be Latina at all so long she remains (racially) mobile in the frame" (144).

This assertion highlights on one hand that the *myth* mediates the representation of certain types of bodies, and on the other that these bodies are not essentially or naturally fixed to these social constructions; rather we have the possibility to make our bodies have meaning in certain ways. My way of appropriating this idea was developed in the studio with the dancers I originally cast, and four dresses I selected to represent Latinas as submissive, fierce, slutty and voluptuous/exotic (see Apendix D). I wanted to represent this artificiality and manipulation of bodies by asking the dancers to dress me up in the different characters. Although this led to a very interesting exploration of movement, (and even to a choreographed section), that helped me to narrow and validate my own vision of the *Latina Myth*, this part lack

integrity. The dancers did contribute to building the characters and in validating my investigations with regard to the costumes. I needed it; I did not know if the *Latina Myth* I was investigating was so evident to me as it was for the other dancers, who at last represented the social and cultural context in which I was immersed. But these workings did satisfy neither my deeper intentions nor the people´s expectations, who were offering me feedback.

In my feedback sessions, I found that although this section focused the attention on the subject matter of my project and on me, my relationship with the dancers was not clear enough. Besides, movement needed to be developed further in order to make the manipulation more visible. Even though, I tried to approach the physical reality of the movement based on the real actions of using the dresses, I felt that this idea was being too *re*presentational, instead of presenting the reality of the bodies involved. I did not have a particular question for us as a group for that section other than my whimsical idea to represent, in the action of dressing, the manipulation of bodies (see figure 1). Consequently, I removed this set material from the final performance. However, now I can see how this section and most of the other explorations I did up until my first showing to the Committee, was just creating my own conditions, as Miguel was assertively telling me to do, initially.

Figure 1. “Initial” beginning of *Not About Me,* first showing to the Thesis Committee. Photos from video footage. December 4, 2012.

Important parts of my other explorations include solo choreographies I set on myself, wearing the *maid*, *Chiquita banana, elegant-fierce,* and *salsa* dresses. A speech I did in front of a podium, in which, while trying to explain what the piece was about, I moved through

and wore the different dresses mentioned above. Also, a duet I choreographed in collaboration with Karen, in which her wheelchair was involved; and lastly, three videos that I developed in collaboration with artist Shannon Knight. One of the videos was of me dancing stereotypically to each of the dresses; another was of me being painted by buckets of paint that were thrown at me, after which I danced in an open space (backyard of the house were I live); and the last one was of me running backwards and forward in the studio. All of these explorations and others led me to craft the piece with a narrative I did not expect. An example is a free writing exercise I did with Shannon Knight and Karen about more general questions such as, "Who cares?" “What if?” and “Can you tell?” The answer to these questions, particularly Karen´s, became the sound text that I used to end the piece. This final text was spoken by both of us simultaneously. I chose it because it articulated and exposed feelings with which I identify in my own experience.

In fact, these explorations made me go through a different mode of perception that highlighted or distilled important feelings for me, as Miguel noted might happen or should happen, in a creative process. Since improvising and recording myself was one of my main methodological tools to explore and choreograph movement, throughout the process I found myself performing cultural gestures. That is, in moments where I was not intending to move in a certain stereotypical way as a Latina, I found myself moving in just that way. I encountered

that my arms and hands were particularly involved while expressing feelings of frustration, despair and confusion. I also discovered that sometimes I did not even have to move in any particular way, but that my facial expression could tell a lot. Thus, I started moving in a different direction; I went from what I like to call a representational intent to a presentational one.

British dancer and choreographer Jonathan Burrows states in *A Choreographer´s Handbook* (2010) that "there are other ways of experiencing or thinking about the body than steps or movement … the body might become a site for representation and reference, rather than physical invention" (99). This added to his question, "Do I need to express something or am I already expressing it?" (36) while creating a dance performance, started to resonate with me. Instead of developing sort of a "fake" narrative and situations, I began to invest in creating situations that truly confronted me with my concerns, in which I could expose my own body –perhaps by just showing up I was already expressing something. So I went back to the basic facts, the physicality of my body.

For instance, my dark hair was a real trait that differentiates me from the majority blond students at the Dance Department. Additionally, I have memories of never feeling pretty enough throughout my childhood because my mom used to cut my hair too short. I felt for a long time in my life, very masculine and that I looked like a boy. In my reflections, my

experience as a Latina sounds contradictory according to the *Myth*; I suppose that not many people would assume that Latinas might not feel sexy at all. From this reflection, I created a section in the piece that deals with these memories and that physically involved my hair – I pull it. In a similar way, I brought back real questions I collected from the dancers in an initial phase when I was developing the characters of the dresses. I recorded my own voice as a sound-text score with these questions and listened carefully to them. I noticed that some of the questions really affected me. For example, I imagined myself as a real maid and how I would feel if these questions would be asked to me. Likewise, I pushed the costumes even more, so instead of wearing a red dress and pretending to be sexy and fierce, I wore red underwear and let my body speak. I felt uncomfortable, frustrated and angry.

This necessary transition, which felt like a breakthrough moment, allowed me to grapple with a truth that I am not sure I can completely translate to words. I know, however, that the process started leading me through. As it developed, I could identify mostly with the maid character, a character that is imbued with some sort of tragic, migratory stories. These stories, although fortunately not mine, testify a social and economic reality, to which a large population of Latinas is subjected. This is due to global, imperialistic economic dynamics between the United States and the rest of the Americas. So I wanted to dignify this character, this hard-working woman who is, most of the time, invisible. Yet, I was

just not a maid during the entire performance. I transformed into different characters throughout, and was in different places at the same time. I played with the performative character of identities. Ultimately we are always in the doing of who we are, so through me playing different characters and layering video and vocal sounds of myself with my presence on stage, I deal with this reality. The performance then became, as Miguel mentioned, the ideal place in which "the word lands" and all the elements intersect to create a different reality that produces a dialogue and affects people.

I did not set for myself the goal to collect or analyze audience responses. Still I had the opportunity to hear some comments from people, mostly close to me. Some of the interpretations coincided and pointed out revealing traits of my particular body. People expressed how vulnerable *and* strong I was in the performance. Somebody even wondered if I felt blessed or trapped in my body. I think these two phrases summarize well my experience as a woman, who recognizes a *myth,* a dominant narrative that complicates my sense of self in a particular context. Ultimately I shared with the audience a creative process, in which I identified contradictory feelings with regard to my affiliation with a Latina identity. The *Latina Myth* taught me a great deal in terms of history and posited important questions on me as a woman and as a dancer. I came to realize that my body, as an assemblage of physical features, is a reality from which I will never escape: the tan color

of my skin, the size of my body, my curves, etc. However, what meaning I give and how I position myself subjectively in this world is under my own will. This choreographic journey permitted me access to my own somatic identity, in terms of Cooper Albright, which is, in sum, my own way of feeling and perceiving myself as a Latina. Even more, it expanded my range as a performer and choreographer, particularly in a theatrical way.

Disrupting the Image: The Experience of Performing *Not About Me*

Contrary to the popular and homogeneous representations that movies, mass media and other visual devices transmit about Latin culture, *Not About Me* was concerned with expressing a subjective position. By creating and performing the piece, I ultimately looked for the set up of a situation, or different situations, that would expose to the audience my sentient experience to such dominant discourse. I believe that we, as audiences, spectators and consumers of popular culture, are very seldom exposed to such close ups of the particular meanings or effects that cultural representations have on people. I think that the value of *Not About Me* resides precisely in this point. The audience of this dance piece was able to have a close up of the images that popular culture offers, to see my reactions and feelings. I played with them throughout the piece. I exposed them to contrast my own, real and particular story. My facial expression, the tension of the movement, the closeness of my body to the audience, the layering of visual video images with my real presence on stage and my own voice as sound score gave a

hint of this subjective experience. Throughout the piece, I let audiences know that behind an image, they way I looked, the way I presented myself through the costumes, there is a body that responds, gets affected, in other words - *feels*.

The experience of performing *Not About Me* left me with a great sense of satisfaction for a long period of time. It took me a while however, to go back to watch the recorded video of the piece, since I felt I accomplished my goals. That is, I went through a series of explorations of movement and questions that transformed me in different ways. Perhaps I transformed in ways that go beyond my intellectual comprehension and my capacity to articulate them in written words. Furthermore, the experience awakened ambiguous feelings inside me. Right after the concert, I felt brave. I was there by myself – solo – receiving attention and conversing with people, with my body and movement. That meant a lot for me personally and professionally. However, as I have repeatedly mentioned, during the thirty minutes of performance, I felt for the most part vulnerable. I felt vulnerable presenting myself to the audience, carrying the weight of the negative stereotypes on my body, making those so explicit to the public. I wondered if, as a matter of fact, they perceived it that way, and ultimately why I was putting myself in that situation. "Was that really so necessary?" But after the experience was over, I felt relief, strength, and in control of my own representation. A big part of me knew that it was necessary to expose the *Latina Myth*, because

exaggerating situations is probably the way to create questions in the audiences. Questions such as, “Do I have these prejudices about Latin people?” or “Is this really funny?” “Do I generalize or make assumptions about Latinas?”

Moving in *Not About Me* reflected my different “Carolinas.” I had a hard time moving in a “sexy” way in front of the audience. I have always had my reservations about women who act this way and expose themselves in these terms. This is mainly because I hate feeling objectified; sometimes I feel I cannot bear certain kinds of gazes over my body. After watching the video, I wish I could have exaggerated these gestures much more. I think that exaggeration would have added to the narrative of *Not About Me*. Likewise, there is some professional value in completely transforming and performing movement that makes you feel embarrassed and pushes your personal boundaries. On the other hand, I think these limits of my own body and movement possibilities, as well as the real embarrassment I felt while in the piece, were also a hint as to the “real me”; a woman who does not necessarily feel empowered by this kind of popular performance of femininity, but vulnerable.

On the contrary, the other characters were easier for me to embody. Cleaning, in fact, reminds me of an activity that I learned at young age as part of my chores. Furthermore, my parents taught me to respect and value the cleaning ladies who worked for us while growing up. We never felt they were different than the rest of the members of the

family. We actually showed affection to each other. Similarly, performing the exotic, funny character was an enjoyable task. My parents even said, after watching the performance, that I looked like when I was a kid. I suppose shaking shoulders and making funny faces was part of my "natural" repertory as a dancer. The recorded video of *Not About Me* highlights the importance of having a close up view of the piece. My facial expressions and the subtle movements I performed were necessary to understanding what I was trying to share: my feelings, or subjective experience, about my Latina identity, a view that Hollywood and the mass media offer very seldom to audiences.

CHAPTER V

CONCLUSION

My choice to critically examine the *Latina Myth*, and use it as the trigger of my movement exploration and choreographic process dwells in my belief that mass media images affect us, perhaps in greater ways than we normally think.[23] Indeed, Mary C. Beltrán and other authors´ analyses, including Ovalle´s, have demonstrated that media representations play a powerful role in American and global social relations (5). Moreover, Beltrán states, following Alberto Sandoval-Sánchez´s ideas, that we can consider the entertainment media as one of the most important places where:

> ideas, myths, fictions, ideologies, and social models are produced, displayed, negotiated, and contested … and this is so because Stars -or the lack of them from particular groups in society– "teach" notions of identity and leadership to citizens from all walks of life, including lessons regarding the meaning or gender, class, race and ethnicity in a particular place and time (5).

While my investigation was not concerned with giving proof to this statement in a larger scale, *Not About Me* constitutes an attempt to make a visible reflection about this complex social chemistry. In these terms, I feel affirmative in my decision to have given weight to and contributed to the deconstruction of the *Latina Myth,* a dominant discourse in which to establish a dialogue about the confrontations I was having in this new

[23] For the analysis on the power of mass media images, see for example: *Killing Us Softly 4: Advertising's Image of Women 2010,* and *Miss Representation 2011*.

context. It resulted in a great process by which to create art and to explore important aspects of identity. It granted me access to a broader understanding of my ethnicity.

In these terms, the research allowed me to gain knowledge both from myself and of the culture, in which I now live. And because identity is grounded in a dialectical process of sameness and differences (Burt 219), the *Latina Myth* permitted me to have access to this relational construction in which cultural identities are mediated. That is, it allowed me to understand how and under which conditions such a hegemonic representation of the Latina body exist in U.S. visual popular culture, as an interplay of economic, social and political relationships between nations. And by extension, how this representation acts as a strong social force that impacts the lives of a people in a national and global scale.

More importantly, however, this creative process permitted me, as I had hoped, to access my own body and personal movement vocabulary. This is especially important, because it is ultimately *in* the body and *through* the body that cultural practices are appropriated and interrupted. Therefore, there is great value in revealing somatic identity. Insofar as it addresses what cannot be taken from the subject as a person, and in this particular case, as a dancer and choreographer: her capacity to set into motion her agency. In *Agency and Embodiment,* Carrie Noland asserts that placing the human´s kinesthetic experience

center stage is essential to understanding how human bodies are both embodied within and impress themselves upon their worlds. This way, it is possible to encounter variations in performance (quotidian or artistic) that account for larger innovations in cultural practices that cannot otherwise be explained (2-3). She further reminds us,

> These variations can accumulate and cascade into forms of innovations and, yes, resistance that produce profound effects on behavior, effects that spread out, radiate into realms of *conscious decision-making* and other, supposedly *more mindful areas of cultural and political practice.* "The possibility of a body that is written upon but that also writes," Susan Leigh Foster ventures, "asks scholars to approach the body´s involvement in any activity with an assumption of potential agency to participate in or resist whatever forms of cultural production are underway" (3).

Through the creation and performance of *Not About Me*, then, I experienced and acknowledged ways in which I recognize myself as a Latina and others in which I do not. I recognize traits of myself in the different characters; sometimes I feel invisible because of my accent and other times, despite the hard work I do. I feel fortunate because I can find humor no matter what extreme circumstances I am going through. Sometimes I feel proud of how fierce and passionate I can be while performing, some other times I feel apologetic for no reason; sometimes I worry I am being objectified by a sexualized gaze, or at times I enjoy my body the way it is, because it is strong and athletic.

These feelings, and certainly others, were strongly present in the creation and performance of *Not About Me*. They inspired and shaped the

final piece, and this is relevant because I can recognize myself as plural, in different ways – sometimes even in contradiction – but still basically human. This in turn directs me to think that despite cultural differences, as humans we share basic aspects of existence. Furthermore, *Not About Me* allowed me to offer a situated representation of myself – my identity – in which I felt empowered while creating this representation on stage. This is especially important within the dance field and in the American academic context. Since dance in the U.S. has not been exempt from these social and cultural tensions, dance has traced a history in which some ethnic groups have been pushed to the margins of an Ethno-Euro-Anglo centric tradition. My case then hopes to bring awareness to issues of diversity as both the literature review and Miguel Gutierrez highlighted as problematic within the dance context in the U.S. and, by extension, in a global scale.

On reflection, this becomes strongly relevant to me because, through my research path, I can see how contemporary dance came as a sort of a foreign practice that is introduced through globalization in Colombia. So the question becomes, "How can I adopt this practice in a postcolonial way?" "Why do I believe in it, even though it could be addressed as a form of post colonialism?" I am ultimately interested in an expressive and unique way in which contemporary dance can be

approached. And this entire project proves, as it has to other artists[24], that dance can lead any dancer, any person interested in expanding her movement possibilities to fruitful insights about her own identity.

In these terms, my intention with this project, beyond claiming for a unique Latina identity or way of being, is to share how my body is both conditioned to cultural kinesthetic experiences and resistant at the same time. As Noland has aptly pointed out, "If moving bodies perform in innovate ways, it is not because they manage to move without acquired gestural routines but because they gain knowledge *as a result of performing them"* (7). These findings support an assertion on which I have been working since my undergraduate studies in psychology. That is, that our bodies are both the limit and the terrain of new possibilities for the recreation of identities. Our bodies are the point of departure by which we make sense of the world. But the way in which we make sense of our world (and our own bodies) is not independent from our cultural context. Therefore, in order to give voice to our agency, it is important to reconsider determinist, constructivist theories that consider the subject as a malleable material on which culture inscribes. We should also not exaggerate the subject´s capacity to express and fashion itself (Noland 8)

In more practical ways, as a choreographer I learned the importance of a constant, regular and rigorous practice of movement

[24] For example to artists inscribed in an African American tradition. See for example Paris, Carl. Power (Empowerment) through the Body, Self, and Black Male Identity in Contemporary Theatrical Modern Dance in *Dance Research Journal,* v 43 n1 Suppl. (2011 12 01): 20-28

exploration. Even though at times I did not know where I was going with the movement I was finding, the exhaustion of possibilities was what allowed me to make the final decisions. This permitted me to catch and distill what I was reminded of constantly throughout the process. Similarly, the use of the video camera to capture most of the rehearsal sessions contributed to this endeavor. This process of watching myself on video, together with my feedback sessions, granted me access to myself as a performer, which was not always easy to have and to "objectively" see.

The use of props, video and original music demonstrably added depth to my artistic conception. I think these means were very appropriate, taking into account the nature of my project. When reflecting on identity and its complexity, I consider, it is important to be able to layer elements that touch audiences on different perceptive levels. In my case, the dresses/costumes, the recording of my voice and Karen´s, as well as the other elements of the theatrical set such as bananas, microphone, and books, contributed to exposing the multi-character of my identity and narrative. Working in collaboration is definitively a great skill to keep refining as a choreographer. And overall, there is the paramount need to develop a very sensitive listening to the creative process itself in order to be surprised and truly learn from it. Time became critical towards the end but it was also a frame that forced me to shape my exploration.

As a performer, I absolutely expanded my range of expression particularly in theatrical ways. I found the communicative value of basic bodily gestures. I feel satisfied that I was able to find my unique way of creating and moving. I feel my art keeps rooted in the investment of movement that is not concerned with its virtuosity but with its power to communicate real and sensitive realities. As a person, I thank my body for what it allows me to experience in this world. Debunking the *Latina Myth* became an unforgettable experience.

APPENDIX A

QUESTIONS PREPARED FOR MIGUEL GUTIERREZ´S INTERVIEW

• “How do you feel about your identity as a Latino, has it play any role in your creative work?”

• “What is it as a choreographer to push against stereotypes?”

• “What inspires you in your choreographic processes?”

•“How do you use your personal identity in art-making?”

• “What is it to choreograph challenging norms?”

• “What was your process in creating *Last Meadow*?”

APPENDIX B

MIGUEL GUTIERREZ INTERVIEW TRANSCRIPT

Interviewer: Carolina Caballero Segura

Interviewee: Miguel Gutierrez

Date: July 27, 2012

Carolina Caballero: Has Latino Identity played any role in your creative work?
Miguel Gutierrez: No, (laughter). Yes, of course it has. I think that my relationship to it is partly contextualized, or is contextual based on what situation I am in. I think there is both being Latin American and there is also being made Latin American, you know, being Latin American or being made a Latino. I think that you can´t distinguish in this country: race, ethnicity from class; that you can´t separate these things, because there is such an intrinsic relationship between those, and also, you know, because the generic term in the United States obviously, and in many places in the World, is "person of color," and you know, I mean, yeah - I am tan, but I don´t know that I read as a "person of color" to people, I don´t know that, you know, my sister quite happily assumes that, (I think…) that term for herself, although she is much paler that I am. I have always felt very strange about taking on that identity and you know when I do sort of try to claim it, my friends are like, "What? You are not a person of color," you know, and I don´t even think that those were even terms I thought about in relationship to myself until I was in college, I think when I grew up, my relation to identity was that I was a Colombian-American or American-Colombian. I didn´t think of it in a broader sense than that, I knew you know, my family had its roots in Colombia and I was tight to that through them and going to Colombia; you know, I was born in New York; I grew up a little bit in Queens and then I grew up in New Jersey. I did not grow up in a Latin American neighborhood, I don´t have that experience for that story. I think in this country, a lot of times when people talk about ethnicities or ethnic groups in this kind of generalized way, they are often talking about of people who live in "communities of color," or in communities of a particular identity group, and you know my father was very invested, you know, in being upwardly mobile from an economic perspective, and he was not interested or invested in staying in Latin America neighborhoods, and I think, also part of that complicated part of that story in terms of an immigrant point of view is, I don´t know that my Colombian parents felt a lot in common with other Latin American cultures, I think they identify with Colombian people, and even obviously inside of that there are tons of categories, I mean they came from the ruling class in Colombia, they come from families with maids, you know, or darker skin than they are - so you know all of that - I didn´t really understand until later, and it wasn´t until I was a teenager and when I was applying to college and suddenly, I sort of starting getting tons of mailings from Universities for like minority opportunities, minority scholarships, and that was the first time, I mean it wasn´t the first time, I definitively was aware. I went to a very white private school from seventh grade to twelfth grade, and I was very keen, very aware, acutely aware that I was one of two Latinos in my class out of the two, three black kids in fucking school, or maybe five, and that there were a lot of Asian kids, you know. I was very tuned into race, ethnicity, but in terms of my own body, feeling embedded in that; that was one of the main moments, and also earlier, actually ironically with dance. Because at my dance school I was called Michael, and a lot of my family used to call me Michael; my sister called me Michael, not my parents, because I have a lot of Miguels in my family, my cousins, one or two uncles.

My dad´s name is Miguel, both my grandfathers are Miguel, so they were Miguel, Michael, Miguelito, different people and all these different things. So at dance school I was Michael and at my academic school I was Miguel, so I had, you know, I always thought as in Flashdance, I had these two identities: welder by day, dancer by night; but I really felt aware about the fact that I had a more American name in one context and a more Latin American name in my -- that context. And then college, that was one. I was "Oh, I am a minority." I didn´t think of myself in that way at all, and then when I got to college,…I went to Brown University first for two years, I went early and they had this thing called the third world transition program at the time TWTP, where there were basically all the "Darkys," - you know – "come to learn, what it's going to be like, to live in this all white context," you know. And for me I have been doing it. For me it was weird to be in a room with Latin Americans kids actually; that was much weirder and way more uncomfortable and a lot of why I was uncomfortable was because I am gay and I was very identified with wanting to express my sexuality. And I had made the equation in my mind that Latin American culture equals homophobia and white or whatever culture equals permission, and I felt that my parents would reaffirm, confirm that distinction, in a way or my perception was that way, so I was not interested in like being in Latin American communities in college at all, because I was not, I am gay! "I want to have sex, I don´t want to be here, I am not here for *la gente*, you know, *para mobilizarla*, you know there was this group LASO - Latin American student organization and *every body talks like this* with an accent, a little bit, but you know it was like that "put on thing," you know? This is late Eighties and early Nineties when it was a super high identity politics moment, when it was intense. And also, just people identifying with their Latinoness! You know? – like, "I am Latino!" I was, "I am like a weird Colombian kid from New Jersey, who went to private school," you know, like I didn´t know. I always felt like I wasn´t Latino enough for the Latino context and ironically in gay contexts I thought I wasn´t Latino American *enough* because in terms of fetishizing the Latino identity in a gay male context where, you know, gay Latinos are suppose to be super hot, you know, I was this hyper-verbal over educated kid, or I was, you know,…I didn´t really feel the context of what Latino meant. To me it didn´t like work, but as I went to school and as I left school the first time, and went back I started to have more of an identification with it for sure. I think, my experience of it was just that there was this fluidity in my identity; that I was interested in around ethnicity and you know, it confuses people that I speak Spanish, I speak Spanish to people in the store you know, there are people like the lady[25], "Where are you from?" I am a queen, I am from New York, from New Jersey like I had that conversation almost any time I take a car to the airport and had a Latino driver and I start talking and he would talk to me and say, "Why are you talking in Spanish?" and I am like, "I am Colombian," and like, "You don´t look Colombian." I mean, if I had a dollar for every time I had that conversation, I would be rich. I am like, "What does a Colombian look like?" And now that I have been in Colombia, I am like, "Trust me, I look like a Colombian!" There are tons like me in Colombia, and the other place when I feel very Latino is when I got to Europe because people are always like, "But your name isn´t an American name," every time! Again almost without fail, I get this kind of response, and I am like, "You know, they are just like dumb because they don´t understand the concept of the United States of America (laughter)," which is like there are a million mixed people here. And they also have this taxonomic obsession where they have to know your genealogy; where they have to know where are you from. You can see festivals in Europe and everybody's name has a parenthesis and a country after it - you are from this. One time I was

[25] When I met Miguel before the interview, we stoppet at a coffeeshop for food. The people who served us were Latinos, so Miguel and I talked to them in Spanish. At the cashier the woman finally asked us where we were from, in Spanish. Miguel right away replied, "*yo soy de aquí*" (I am from here).

identified as being from the U.S.A *and* Colombia in one of those festivals, and I told to myself this absurd I am not from Colombia, that is not accurate, and it doesn´t feel,…I mean, I am happy to talk about the fact that my parents are from Colombia, but to try to put that on me. I am not like bi-national or something false, that is a false impression.

CC: Why do you think people do that?
MG: because they are ignorant. They think they see your name and they think, there must be this wierd reason. You can´t just be someone from the United States and have a Latino name and be an American; like you must be actually a South American national too. That´s like,…no actually a lot of people are born here with immigrant parents. Anyway this is a long answer to your question, but I guess in terms, I suppose you want to know how I feel that traces to my work. I do feel like it is very much embedded into my work but not like in any kind of boring or obvious way. I am *Latino* there is not a declamatory thing in my work about my ethnicity, there is about my sexuality, that is sometimes less subtle for sure, but I do feel the thing of being bicultural that is very particular, like yeah, you see things in a particular way, I am very acutely aware, always, always, always of race and ethnicity and who is the room and where are they from and what is that about and I think because I grew up in this, you know, my extended family was very big, huge family parties (a very common Latin American experience), and I felt very aware of my sexuality. I think I became very aware of this insider/outsider thing, like loving community and needing community and loving a social practice of interaction but also always holding my self apart because, you know, whether I had that misperception of what would happen to me, and I feel that value of insider/outsider community and solo figure is a huge part of my work, I think it is so inscribed into the value of the work.
I don´t know much about the book[26], but I am going to project a little bit into it, which I think it is, again, contextualized, because on the basic level that operation with that sort of identity procedure, that kind of happens with everyone, you know. It happens with people you find out there that are Italian and Jewish, like that person is such an Italian and God knows Colombians are the first people who would be, you know,…There is this whole thing in Latin American culture reducing someone to their ethnicity, it is like a nickname like *el chino*, like my parents called their accountant *el chino*, because he was this Chinese American guy. And I was like, "Guys what is his actual name?" I actually don´t know his name, like my entire life, I still don´t know his name, he was *el chino* or *ah si, está casada con esa Suiza*[27]; so you know there is this identity with countries. I think like everybody does it to everybody. It starts happening when we've got issues of representation; it gets more complicated. And I think there is an issue of representation happening on stage, vs. film vs. music. Each place has its own specificity around how they deal with it or how you acknowledge inside of that.

CC: Your work to me, seems to push against stereotypes, so what is that like? You were talking about how important your sexuality is…
MG: Yeah, I feel that in the way it does that, I mean I don´t feel that I am the most radical representative of these ideas, but I guess, I don´t necessarily foreground, I have foregrounded things with sexuality in the work, but I guess I sort of just offer the work; act as if the work already looks the way I wanted it to look, as the work is already the way. I know it is not, but like I create a new status quo, like I assume a different status quo, and in that regard the work isn´t commenting, you know I am not making a work about blah blah blah. Like I am not making a work that says women can be strong

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[26] He is referring to *Dance and The Hollywood Latina*. I had it with me.

[27] He is married to the Swiss.

necessarily, or in this new show I am making, we have people from different ages, and from different body types in the piece, but I am not making a thing about bodies, or about age**,** I mean it *IS* in there, it is about that, how couldn´t that not be, you have a body, so it is about the body, duh. But you know what I mean, it is not the politic of it, it is not the thing I want to extract, like LOOK, I find that, that´s like a very old in a way, updated operation to me, you know, but I think like if you act that is OK and that´s possible, like if you just put that in the work, and you don't necessarily draw a circle around it, that can be more radical. Just say, I am not even going to talk about like this is even a big deal. And it is so funny like in *Last Meadow* for example, there was a gender inversion that happens where Michelle Boulé plays James Dean, composited by female figures, and some people get really attached to that, like, "What is it like, this weird gender inversion?" And it is like, "Yes, it is a queer operation." Like of course gender inversion is embedded in this trio, and drag and all this, but it was also an obviously choice, it was just Michelle looks like James Dean targeted as woman, it wasn´t,.. I wasn´t like, "I have my books about gender theory in front of me, and I have to change the genders." You know what I mean? And it is of course a luxurious position for me to take this on, but how can it be about it, and not about it? There is, to coin a phrase of my friend Joseph Hiro Tomy, a double truth. It is about gender and queerness and it is also foregrounded and not foregrounded. I am more interested in having Michelle being James Dean, because Michelle is a fucking genius performer and she could, she can do it, you know, not because I need to sort of make a statement: "*Women can be men!"* She is not a gay, you know, so it is also not about doing that. I forgot, what is the question? Oh yes, stereotypes, I do feel it is my job to be sensitive to the way that representation happens in the work, I don´t think that I always do the most, I mean I think I am still in an evolving position.

CC: well then, what is your equation to do the work, if you don't go after the theory or the social issue?

MG: Well, I just think that I live in a world; I mean I live in a very particular kind of world; I mean in the world that I live in, queer people are everywhere, people of color are intelligent (laughter), big fat people are beautiful and capable, older people are just as important as younger people. Like my values around that, not that it does take work to remember those things[28], because we live in a culture that tells everything that is the opposite about that, right? That tells you that young is beautiful, white is better, white is smarter, healthier is faster, you got all this and it is certainly in dance. Everything is "Top Ten," and then you get all the fucking stupid projections that people have about dance, like "Oh my god you must be in the studio rehearsing and working all day long," "You must be a great fucking lover," "You must have no body fat," "You must be like super flexible," "You must be able to do ballet beautifully," "You must love all this list of really boring dance companies," you know, I mean you do this all every time, you know, in every category of life. Or if you are a dance person like me, who also is a writer, who also does music, who is also a singer, who can also act, who can also you know, then this is confusing right, you know, because you are not any longer just a dancer or choreographer, and then you know, I am not really a choreographer. I don´t make a bunch of movements and then say, "Do these moves." I mean this not what my work is, at least hasn´t. There have been some moments of that, but that isn´t the central practice of the work, you know? There is so many ways in which I am not satisfying the perception or the identity that I am allegedly part of, so I can either get really caught up in that, fight about it all the time, or just do the fucking work, and let the work catch up to you. I mean it is like so boring that people get caught up in things about bodies, or you know, I have been called fat in reviews you know, in my work, and it is kind of like, "OK fine, I am fat, and I have more fat than this (laughter)," you know. But if that

[28] At the TBA:12 Miguel also mentioned that to cultivate humility, takes as much as to cultivate the ego.

is the thing you want to talk about it, then what kind of conversation can we have about art if your idea of what dance is about? This person who comes on stage, you know, then OK your eyes are old, your eyes are still caught up in some strange time, that is not the world that I am living in, but I have the history, I am holding and continuing a history of performance in dance that holds the line of experimentalism from Judson through the Seventies into the Eighties, east village scene into this weird … of people that I know and then I became familiar with when I moved to NY into, you know, an international awareness of the European conceptual movement into what is happening in Australia, what´s happening in the West Coast, in San Francisco. Like I hold a larger concept of what dance or of what I understand to be happening in the dance world, I don´t need to bring everyone along with me, holding their hand, I just need to make the work and let other´s values get in there, and then people are like "Wow, you know there is a person who is older than thirty in that work, because you also don´t know what rocks somebodies´ mind. And I think, I feel actually much more conscious of that in dance and living in dance, and that has been a big thing for me, I have been talking a lot about this in the work. I am really frustrated with the lack of diversity in the dance context, in dance pieces that I see in NY, pieces that I like even. You know, racially they seem very, very, very, homogeneous to me, or the physical body type is very similar. I actually feel that we are (here in NY) actually quite, I think quite behind the times in a way around of representations of the bodies in dance and consciousness around casting, and consciousness around the fact that you're doing choices around representation whether you like it or not; whether you want to think you are detached from context and history. And you are just making some sort of abstract unmarked body kind of a piece which is bullshit as we all know. I feel that NY, New York artists can be often not be conscious about that and you still see, you know, if you want to see, black dances you have to go and see a black choreographer´s show, and if you want to see a bunch of Latinos dancing you have to go a Latino choreographer´s show, not mine unfortunately, you know but other people.

CC: Do you feel that there is a Latino community creating contemporary or modern work here in NY, or not so much?
MG: Um, I wouldn´t call it a community, I mean I think we are conscious of each other. I mean again, I am very interested in what Luciana Chugar is doing and she is from Uruguay and she is here. She is one Latina artist I can think of here, I don´t know if she identifies as Latina or Latin America, I don´t want to name it for her, other than that she is the only,… I mean my other peers are not. I am not seeking out a community of Latin Americans - that´s not my intention. I am interested in the artists who work alike regardless of where they land in the identity spectrum. I think it is a complicated thing, (here, you know again) because what is a Latin American? You know, what identifies your work as identity specific? And I always find that conversation very frustrating. Like what do I have to put up salsa music? Do I have to comment? Or, you know, do I have to perform my ethnicity? Because I don´t fucking want to do that. I haven´t found a need to do that in any kind of, even with my sexuality, you know. Even as much as some things are foregrounded in the work, even, you know I am not making gay work like, "*I am gay and you should like it!"* This not what the work is, I mean I did a piece like that when I was nineteen, but hasn´t been the work that I have made. I am interested in the relationships between people and I am interested in the turbulence of identity, but everyone´s identity is not like the Latin American gay identity, because I think, at the end of the day, we all share the same freaking existentialist crises, and the work is a space where we can articulate these kinds of un-theoretical term, un-transcendental ideas. Virtual ideas, that is what interests me. The body is like a container, a vessel and I haven´t found the need *per se* in my work. I mean that hasn´t been the operation in my work to get super caught up in this historical representation of the body in this particular context. Like in *Retrospective Exhibitionist and Difficult Bodies,* there is definitively a piece of mine - a solo - there is definitively a way of the

body, the performing body is deeply at the center of the concern. Now, is it the gay Latino performing body? Um, maybe, like I don´t know. I did not make it, (that piece) with that thought in my mind, but I am sure that my identity and I am sure that the place I have looked at myself inside the culture is completely embedded into that piece. I know that it is, because it is all about who the hell I am as a performer, so that all that has to include all these different questions, but I don´t walk around asking myself, "How can I be understood and accepted as a Latin American choreographer?"

CC: I feel we have already talked about these following questions, but if you want to add anything else as to how you use your own identity in art making, or how is it to choreograph challenging norms?
MG: I mean, I think it is again; you create multiple references for yourself in your work when you have been making work for a while. You have sort of obviously contextual references of time and space and community. I make work in a consciousness of the fact that I embedded in this legacy of NY experimentalism, which is a very specific history right. I don´t live in San Francisco, I don´t live in Philadelphia, I don´t live in Minneapolis, I don´t live in L.A. Like those have different contingencies, histories and values, there is a thing in NY. NY gets very interested in the history of abstraction, formalism, a sort of intellectual academic rigor, a certain sort of often seriousness, let´s say, a certain notion of what is considered the beautiful full dancer and what is not, and there is a whole full history around that. When I lived in San Francisco there was a different consciousness around identity you know and the politics: very, very big queer, gender and queer huge, huge, so you know, you see a lot of people´s work there talks a lot more explicitly about that. But that is also historically related to the history of San Francisco. I mean like it's driven more by commercialism, capitalism, and at the same time, fame, and recognition and kind of who is doing what now. Those are the values that drive the city, right? So you sort of have that reference point then because I travel, because I lived in San Francisco, because you know I am bi-cultural, queer or whatever. I have a cultural awareness of multiple, or I feel aware of the way that certain evolutions in art and art making are happening in certain places, not that like I am an expert, but I am more aware of that having traveled a lot. So those are references as well, and then history of my work becomes a reference as well. I am often doing a piece that it is in direct reference to a piece that I just made for myself. That´s the thing; I am creating a certain like discourse lexicon in relation to myself and what the work is showing me, and teaching me, because I have felt like the work teaches me, and it says, "OK this is what it is; This where you need to go next; This is what you need to work on now." Or, "Look how this happened; Why this happened?" And then there is a whole other point of reference which has to do with the administrated reality of my work and the scale and the size of the administrated operation in relation to making a piece possible. You know, I am making a piece right now with the biggest budget for a piece I have ever made, so I am having tons of conversations about money, about baggage, shipping things, about sets. I am having very practical conversations about how to make something exist in the theatrical space and that becomes another body of reference for, so you know what I mean, it is never as easy as *identity!* Or *ethnicity*! Or *sexuality!* It is not. The conversation is about: regional, national, international, administrated, personal, you know, and then I have like my family. My work is in such a conversation with my history with my family and my evolving feelings about that. Right now I feel like my work is in a huge conversation with my relation to aging and getting older, you know, I mean, I am 41 years old, is not like I am old, old, old, but you know I am not a little kid either, so that I guess this is what I am trying to complicate my perception of what I am in conversation with my work and again, these sorts of larger spiritual questions that are haunting me and have haunted the work for years, around, "Why the fuck are we alive?" Or, "What does it mean to communicate? "What does it mean to interact with each other?" "How do we experience meaning?" Like that beautiful story of your mom breathing at the show. Like that´s freaking awesome to me, you know? Like I don´t want

to make the work for someone who read a book at the university. I mean, I am happy if that person gets it, that too, but you know what I mean; I do feel like I see work that is coming straight out of that practice that like, "I read this book, now I am going to make this piece about it." It is like that´s great for those five people who read that book with you in class, like I HATE that kind of work. I am a populist in a way, definitely, and that has to do with my acting training and that has to do with my parents and actually with my identity I think very much. I think there is something really beautiful about the Colombian identity: like a sniffing out the bullshit, you know like that´s bullshit, I am able to say it is bullshit, so all these things are really intriguing to me, and I don´t feel like I dumb the work down. I feel like my work is pretty challenging for people, certainly if you put in inside of some North American context it becomes very challenging for some people, but even there, I always have found people always respond to it pretty well…

CC: What inspires you in your choreographic process?
MG: Well, if it is a group piece I am inspired by the people in it, each piece usually has a kind of interconnected set of questions or concerns that become this kind of global matrix that the piece kind of exists and gets created inside of, also that hones the piece, there is this cloud of conceptual concerns, right? And in the last few years I think, some of the things that fascinated me, this is all because of personal stuff is a lot around my body, conceptions around mind/body in different fields, neurology, philosophy, somatics, improvisation and you know the paranormal (laughter), ghosts and spirits, and stuff like that. These things are very interesting to me. My father has had a lot neurological problems in the last four years that it has become just enormous for me, that has just become so, archetypically huge in my dance. "Last Meadow" deals with it, my new show is all about that, my solos deal with that, It is like it's not only about that, but you know, you can´t have a life long relation to your parent and then that relationship is completely affected by some very particular physical and medical reality that they go through, and not to affect you. So it has become so essential; and then I think the research I have being doing inside of improvisation which has to do with articulating the thing that can´t be articulated, when I teach this workshop that I call ineffable, intangible, sensational. This fascination with the intangible, this fascination with the perceptual mode that improvisation and dance proposes that I don´t think is linguistic, I think is always both been reduced and made analogous to language, but I find that this is not adequate for dance to talk about it as a language and then to be inspired by the interrelationship of the elements of performance: music, sound, light, action. And I think I am inspired by continuing to find ways of pushing my own experiments to all these things, that is a huge thing, I mean yeah, I don´t often get inspired specifically by one thing; there is almost always a conversation about multiple, intersecting problems happening in the work. I mean I actually don´t – people who end up doing just one thing in the work, I just think this is not what my work is. In that way, it feels very Latin American (laughter); like a big mess of things you know actually. In that way I feel it kind of resists this kind of Eurocentric or intensively white minimalist view, purist, which is again why what I find ironic, you know, when I was in Colombia, I was so aware of the trajectories of conceptual influences are very European now there. I mean Carlos, for example, having spent this time in Germany and being very attached to the French tradition, and I am thinking, well I mean that has everything to do with the economy and it has everything to do with the United States basically being this horrible xenophobic country and fucking --- with its imperialistic attitudes. But I find it strange also, as an artist, it just feel like those are strange histories - - – if you are from Latin America, I guess you know it´s strange to go to South America and to encounter something that it feels so European. You think you will encounter something very particular to itself, but then is when you realize when these trajectories, they are just the product of a person going to one place, to another place, and influencing people, that´s how history happens, that´s how art happens. I

think when I was younger, I had a much more naïve view that, you know, each art scene has its own kind of origins in how it got created. It was very particular, it was very personal to itself, and that´s actually not how it goes. It´s completely about these crossing influences and who gets there and who doesn´t. What you are exposed to and what you are not exposed to, and that happens here too, in NY a lot more of these intersections happening through here at least in the United States, although less so now, but you know.

CC: Could you talk a little about your creative process in *Last Meadow*? Since you also touch movie subjects, characters, and maybe if you could talk about the description as this myth of America as a Father?
MG: Well there were so many things happening when –---- The first thing was let´s see, I mean, I didn´t know the James [Dean] thing was gonna happen, that was a total accident, basically the first thing that it happened was that I wanted to make a piece with Michelle and Tarek, (so again I think it starts with people). I just knew I wanted to do something with them, because Tarek, I worked with him for several years and then he moved to Europe, I just knew that Tarek, Michelle and I share a common skill set around speaking, dancing and thinking and being able to be "characterized," I guess I just knew that we share that in a way. That was like the first thing without even having any particular idea, I just wanted to work with these two guys, and then I have been. Two other things happened, one is that I have been thinking about this idea of misinterpretation; I have being thinking about how people talk about dance as a language, and how that always made me feel very strange. It doesn´t seem like it is ever as easy as saying it´s a language, there is some sort of frustration about that idea. And then I also, I was traveling a lot in Europe at the time, since I was working with this French choreographer, and I was having this kind of alienated experiences, traveling to places and not understanding the language, feeling tired and in the outside of this things, just kind of noticing that my life was becoming sort of an hallucination in a way, you know: I was always jet lagged, always tired, always having to be super present when I was actually physically not being present. And I think the other thing that was happening, well two, three other things was, I felt up until then my work was very, one of the values of the work, one of the values that it was lunged at it was like oh it was so honest, people would be like, "Your work is honest, so real!" And I was always like that work freaks me out, because it's stage, it's a very, like I make pieces for the stage, you know, so there is something inherently fake about that and I thought I was critical of people´s perceptions of that projection. I was nervous about it, I was like what would it be to accept, to really embrace the fiction of it, and two other things, when it was the election here, there was this bullshit of America, America, George Bush and everybody trying to add to these stupid campaigns and then my father, my father had his first like sort of stroke-like event and that really set a whole fuck of feelings and emotions around my relation with him; this idea of hero, this idea of communication breaking down. So right before I started working on the piece, (I have told this story many times but it is truth) I went to borrow a dvd from a friend of mine to watch in France and it was this James Dean film. He only made three films, and I went to watch the movie and it wasn´t there - the dvd of the movie wasn´t in the case but the special features of the dvd. So I said, "Fuck it, I'll just watch this." And it was this amazing,…they were trying on costumes in front of the camera, and all these little silent films and I watched those and it was so beautiful, and James Dean is so amazing and fascinating to watch him, so self-conscious, really seductive, moody but it´s very queer, but it´s very like I just saw this weird things about him right. So I thought, "OK, this is very interesting." So when we starting rehearsing, I said let´s watch this movie, and then I say let´s watch all these three movies, and then I was like, "Wait, he just made three movies, all of the movies are love triangles, every movie he made was about a love triangle of some kind." So I thought this is really weird, there is three of us, it was a total coincidence, total coincidence. So I said, "Why don´t we play with the idea of Michelle being kind of

consistently being the James Dean person, and Tarek will be sort of a composite of all women or the female characters." And there was always this third person in the movies, in a way there was always this extra, inappropriate person, so I would be that person. So yeah that´s how it kind of, and I think I was influenced by having worked with Allen, because for the piece I did for him we have just watched a bunch of movies so I had worked, you know I have done some things where I have extrapolated some excerpts from films, but you know that´s a very common tactic in theater. So I felt kind of self conscious doing it, but then there were all these great stories that I was very interested in like, "Wow, all these movies deal with a particular narrative about America decline." "All these things having to do with…I think it is the First World War, and people going to War and the father falls into business adventures, and he finds out that his mom is a prostitute." It´s all this weird thing about this golden narrative of America as not perfect. *Rebel Without of Cause* is all about these misplaced or out of place middle class youths, like the Boomer generations. Like they are this post-World War II generation, they like are really frustrated by life and everything is perfect but they are just full of turbulence. You know like pre-1960s´ anxiety and then *Giant* is this history of oil in Texas, and also kind of in some ways in the movie, the history of race, you know, because there is this tension between Mexicans and Americans and all these things about racism in the film as well as, … in which the James Dean character becomes the wealthiest person but also is the most unhappy. So there were all these in relation to the election campaign: "America is still on top," like in total denial of the fact that this empire is scrambling, has crumbled and it will only continue to crumble economically, on a world stage and yeah, my father, America. All these things just sort of started to swing into each other. I just started to notice that the film, the scenes that interested me the most were the scenes between the son and the father and the son characters, I pulled a lot of dialogue from those scenes, so we sort of were working with those, there is a very iconic scene in *Rebel Without a Cause* where he is having a fight with his parents that we used in this show. It just kind of all got in there you know, and then I guess because I was sort of interested originally in this concept of misinterpretation, you know there is a lot of ways in which the language gets swallowed by the sound in the piece. Like you can´t hear it, it´s too confusing, or like the music becomes too loud and you can´t. It´s like there is conflict between wanting to understand what is actually happening and actually understanding it, and then theoretically, (I don´t know what happens, but I think for some people it happens) theoretically this idea of what it is to just take in communication as a texture of sound or a texture of experience, rather than attaching yourself to words to assume that they can actually explain something, which is a very choreographic operation - it´s sort of just saying that the utterance of the body is not as primary body. And I think that that´s obviously deeply related to the way I felt about my father´s situation where, you know, my father was always the smartest person in the room but suddenly he wasn´t and so what do you,…how do you hold the conception of someone´s body intelligence when they are not longer able to articulate intelligence in this way that we generally assume that intelligence should be articulated which is through words, right? And you know look at where I am right now, as Feldenkrais student. I am invested in the investigation of intelligence like this notion, Somatic´s notion that everybody´s body holds intelligence regardless of the kind of body that it is: old, young, you know, able not able. And that there is a kind of, there are patterns, directions, there are possibilities that everybody holds, you know but you can´t get it from talking, what we learn here (we are at the Feldenkrais Institute in NYC) there is a lot of words but when you are working with a body it's like you are not saying to someone, "OK and now your shoulder is going to work better," you know. You are not convincing someone. It is through touch, through actions, through what the body is already doing, because we have mistakenly placed so much value in cognition, we have mistakenly placed so much value in naming. And I think it gets back to this identity thing where I am not interested in foregrounding it because words are not the most interesting thing to me about that conversation, for someone to get up and say, "I am

this!" It´s like, "Congratufuckinglations!" You know I am cold. "Why is your I am, why is it that much more interesting that anybody else´s?" You know, this is where I am at, and maybe is an anti-ethical statement to say that but I am mistrustful, I suppose, of these legible boundaries that words create or these walls create. I feel like, it´s not as easy to me, or at least in performance is this the ideal place where you can destabilize that, right? Like the word lands and is this (Miguel moves his arm and hits the floor) and what is so great about time, about perception is that it starts to bend and get weird and soften and free fall, and then something else becomes more important, and it gets hidden, and the solidity of this doesn´t function because its meaning by its very nature in performance is plastic, because of the set up, because of the time, because of everything you know.

CC: Those were my questions that I planned, I am still very curious about in the practical things, in the *Last Meadow*, how did you build the characters, in rehearsals how did it happen?
MG: We did a lot of reconstruction, we reconstructed a lot of scenes, we took things straight from the movie, so we spent tons of time with the video and the movies and relearning and relearning and just kind of, you know,… I think Michelle is very invested in not sort of the actions but in the Gestalt of this person, this James Dean person. And there was this tone of repetition, tons like it's really boring to do this thing again, "What´s the speech pattern of the scene?" "What´s this sort of?" And so, so there was this character but it was also, you know because we weren´t,…and I don´t think of *Last Meadow* as a non narrative or even like an appropriation or retelling. I don´t think of it as any of these things. I think of it as all the material as being the choreographic material, all this stuff was the choreography, and then the choreography was the way we pull, stretch, mirror, relate all that stuff to itself and the other elements of the piece. Like light is a huge story in that piece and sound. So, and again, thinking in archetypes of characters not like my character starts here and ends here; this kind of traditional theatrical way, although of course that kind of narrative is embedded into it, because it is characters, and characters invite the perception of what´s happening to character, but even that invitation and expectation is fucked with, and that is yet again, this way of how the piece invites this destabilization of perception. To say you think this character is this, but actually this character is this, of course it´s a fucking women in a wig; she is not James Dean, you know? I am forgetting your question, you know I think in the moment of making something (work) you get involved, or I get involved, in the thingness of it; of what the thing is. If the thing would go here, or better here or here, and I think it is hard not to do this, but you try to not be too heady yourself and be like, "What is the impact of the thing?" "Wow, if I put this in front of me like I can try to say is rectangle, it´s plastic, it's pink, it's…," I did get invested so much in the shape of it but I would be stupid to not say at some moment AND it's a huge cultural icon (he is describing his cellphone), it has a very particular weight in culture, so I can´t just not treat it as an object; I have to treat it as a sort of anchor of meaning. So as a maker you are balancing those two things because if you only get invested in the anchor of meaning, then you can do anything or I think, you can´t move forward, everything become representational, objectified, and I know people who work that way, whose work looks like that. But I can´t do that or I resist, so I am aware of both. But I think I work more with the first way in making in the studio, because I also like to be surprised by the work, in how a piece goes, because I think I can have all the fucking intentions in the world, "My piece is going to be about my relationship to my body and neurology." "Sure whatever, you know what your piece is actually about your dad." I can have all this highfalutin' conceptions about things but then it´s about, the piece tells you what it is about, and again, it gets back to this question of the cognitive mind, the conscious mind is not the most important mind, especially in intellectual circles. We place a lot of value on this idea that we can know, but I actually think that life and the body, it´s a lot, way more complicated than what we think we can know. We find out through

working where our values are, we find out in relationship to how we feel, in the way of any day of the week, you can wake up and not talk to people and feel in this way or this way, and then you see a friend and you, blah,blah,blah, and suddenly, "Oh, I did not know all these things were inside of me." "I didn´t know that the situation could change." "I didn´t know I could totally be laughing." "I thought I was very sad, but now I am laughing." Your body undergoes a process of transformation due to a process of interaction with the environment and I feel like that, to me, that process is critical to me in work. I never understood this thing of like, "I know what the piece is about; I am going to work on it, I am going to make the piece come out like this -Boom!" I never understand that, not for one second. That´s why I am, partially why I am fascinated by movies, plays even or TV shows were there is a script. I don´t even understand why there is a script that sounds crazy to me, the thing that exists before hand. I talked to a friend the other day, and he has been doing a project for the last three years and they finally are just going to make it happen, and they will start rehearsing in February and it goes up in April, but they have been working in it for three years. They already have the script, the music, everything has to be made first before the people go in it, and to me that´s like opposite way of how I work, completely the opposite way.
CC: Well I have designed, because I have to be approved right for my thesis, so I have to design a methodology, so what I said, I mean I have no idea what my piece is going to be about, I just know that they give me like 20 minutes more or less and I can play with that and then I know that the big subject is like, "OK, I am a Latina and what does it mean actually?" Because I also don´t feel like I just want to vindicate the fact that I am a Latina. I just have felt very Latina since I have been here you know, and it's like, "What does it mean? Yeah what does it mean?" You know, I guess that´s my huge question, but then I feel because I have this psychologist background or whatever, so I tend to be like, read first, or that has been my process this time as well, or I found this book (*Dance and the Hollywood Latina*), I read it and I was like well, I am a Latina and I dance but I don´t dance salsa, I mean I know how to dance salsa but I don´t go out every Friday or I don´t want to do a performance about salsa; or also there have been some things that touches my own body like, "Yes, I have the big boobs." But it´s like, "What the hell, this is not how I see myself." So what the book says is more like there is a myth and it has two faces, one is an oppressive discourse because the only way, or the way how Latinas have been portrayed is like being this exotic other, very delicious, and (MG: Sofía Vergara, who I love by the way), yes, exactly! Me too but it is like,
MG: Performing identity of a certain kind, performing a certain Latin American body or Latina Body.
CC: Yes, and of course like Latinas come here and if that´s the way to get into the mass media then they do it, but what they are reproducing is this idea of a sexualized body. It says that we are natural dancers *per se*, that is like, "So where am I in all this discourse?" You know, and it is not to make it all about I am a Latina! But also I can´t deny the fact that I am one, and I also feel like it is a pretext to create something, but I also have that tension like… what I have been doing is reading, reading, reading, all these stereotypes, oh and what I wanted to say is that all these images, or this imaginary also plays the rules of the U.S. imperialism, you know like we are exotic because you want to go and buy products. Well, and then for example I have been looking at Jenifer López and she always plays the role of the maid, so I guess I am happy as well we all the representations, like, "Is this the only thing we come here to do?" Well I have been here before and I have babysit, but now that I am doing my Masters, there are different stories you know; so you know, I have been reading and I have been having all these images, and of course I also want to involve some people with disabilities, because in my mind, in my world, I like what you said, in my world I hang out with people with disabilities, and there is a woman who I have been working with, she is 60 years old, she does not have a leg, and she has a lot of experience working with DanceAbilitiy, and also because that was what I came here to do as well. And I feel like I want to include her but now I have, I don´t know how to mix these

things, because I feel that if there is about me being Latina, but if I talk about this, it is also about like in general, questioning the diversity of bodies on stage, but I don´t know how to do that yet, you know?
MG: I thought, when you were talking I had this fucked up image that you could do a project, or maybe this could be the beginning of your piece, you should do a project where you clean things for like a week, where you are like this, like you are like a spy, because I think one of the cool things about being dark and a woman is like you can start cleaning something somewhere, like in an uniform and no one would even ask you who you are. Like you have like this weird, subversive or like this weird access to something special through that. Like people will be like, "This is the worker lady," you know. And it would be kind of interesting if you sort of do this project where you are the cleaner, the maid and nobody would probably notice. I know a woman who did something like that in Australia recently, a white woman, where she was like the cleaning lady at a museum and she cleaned everywhere and no body knew she was performing and every now and then she would do like a little dance or something, but it was OK, I mean what I saw mm, but the way you are saying yes, I mean what you are talking about, and I think it is also very important to make this distinction like when you are asking me about how I feel about being Latin American is like, well I am a Latin American man you know it´s very particular, like whatever the fuck I feel about my gay identity and blah,blah,blah, you know. I am a generally capable, able, not enormously obese man, so I get assigned all kind of privileges that a woman wouldn´t have and so that´s another whole other way in which, like I am not, I guess if I would be a woman, you know like a differently shaped woman, my story would be much more about my body,
CC: Yes, because you know, in Colombia we are all different, and I have been talking with a fried about it, and she is very thin and small breasted and you know, I have not asked her, but I am sure she feels differently about the myth you know, because I feel I am a little bit like the stereotype: the way I look, so is like what do I do with this, I don´t want to be seen that way; so I have these images from what I have been reading. I have a list of verbs, I mean there are fascinating things, there is this image of the maid, but there is also this story that we have been always portrayed as the lovers, always in contrast with like a blond white character, and the main male character wants her but at the end she has to go back to her country or she dies or, so I guess another option that I have is playing with characters to contrast these things, so then I am imagining a lot of theatrical things, or for example the "exoticizing." A good metaphor will be the fruits, like a lot of different fruits; so I could play with the objects. We have been associated with bananas. There was some commercial this Chiquita banana, so I feel like… I don´t know where to start!!
MG: I know exactly what the piece is about already,
CC: Well is just that I have been talking to a friend and he is very physical and he says, "Well I feel like you have an anthropology question, but I don´t see where your question for the dance, for the movement." So that´s why I started doing the exercise of writing down the verbs.
MG: I mean I guess you have so much, I wouldn´t,…that thing that your friend said - um, who cares about that? I mean I think, I appreciate what he is saying, but I feel like who cares, like I don´t know. I also feel like when you are doing something or when you are about to do something, the thing that I find is most critical is permission. It´s really just permission to go and to do anything you want to go into, and you know the boundaries that you create are your own boundaries, you know. I don´t, I am lucky I did not go to arts school, I did not finish college, how much of educational training has to do with "I won´t do this," or like people painting is dead! Or that kind of statement you know is like I never had that. I mean I had those feelings momentarily about things and then they come and they go, and then I am kind of, "But I like dancing! Like you like dancing is dead! Pleasure is dead!" And then it's like, "But I like moving and I like feeling good, you know like, "Oh, oh like what does it mean?" "I am not allowed to do

this thing that I like?…that my body told me to do?" You know, so I think that is like following your interests, like all these things sound great and I would not get caught up in just like this is not a dance exploration, who decides what the dance is, "what is a dance? What is a choreography?" I think the relationship of all these images can be the choreography of your work? The relationship of all those questions is the dancing, is like there is no, to me it is unfortunately that we lose sight of the fact that dance and choreography, those are just again perceptual modalities of working to me they are not exclusively about a kind of thing that you have to see that answers its own definition of like, "This is a dance," and I suppose to me it's about movement and relationship to movement; it feels expansive, it can mean so many different things, it does not have to look like just one thing or,…

CC: Because my idea was to read, interview you and look at Guillermo Gómez Peña and Coco Fusco´s work to find tools and create some situations, scores for me in the studio, like I could bring a bunch of fruits, and I don´t know what I am going to do with it but,

MG: Try it!

CC: Or like the costumes, like what does it feel to be blond? Or,…

MG: I mean, this is what I think, all your ideas are great, this is what is driving you, but then when you put the costumes on, your body will tell you, and then feel what it actually feels like to be in the costume. Do you feel small, do you feel big, do you feel like moving, like being still? Do you feel funny? Get the somatic truth, get into the somatic truth of the situation, create the condition, create the condition for yourself through this images and then follow what your physical reality becomes, because that has nothing to do with, or that is not the same practice as I have these ideas and I want them to mean this. Because in a way, personally when you say all these things to me then why would you make the piece, if you already know the piece. Why not just subtract the fucking piece? The reason why I think we go through a process is because we want to be surprised by our own conditions. We create these conditions and then you,…. "Fuck, the condition is leading me to this and maybe there is whole other story even inside of this questions that you haven´t determined yet." It´s funny, when you were talking about these women, the uptight white woman and then the exotic, you know. I think yeah it´s funny that representation is very oppressive to Latinas, but it´s also very oppressive to white women. It gets always that they are boring, weird uptight white lady, like that´s not fair to her either. It´s like the Latina only sub exists if the other exists, and then what is fucking gross about that story is the guys gets to choose, fuck him! What about the other woman, why can´t they become lovers? (laughter). Well I have to go…

APPENDIX C

TOWARD A PROCESS FOR CRITICAL RESPONSE

by Liz Lerman

"Several years ago, I finally acknowledged to myself how uncomfortable I was around most aspects of criticism. I had been involved in the process of creating art and teaching art for a very long time, but I had not found peace with my many questions and with the array of feelings brought up by both giving and receiving criticism. I found so-called "feed-back sessions" to be often brutal and frequently not very helpful. I couldn't seem to solve my needs during post-performance rituals of backstage chatter. I had trouble getting it, and I had trouble giving it. I became uncomfortable at other people's concerts where much of my experience of the evening included a subtext of internal complaining about what I was seeing. I began to dislike residency activities where, without knowing anything about the dancers, I was being asked to comment on their work. I even began to question the basic premises underlying my composition teaching because I was troubled about the nature of my response to the work being created by my students. I had plenty to say. That wasn't the problem. But I kept wondering why I was saying it.

This much was clear to me. The more I worked as a choreographer, the fewer people I trusted to tell me about my work, since much of what I received in the form of criticism from others seemed to tell me more about their biases and expectations than about the particular dance of mine being discussed. It didn't seem to me to really be about helping me to make the best dance I could from my *own* imagination. At the same time, it seemed that the more I saw of other peoples' work, the more it became clear to me that what I criticized in their work was that it wasn't like mine. If I didn't see my own ideas confirmed in the work of others, I found myself being very critical--my critical comments told me more about myself than about the nature of the work I was seeing.

So, in the past few years I have been evolving a system of peer response. It is grounded first and foremost on my own experience as a choreographer. I discovered that the more I made public my own questions about the work, my work, the more eager I was to engage in a dialog about how to "fix" the problem. This process began unconsciously as a way of working with dancers in my company, as a way of talking with my husband Jon Spelman in our extended conversations, and with a few choreographers/friends. I found that often, just talking about the messes that are an inevitable part of creating new work, talking about it out loud from my perspective, pointed a way out of the dilemma. I began to wonder what would happen if critical sessions were indeed in the control of the artist. I experimented with various approaches while teaching composition at the American Dance Festival and the Colorado Dance Festival. That is when I noticed that the more I gently questioned my students, the deeper we got into their own work. Its motivation and meaning to the creator became

the basis on which feedback was given. I found that I could raise all of my concerns in this manner and amazingly there was no resistance.

There are several basic preconditions to all of this for both artist/creators and observers/responders. We creators need to be in a place where we can question our own work and be able to do it in a somewhat public environment. We also need to be able to hear positive comments that are NOT "this is the greatest thing I have ever seen." I am convinced that since we all wait for that comment, we have a hard time hearing anything else. There are two preconditions for the observers. First, it is important that we want this artist to make excellent work. I think sometimes, for a host of reasons, people looking at work don't want the artist to succeed, especially on his or her own terms. So this notion of actively harnessing our responses to the idea of another person's excellence is not always achievable, but worth working towards. The second precondition is that the observer/responders need to be able to form their own opinions into a neutral position.

Although these sessions are geared to the needs of the creator, it is important to have a facilitator who will keep things moving, and keep people on track. One way the facilitator does this is to continue to fine-tune the process. In fact, I find if I tell people I am still working on its evolution (I am) and that I might get confused at times (I do) and that we may have to stop the action of responding to someone's work while we question the process (this has happened), all of this openness creates an environment where good critical thinking can take place.

Here's how it works. The day after a performance, a facilitator might gather with the artist and with a group of people to discuss what they have seen. Or it could take place directly after a showing, if the artist is ready. In composition classes, it can happen after each presentation, no matter how short, and indeed the whole process can take as short as five minutes (in the case of a fragment) or as long as people are willing to sit and talk.

STEP ONE: AFFIRMATION

It is my sense, that no matter how short the performance, people want to hear that what they have just completed has meaning to another human being. This natural condition appears to be so intense at times as to appear desperate. My own experience points to the very fragile moment when we first show another person our creative effort, whether a fragment or a completed work, new or old. It makes sense to me, then, that the first response takes the form of some kind of affirmation. (Remember, it is not going to be "that is the greatest thing ever," but it does need to be honest and true for the responder.) So I have been trying to expand the palette of what constitutes positive feedback. I like to use words such as "when you did such-and-such it was surprising, challenging, evocative, compelling, delightful, unique, touching, poignant, different for you, interesting," and many more.

I am aware that there are many people exploring the question of feedback; one way that folks are working a lot right now is for people to practice saying what they saw--with the idea that there is no positive or negative implied. I too have

experimented with that approach, using it here in step one. However, I keep coming back to the need for positive, affirmative information. I suspect that people will challenge this as being too needy, too thin-skinned. But after all these years of doing work, and after many positive comments from others, it still makes sense to me that we tell each other at least one thing that we noticed about the work being discussed that brought us something special.

STEP TWO: ARTIST AS QUESTIONER

The creator asks the questions first. The more artists clarify what they are working on and where their own questions are, the more intense and deep the dialog becomes. These questions need to be quite specific. It doesn't work to say "tell me what you think" since in my experience people don't really mean that, and if we do tell them what we think, they get defensive. But if a person says, "Do you think my arm should be this way or this way?" or "I'm working right now on the way I express a strong feeling, what did you think of this section?" the respondents are given the opportunity to say exactly what they think in a way the creator is prepared to hear.

One of the jobs of the facilitator is to help artists find their questions. Some artists are quite able to analyze their work, and form their dissatisfactions or dilemmas into specific questions with ease. For others, it is a new experience. So an artist might pose a very general question, and the facilitator can help make it specific and find the real heart of the matter. But the artist needs to raise the subject first, and the facilitator needs to probe with more questions, not with answers.

Speaking anecdotally from what I myself have experienced, as the artist whose work is being discussed and as a facilitator, it seems that usually the artist has the same questions that those watching do. When the artist starts the dialog, the opportunity for honesty increases.

STEP THREE: RESPONDERS ASK THE QUESTION

The responders form their opinions into a neutral question. So instead of saying, "It's too long," a person might ask, "What were you trying to accomplish in the circle section?" or "Tell me what's the most important idea you want us to get and where is that happening in this piece?"

This is another area in which the facilitator needs to be active. For many people, forming a neutral question is not only difficult, but a seemingly ridiculous task if criticism is the point. I have discovered, though, that the actual process of trying to form opinions into neutral questions is precisely the process necessary to get to the questions that matter for the artist.

I know that for some people this sounds again like a cover-up for the real action and, for some, it is at first. But I have observed that after some experience of this approach, even the most hard edged, "I-can-take-any-thing-you-dish-out" artist is more open and involved in the critical session. And more open to the possibility of hearing what others are saying, and actually learning from it.

It's important to remember that this process is not telling an artist how to improve their work. Therefore this can be a difficult step for people who are used to giving feedback from a position of authority: teachers, directors, folks called in to "fix" a piece. (I don't know about critics, I haven't tried it with them

yet.) For some it might seem like giving up the right to tell the truth very directly. What I have found for myself, however, is that I can say whatever is important through this mechanism, and that what I can't say probably couldn't be heard, or isn't relevant.

STEP FOUR: OPINION TIME

Let's say that an observer really has an opinion that can't be stated as a neutral question and this person feels that the artist really needs to hear it. In step four the responder asks permission to state an opinion: "I have an opinion about the costumes. Do you want to hear it?" Now this artist may be very interested in hearing about the costumes, but not from that person, so he or she can say no--or yes--or no, not now but later.

I really think that most of our reactions to work, which we all try to formulate as mature criticism, are indeed merely opinion. There are times when artists can use these opinions to help place the work in a larger context. There are times when artists can hear all of these opinions and use them to weave his or her own solution. But artists may not want to hear from everyone, or everyone at a particular time. In this process, the artist can control this moment.

This is the one place in the process where people can actively offer suggestions. One simply says, "I have an opinion on a direction you could go in, would you like to hear it?" Again, the artist can say yes or no.

I have never been at a session where an artist hasn't been willing to hear from everyone. It is curious to note that often during this opinion time, people choose to do more affirmation. Usually by this time, so much has been discussed that there is not too much left to be said.

This can complete the process in most settings. However, after exploring this process more publicly under the auspices of Alternate ROOTS at an Annual Meeting, I have added two more steps.

STEP FIVE: SUBJECT MATTER DISCUSSION

Sometimes the subject matter of a work is such that responders want to get into a discussion about its content. The discussion may or may not relate to the specific evolution of the piece. In order not to break the momentum of the peer response to work, one can just table the discussion for this step. For example: a person seeing my work "The Good Jew?" wanted to get into a discussion about the Covenant and its relation to contemporary Jews. I suggested we wait and talk about it later since it was a more theoretical discussion of some concern to some people.

My friend and colleague Sally Nash has recently contributed another possible use for this step. She appreciates hearing what personal stories, memories or feelings come up for people as they watch her work; these could be told at this step. I suspect that it might also happen during the first step as a kind of affirmation depending on the way it is stated, and the facilitator's sense of the momentum of the discussion.

STEP SIX: WORKING ON THE WORK

Sometimes after a session like this, the artist may be ready to get to work on a particular section. If a relationship has been set up in advance, then "labbing"

the work can be very fruitful. I suggest this be done with only one person in charge (the teacher, the facilitator, the friend). Others may watch if that is OK with both parties involved.

That is what I know of this process now, in the fall of 1993. I hope that people will try it, refine it, and let me know how it works for them. In my travels this past year, I have discovered that many artists are working on their own processes for dialog about work. For some, it is an ongoing part of the creative work with company members, for others an organized part of the dance community's efforts to support each other. I am hopeful about all this activity, and hopeful that at some time in the future all these efforts can build to some dialog among those who write about art, those who fund art and those who make art."[29]

[29] Liz Lerman Dance Exchange. 2010. Toward a process for critical response. [on-line] accessed on 19 March 2012; available from www.ipayweb.org/docs/LizLermanArticle.doc; Internet.

APPENDIX D

DEVELOPMENT OF STEREOTYPES/CHARACTERS:

EXPLORATION WITH DRESSES

The first dress I used was the *maid*: I associated it with the stereotypical submissive and subaltern role of Latinas in movies, but also this character reflects the real working class of what a large portion of the Latina population is.

Photo by: Shannon Knight

The second was a black carnival dress with yellow and red decoration, which represents the exuberance and exoticism of Latinas. This dressed was chosen, inspired

by the iconic figure of Carmen Miranda, a Portuguese-born Brazilian singer, dancer and Broadway actress from the 40s-50s, perhaps the most familiar Latina icon from the movies to most Americans. She participated in large musical ensembles in movies that depicted her dancing Brazilian rhythms. Her arms and facial expression were given special attention in her performances. She was also the inspiration of the *Chiquita Banana* commercial of the 40´s, produced by the United Fruit Company,[30] representing then the *Chiquita banana* lady.

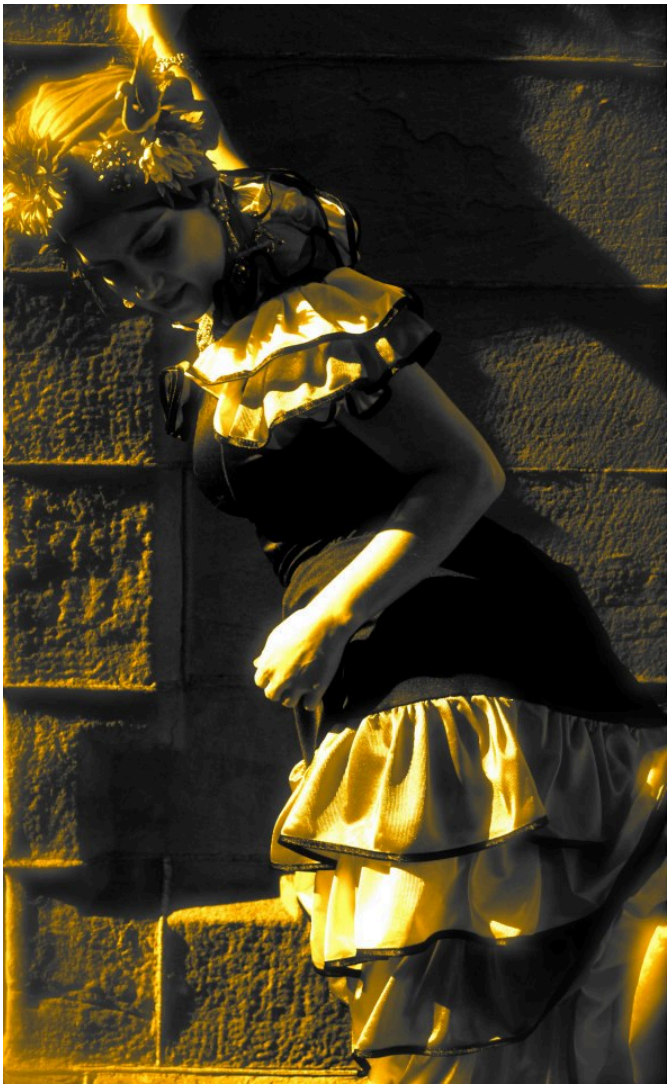

Photo by: Shannon Knight

[30] Consulted online, http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RFDOI24RRAE

The third one was a *salsa* dress, which addressed the mythology of sexiness of the Latina body and the fourth was an *elegant-fierce* red dress linked to the fierceness with which Latinas are stereotypically perceived. These both dresses would highlight the sexualized connotation of the Latina body.

Photos by: Shannon Knight

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