

Choreographies of community:
Familias and its impact in the South Bronx

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Abstract

Choreographies of community: *Familias* and its impact in the South Bronx

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This thesis documents the creation, performance, and reception of *Familias*, a performance project created in 1994-95 by visual artist Pepón Osorio and choreographer Merián Soto, both in and out of its generative South Bronx context. This strategic close reading explores and presents *Familias* as an exemplar and richly instructive instance of socially engaged, community-based art making.

By exploring *Familias* through multiple points of access – how it dances, speaks, listens and is understood / misunderstood -- this thesis reveals other narratives and paradigms for thinking about the work and its participants, and by extension, further engages with the creative process and production possibilities in the South Bronx. Reviewing *Familias* further with a curatorial perspective reveals opportunities that could strengthen other current art and community projects. In other words, by thinking about how *Familias* activates, generates, and replenishes itself in its creative process, this thesis also helps reconfigure how we can think about other possibilities in the borough.

Chapter breakdown:

“Bronx Renaissance” examines structural underpinnings of long-term economic depression in the borough and offers multivalent arguments for change.

“*Familias* and the South Bronx” offers further historical background that situates *Familias* locally, and provides insights into the artistic visions and curatorial work of its lead artists.

“Pepatián and the South Bronx” offers insights into my own practice, and how my experiences and creative grappling with the making of *Familias*, together with my sustained participation and leadership of alternative art making circuits in the South Bronx, led to the creation of a performance piece: *How I Became a Boogie-Down Rican*.

“*Familias*” provides four distinct perspectives into the work with interludes to further underscore the impact of performing arts and organizations in the borough. This writing approach with performance and curatorial work as research-site offers material far beyond existing reviews, articles and video documentation.

“*How I Became a Boogie-Down Rican*” explores the performance work of an experientially informed, next-level socially engaged, community-based practice from my experiences in the borough.

An engagement with *Familias* shows how the artists’ work and their way of working offer a local legacy of impact that continues to inspire.

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Introduction

Familias was a breakthrough for art and community projects in the South Bronx. This thesis gives the performance project a platform to connect more strongly with the history of the borough. This thesis also honors the artists' process and what they were able to create in the mid-1990s. This history is needed more than ever as recently there have been several organizations that have moved to the South Bronx in 2011-12 to activate art and community projects in alternative indoor and outdoor sites. These include: "No Longer Empty" known for turning vacant sites into temporary art exhibitions with two projects in the South Bronx ("This Side of Paradise" at the previously under-used site Andrew Freedman Home and "Home is Where The Bronx Is" at Longwood Art Gallery, both in 2012); Dancing in the Streets (2011) which produces large-scale public performances that highlight the architecture and histories of the Bronx; Laundromat Project (2012-13) which uses arts in alternate neighborhood sites to strengthen existing community networks. These recent projects are in addition to arts and community programming already happening at local venues in annual one-day events, like Pregones Theater annual Summer Block party (2005-present), and The Point Fish Hunts Point Fish Parade & Summer Festival (2003-present), among others. As a groundbreaking work, *Familias* offers these recent initiatives, whether they realize it or not, foundational support for their current work in the borough. Thinking with *Familias* and thinking with the non-profit organization Pepatián offers support that can further empower other local art and community initiatives. The success of Merián Soto and Pepón Osorio's *Familias*, its influences and impact, is part of what makes their current work more possible in the South Bronx. Similar to the way Teatro Puerto Rico in the 1940s and 50s supported the impulses to create *Familias*, *Familias* is also the long-held secret that continues to whisper its impact. This thesis reveals more of its work and the artists' way of working.

Within this through line, there is also the cultivation of curatorship. Osorio and Soto were the artists creating this work, and their direction of the full project was also nearly like the role occupied by curators in the performing arts. Performing arts curation is a new field with a rapidly growing practice and study. Reviewing *Familias* with a curatorial perspective can also reveal possibilities to further strengthen other art and community projects happening in the borough and

possibly outside the borough as well.

There is an urgent need to consider the impact of this project and its curatorial and artistic work in the borough. When *Familias* was created in the mid-1990s, the Bronx had begun to recover from its previous two decades of neglect. Today, Manhattan is undergoing a hyper-gentrification, and there are plans that will soon bring new large-scale developments to the South Bronx. These include plans to transform the Kingsbridge Armory into the largest indoor ice facility in the world; rezoning Harlem River waterfront for mixed-use between 138th and 149th streets; plans to extend Metro North into the East Bronx; new retail developments with several new malls (Ortiz). While the borough is still in a process of revitalization, gentrification pressures might soon follow. It is vital that the borough continue to strengthen and empower its own histories, stories, artists, non-profits organizations and venues, audiences and residents and their grassroots works.

Thinking with Soto and Osorio's collaborative performance work *Familias* and their non-profit arts organization Pepatían provides more understandings of its artists and their singular impact in the South Bronx, and also provides a lens to consider the possible implications of an "artist-activist curator" that could help inspire others to take on the same kind of empowered role that Soto and Osorio brought to their "adopted borough." Thinking with *Familias* and thinking with Pepatían continues the artists' legacy of works in the South Bronx and continues to inspire.

Statement of Methodology

My research-creation methodology is based on autoethnographic approaches to a place-based practice supported by personal interviews and communications, as well as experientially informed community-based practices. Drawing on a strategic close reading of *Familias*, both in and out of its generative South Bronx context in the mid-90s, this thesis provides insights into its groundbreaking artistic and curated processes and shows how its impact and influences have continued. Through an exploration of how *Familias* dances, speaks, listens, and is understood/misunderstood, this thesis offers an activist impulse similar to this work and seeks to inspire other art and community projects, artists, curators and producers making new works in a rapidly changing borough.

Chapter One: “Bronx Renaissance”

On September 28, 2013 I attended the National Association of Latino Arts and Culture/NALAC “Regional Arts Talks” at Pregones Theater (575 Walton Ave) in the Bronx. Scholar Brian Herrera (Associate Professor of Theater, Princeton University) gave the keynote address entitled “What Happens AFTER a Latin Explosion?” in which he described how mainstream media has continually “discovered” Latinos and their impact. By focusing on a series of *Time Magazine* covers between 1978-2012, he argued that these announcements of re-discovery discredit Latinos by continually noting and enforcing their lack of integration within American culture.

The word “discovery” implies something was lost. This is the language of conquest, and implies something has and can be taken away. His closing remarks advised us, the audience at the theater, to remember that should a recurring “Latin explosion feel a bit familiar...like a dance we might have danced before...that’s because it is. Each Latin explosion’s rhythm of discovery, fascination and discard is as a dance – a dance that feels new but which has actually been long rehearsed” (Herrera). His warning is a reminder, in advance of the next “Latino explosion,” to notice this pattern, this sensation of “discovery” and to be ready to refute it when it surfaces. He is pushing an awareness of the past before it happens again. A pre-articulation that moves the interval of this discussion before its pattern reemerges.

Listening to his talk at Pregones Theater on Walton Avenue, I also had the sensation of experiencing this dance before. I was reminded how often I had heard and read over the years that the South Bronx was in a “renaissance.” The term has been used nearly continuously to talk about the borough’s development since the early 1980s. (In the South Bronx, there is always a “before” the devastation of the late 1950s - early 1970s and an “after”. How should we describe the evolution of this “after,” this “post – “ time period?). Arts organizations, construction companies and real estate agents all used this idea of “rebirth” to describe, attract investment interest, and promote the South Bronx (Gordon).

How is it necessary to repeat this proclamation every few years? What is the recycling of this word from the European Middle Ages doing to support your current artistic work in the

borough? The word itself is a western concept and the South Bronx has many other cultural influences it can draw from to create a multiplicity of words to describe its own evolution. Is it strong enough, relevant; does it adequately speak for and activate the art making practices in the South Bronx?

The concept of “inreach” used by artists Merián Soto and Pepón Osorio is an important tool for the making of *Familias*, and works to more accurately describe the complexity of the artists’ craft and relationship with the local community. The blanket term of “renaissance,” on the other hand, does a disservice by diluting what the artists have achieved in the South Bronx. Artists, especially those from the Puerto Rican diaspora, have been making work in the South Bronx since the 1940s until the early 1960s; the Melrose, Mott Haven, Longwood and Hunts Point areas of the South Bronx were, according to its residents in the film *From Mambo to Hip Hop: A Bronx Tale*, “a hotbed of Latin music” (Chalfant, 2006). There is a complexity at work: people are steadily building their lives and yet are “re-discovered” or their successes are identified as an instantaneous “re-birth.”

By 1999, the arts had helped reinvigorate the community enough to generate a retrospective; in that year, the Bronx Museum exhibited *Urban Mythologies: The Bronx Represented Since the 1960s*. One of the shows curators, Betti-Sue Hertz, said that the subject of the exhibition would not have been possible five years ago; “the terrain was just too painful, too personal. There is a renaissance now. We can look at the negative imagery” (Waldman). This renaissance is defined by the distancing from the devastation of the 1960s and 1970s. There is also a sense of integrating this time period; not as something to be denied, but folded into the borough’s ongoing history. It’s worth noting that Hertz’s remark about the challenge to mount this exhibition “five years ago” was 1994, the same year when *Familias* began its creative process. The project was beginning its work in a tender time in the borough’s history.

Wally Edgecombe, Director of the Hostos Center for the Arts & Culture (1982-2013) stated in an article honoring the retirement of another South Bronx titan of the arts, then-Executive Director of Bronx Council of the Arts Bill Aguado: “When we got here in 1982, the South Bronx was still smoldering. We got the charge from our president [of Hostos Community College] to come up

with cultural programming. Somebody came to me and said we'd never get any audiences. But Aguado said, 'This is where it [arts and cultural programming] is needed the most.' The arts brought this community back" (Gonzalez D. "Arts Leader"). The vision of these steadfast arts and cultural leaders in the South Bronx was aimed towards participation in arts-based community development. Artists were leaders in the re-empowerment and re-building of the Bronx.

Commercial development desires to "skip over" the devastation to try to speed up their version of progress. From 2006 to the present, I found a steadier uptick from a variety of business sources using the description "Bronx renaissance." Two in-depth articles in particular described this "Bronx renaissance:" an article in *New York Construction* entitled "Bronx Renaissance: Big and Small Projects Signal a Strong Development Harvest" (MacDonald 2006), and *The Architect's Newspaper* "Bronx Renaissance" (Starita and Connolly 2009) during the rebuilding of Yankee Stadium. What does it mean when corporate interests are using the same term for developments as the artists who preceded them? Who could be pushing whom out in the name of "renaissance?" This pushing away of the past to help enhance property values can also serve to negate the very community resilience and perseverance that helped keep the Bronx intact.

The use of this descriptive term has also led to demands to re-name the South Bronx as "Downtown Bronx" or "SoBro" to further differentiate the "new" South Bronx from its history. In 2010, Chairperson of Community Board District #1 George L. Rodriguez called members to embrace the vision of a "Downtown Bronx" as a "gateway to symbolize the Bronx renaissance" and create another vision of the borough far removed from the "negative stereotypes promoted by the media's outdated image of the South Bronx" (Loftin). Five years earlier, when Carnegie Management was converting a former piano factory "the Clock Tower" into lofts, there was also a similar call to change the name to "Downtown Bronx." As reported in *The New York Times*, "with all this arts activity, not to mention parallel efforts in housing development and commercial enterprise, some have suggested renaming the neighborhood the Downtown Bronx. The idea has yet to catch on" (Kugel). Living next door to the powerful economies of Manhattan can make local community efforts seem vulnerable, and yet even now, this name change is still not readily accepted in the Bronx. Changing the name to create a new sense of place to support

development is not the easy maneuver that has helped solve this question elsewhere in New York City.

In the ongoing efforts to transform the South Bronx (with big money and dreams at stake) and perceptions of the borough, there is a desire to promote the borough in ways that might encourage more development and resources in this “new” Bronx. If commercial interests are using “renaissance” and might also push artists out of areas they helped transform, would it be useful to articulate the artists’ work differently from that of the developers?

Developments in the Bronx are not always supporting its artists and cultural workers with space dedicated to the arts. As Edgecombe stated in 2004: “The Bronx has never lacked for musical talent, from doo-wop to salsa to hip-hop... [the Bronx] was always rich culturally, but we were venue poor” (Kugel). There are continued signs of hope for the establishment of new spaces like the Bronx Music Heritage Center, a theater at Boricua College, the future performance space at Casita Maria Center for the Arts and Education, and other nonprofits (Dancing in the Streets, The Laundromat Project) that focus their performance works at alternative sites throughout the borough.

For the artists and arts organizations, the downside of these “new” renaissances can mean that little traction is felt to further support the growth and stability of arts and culture. With this ongoing promotion of the new and with it, some partial denial of previous achievements, artists can start to feel isolated. Renewal can become a limited perspective that does not help the artists in the Bronx to feel that they are part of a historically rich artistic and cultural lineage that can help further support their dreams and desires. They are left to remember how difficult it is to make work – but not with ideas of how others created opportunities for themselves that could be used as tools for them to also build. It’s made new, again and again.

The rhythm for artists to effect change in the Bronx is at a slower pace than commercial developments. Artists have been collaborating with residents in different ways, and it is an integration that is a different form of development. It’s not about consumption but a kind of work and an approach that also helps increase the field of possibilities for artists and the communities

created via their artworks. The use of the word “renaissance” signals shifts in the Bronx, but only it seems in bursts to then retreat quietly until its next announced rebirth.

A constant through-line in the South Bronx context is that the borough does have some serious, ongoing problems. One way to try to understand the continued poverty in the South Bronx is through statistics: in the area of Mott Haven in the South Bronx, the Census Bureau in 1990 recorded an unemployment rate of 18 percent, a median household income of \$17,633, and 51 percent of families living in poverty. By 2010, the unemployment rate in Mott Haven stood at 13 percent, median household income at \$20,253 and 40 percent of families were living in poverty (Roberts). In 2013, the Bronx finished last in statewide health (University of Wisconsin) and remains one of the poorest congressional districts in the United States (Sisk) with the highest asthma hospitalization rates for juveniles in the city (Fernandez). Many South Bronx neighborhoods are “food deserts” with few options for fresh produce given the population density and its residents suffer from high rates of diabetes, heart disease and obesity (Ponsot). This consistent poverty has unfortunately remained present in the history of the borough, pre-dating 1990. Youth remain vulnerable, and the poorest youth of color have not been supported academically in the borough’s public schools, and therefore have had little academic success (Fabricant 2010: 38). If the situation for young people in public schools is not improving, how do advances of “renaissances” and community renewal impact the next generation? (Fabricant 2010: 38). For whom is the renaissance happening, and when? Who is missing out, and who gains? The systemic problems seem to persist, sometimes improving slightly, but not always. But let’s not forget that even in difficult times like the 1970s in the Bronx, its residents created hip-hop as a creative answer. The poverty is there and so is the drive to create. Artists, organizations and residents are needed as leaders in the borough.

Looking back at her work in the late 1970’s, photographer Lisa Kahane states,

The South Bronx looked like history, an unwritten story of decay, nostalgia, and frustrated expectations. Recorded history favors the successful. If I hadn’t photographed the Bronx back in the day, even I would have a difficult time remembering it. The Bronx has been rebuilt, but this new reality has yet to displace the old image. The rebirth of the Bronx is a continuing story” (Spampinato).

For its part, *Familias* included an intergenerational cast, and the young people who participated were introduced to the idea that other possibilities were available to them as well as access to other resources that could help increase their sense of family and familial support.

Ideally, one could argue that Bronx communities and the borough's history are ready to be renewed, ready to dance with the next partner. As more immigrants settle in the borough, this ongoing renewal is a resource could be accentuated more than as one "renaissance" moment. As Massumi writes: "A path is not composed of positions. It is nondecomposable: a dynamic unity. That *continuity* of movement is another order of reality than the measurable, divisible space it can be confirmed of having crossed" (Massumi 2002: 6). It's not about separating and foregrounding certain moments apart from each other but about finding ways to articulate the powerful continuance of arts organizations continuing to make work in the borough in an ongoing drive towards revitalization.

To look at the idea of "renaissance" positively as an opportunity to live and make work in a place that is continually being reborn could also be invigorating. The Bronx is considered by the U.S. Census to be the most diverse area in the nation (Harper). Dierdre Scott, Executive Director of the Bronx Council on the Arts, said, "One of the things that is really exciting is that in the Bronx we are constantly renewing ourselves. ...periodically we have an infusion of new nations that comes here in waves. So we're an agile borough, and that's exciting and part of the fun" (Florescu). As Brian Herrera charges, the task is to try to keep ahead of ongoing patterns that would limit its ongoingness.

And to loop back to try to further understand the continuation of using this term: maybe part of the continual call of renaissance in the Bronx is that it's so tender a thing. To announce its arrival repeatedly might be a way to build and support the borough's continued transformational efforts. To keep building with available materials.

The South Bronx. You hear those words and then....what comes to your mind?

A photograph of burned out buildings and empty lots thick with rubble while a middle-aged woman, dark-skinned, walks along the sidewalk carrying her groceries?

The #4 train bursting out of the tunnel after 149th Street/Grand Concourse and into the sunlight at 161st Street? And two little kids shouting from their seats, “Outside! Outside!”

Or maybe it’s the calls of “Coco-Cherry” from the shaved ice-vendors that you remember the most.

Or the sounds of lanes of continuous traffic hurtling along the Bruckner.

Do you think of the prostitute who kills two cops in the opening scene of the 1981-film *Fort Apache: The Bronx*? That scene of how she casually walked away through the brick rubble while teens opened the car doors to rifle through the cops’ pockets.

Or do you think of the murals around Hunts Point, like the one on Hunts Point Avenue that states: “*You don't have to move out of your neighborhood to live in a better one,*” or the work of Lady Pink along Barretto Street or Tats-Cru at The Point C.D.C.¹

Maybe what you have in your mind is the stark outline from Kenneth E. Raske, president of the Greater New York Hospital Association, who stated: “Like many Bronx hospitals, Lincoln Hospital is located in a medically underserved area marked by a lack of primary care physicians, low-income residents without health insurance, and high rates of chronic illness such as diabetes” (Hu).

Chapter Two: *Familias* and the South Bronx

“*Familias* and the South Bronx” offers further historical background that situates *Familias* locally, and provides insights into the artistic visions and curatorial work of its lead artists.

An exploration of *Familias* begins with two collaborating lead artists, choreographer Merián Soto and visual artist Pepón Osorio. By 1994, when they first began the creative process of making *Familias*, Soto and Osorio were a couple who had been collaborating as well as making individual works for nearly twenty years (see appendix 4: Merián Soto choreography). Their collaboration began in 1979 after they met downtown through a mutual friend. Soto, who had received her first commission from El Museo del Barrio to create a solo dance, invited Osorio to collaborate and create a costume and set for her 1979 work “El Agua Viva/The Living Water.” This artistic collaboration lasted for nearly twenty years until *Familias*, their last collaboration in 1994-95.

Osorio had moved to New York City from Puerto Rico to attend college in 1975 and stayed with a family friend in the Bronx while he studied sociology at Lehman College. Soto had also left the island to study dance at New York University in 1974. With choreographer and friend Patti Bradshaw, Osorio and Soto co-founded Pepatián in 1983 as an artists’ collective that sought to cross-traditional boundaries between artistic disciplines. Before Soto moved to the Bronx to join Osorio in 1985, they took long walks throughout the borough, and as Soto described in a filmed interview, “we were looking at the creativity of people in the Bronx” (Soto, *Portraits of Bronx Renaissance Artists*). From the earliest days of their artistic work together, Soto and Osorio found significant inspiration in the South Bronx. In 1988, the artists officially registered Pepatián as a non-profit organization based in the borough.

Originally, Pepatián was founded to support the co-founders’ creative works. Two years later in 1985, while maintaining its commitment to interdisciplinary work, the organization shifted its primary focus to the development of projects that “1) promoted audience understanding of the diversity of new Latino arts; 2) supported the work of a variety of Latino artists as well as access to their communities; 3) increased the exposure and visibility of these artists' work; and 4)

initiated collaborations with other institutions to create networks of support and communication for Latino artists” (Soto, “Pepatián’ proposal”).

This formalized shift in the organization’s intention is significant in that it moves Osorio and Soto’s work from a purely individualized artist-centered focus into a larger frame of performing arts curation. They sought deep connection with audiences and community. In a later interview in *Bronx Dance Magazine*, Soto described how

Pepatián addressed for me three pressing needs — the need to create my own work, the need to return the work to the community that inspired it, and the need to work within a community of artists. It allowed me both to create my dance work and develop projects that brought artists and communities together. The balancing was possible because I believed in the work and saw/found possibilities for the intersection of the different directives (Soto “Interview”).

Curatorial Practices

Curation in the performing arts is a newly emerging professionalized term and field, undergoing rapid evolutions. Historically, the role of the curator is more established in the visual arts, as the person responsible for museum collections and objects. This caretaking also includes conservation and archiving. Art historian and culture critic Beatrice Von Bismarck places the first use of curator in the visual arts at the end of the 18th century (Boldt 2011: 3). Bertie Ferdman’s 2014 article “*From Content to Context: The Emergence of the Performance Curator*” describes how the emergence of productions concerned increasingly with the immaterial (installations, happenings, performance art) in the 1960s caused a shift in the role of the museum and gallery curator. The job and function as caretaker expanded as art and its developing relationships with viewers developed the field in new directions. Contemporary visual arts expanded beyond objecthood and traditional museum spaces, and with it, the curator’s role also shifted. Their work developed from managing to also creating the viewing experience. By the late 1980s, the independent curator was like an art star, or as O’Neill calls the “curator-as-auteur” (Ferdman 8).

Ferdman argues that in the performing arts the shift in site-based performances from a focus on location in the 1980s towards more interactive projects which use “the live” as sources for their works (Ferdman 8) contributed significantly to a burgeoning discourse on curation outside of the visual arts field. This curation is not based on objects, but on people at events - spectators, artists, participants - all of who require different kinds of interactions and negotiations. From the onset then, curation began outside the designated spaces and relationships of traditional theater. Contemporary curation was concept-driven, focusing less on programming logistics of a performance venue and more on creating context for artistic ideas (Ferdman 10).

Etymologically the word ‘curator’ derives from the Latin ‘cura’, which means ‘care, concern.’ Judy Hussie-Taylor, Executive Director of downtown Manhattan’s Danspace Project (and founding faculty member at ICPP/Institute for Curatorial Practice in Performance at Wesleyan University) described the word curator as meaning “one who cares for the souls of others” (Hussie-Taylor 102). On the other end of the spectrum, *curare* is resin from a plant in the Amazon that can cause muscular paralysis. In medicine, it is used as a muscle relaxant and by indigenous Indo-Americans and aboriginals in South America as arrow poison (Ritsema 6). In her poetic essay, “about programmers and curators,” Jan Ritsema, a Dutch Theatre Director, discussed the necessity for artists, for risk-takers, who don’t know if their actions will kill or cure, to save the curators through art making (Ritsema 7). Those who “cure” don’t always know what or who needs help.

The emergence of this field and these conversations about its possibilities and challenges are recent occurrences. In the past five years, the field has been supported by a variety of publications, graduate programs, and conferences. These activities include: the Tanzplan Essen conference “*Beyond Curating: Strategies of Knowledge Transfer in Dance, Performance and Visual Arts*” (Jan 28-30, 2011) with published symposium notes; in Croatia, three editors (Florian Malzacher, Tea Tupajic and Petra Zanki) published *Frakcija Issue No. 55 "Curating Performing Arts;"* a book *Cultures of the Curatorial* edited by Beatrice von Bismark, Jörn Schafaff and Thomas Weski included several chapters on performing arts curation (2012); in addition, there was the 2011/12 establishment of ICPP/Institute of Curatorial Practices in Performance at Wesleyan University (I am a graduate of its inaugural certificate program), the

Montreal international symposium on performing arts curation “Envisioning the Practice” (April 10-14, 2014; I was co-organizer of the symposium), and the recent launch of *Theater Journal* (Summer 2014). In Montreal, this international symposium led to the creation of Communauté Internationale des Commissaires des Arts de la Scène/International Community of Performing Arts Curators (CICA-ICAC; I’m a co-founder of the organization). In January 2014 a first Canadian course on Performing Arts Curation was offered via the Masters program in Museum Studies at the University of Quebec in Montreal (UQAM; I was a co-teacher along with Tangente founder Dena Davida). These initiatives engage with theories and practices in the field, and serve to provide foundational materials for this emerging professional field as well as questions and different perspectives on how to define curatorial practices in the performing arts.

Established in 2011, the ICPP graduate program focuses on “time-based art practices” from a wide variety of professionals (artists, curators and cultural leaders) working in diverse, contemporary disciplines such as dance, performance art, experimental theater and traditional/culturally specific programs, as well as “various combinations of these and other disciplines” to offer students a “tools – a history of critical ideas; intellectual frameworks; and the application of theory to practice – necessary to developing new approaches in the field” (ICPP). ICPP is increasing the visibility of its program with panels at annual conferences in the United States like NPN/National Performance Network and APAP/Association of Performing Arts Presenters, among others. Bertie Ferdman, the guest co-editor of *Theater Magazine*’s issue on “performance curators” attended the 2013 panel of ICPP faculty presented at APAP. As the only scholar in a room of presenters, she felt “a clear divide between those who study and contextualize work (academics and dramaturges) and those who present performance” (Ferdman 10) but sensed that this separation was beginning to blur. The presence of the ICPP panel at this annual conference was part of that bridge, that smudge, that introduction of another possible way of considering performance and the performing arts outside of or in addition to its logistics and ticket sales.

Another somewhat distinct, yet also blurring, separation exists with the use of performance and performing arts. Performance suggests concept-driven works, and the identification of performing arts focuses on particular artistic skills. One does not preclude the other. A

“performance studies” graduate research group of faculty members and students at Concordia University (Montreal) refined their description to work with “performance as an organizing concept” to think about a range of “embodied cultural practices and live events.” They include performing arts, and its interdisciplinary and intercultural works as well as the “performative turn” in various theories focusing on the cultural, aesthetic, and political (Centre for Interdisciplinary Studies). In the above description of journals, conferences, and graduate programs, there is a mix of the descriptives “performance” or “performing arts” throughout. The main focus is on curation outside of the visual arts. The other terms relating to performance, performing arts, or live arts, seem to be more in flux and flexible. Another recent conference on curation based in Zurich entitled “Curating: Glittering Myth, Social Symptom, Revolutionary Force?” (November 15, 2014) is not specifically geared towards performance or performing arts, but focuses on how art can have a political aspect to its impact on social conditions, and argues that as each project is different, contemporary curating is about using a diverse range of methodical approaches (Postgraduate Programme in Curating).

Soto and Osorio’s almost pioneering move towards establishing a frame and context in 1985 (nearly 30 years previous to the stated focus of this recent Zurich conference) was also a way to create a platform to expand the possibilities for their impact - artistically, socially and politically. This move towards creating context also spoke to the influences of place. In an interview with Arthur Aviles, Soto explained:

When I started working in the Bronx in the mid-80’s my work became politicized. I was deeply affected by the tragedy of poverty, disempowerment, marginalization, and neglect experienced by the people of the Bronx. At the same time I was moved by the spirit of creativity and resourcefulness in the Bronx, the making of something out of nothing (Soto “Interview”).

In contrast, Ralph Lemon, who self-identifies as a conceptualist, choreographer, director, writer and installation artist (Doris Duke Performing Artist Awards), stated in an interview with Hussie-Taylor that there are many dance artists who “obfuscate or pretend that they don’t want to have a relationship to the audience or that it doesn’t matter – even though it does. I’ve been one of those people for many years, proudly” (Hussie-Taylor 102). As artist-curators, Lemon and Soto seem to have more common ground. Lemon described his curatorial process in this same

interview: “I think, as artists, we really just want to be in the studio. And of course what drives us at some point...there’s the inner private need to create but at some point it becomes public. And at best, that relationship’s not neat” (Hussie-Taylor 103).

By creating Pepatían, Soto and Osorio moved out of their individual and collaborative practices in the studio and toward the public. In this movement, as defined in their mission to create greater understandings, they were also caring for and about other artists and audiences. This demonstrates a stepping out of the artist role, and into a position of witness and caretaker, observing the artists on stage and the audience in the venue and nesting one’s role in this web of relationships. As Lemon also stated about his curatorial work, “ I am no longer caretaker of the arts; I became caretaker of the audience as well” (Hussie-Taylor 102). Soto and Osorio brought this awareness of creating community through their artwork and connecting with audiences directly into their mission. This early mandate to collectively create works in the performing arts and formally establish an organization functioned as a strategic, curatorial move. To understand this curated context in another way, former IETM/International Network for Contemporary Performing Arts co-coordinator and producer Hile Teuchies states in a published conversation in *Frakcija* that “the way you are creating context is already a way of curating – you are creating a pattern in which things happen and frame it very clearly” (Brandstetter 26). In this same conversation, dance theorist Gabriele Brandstetter states that “curating in the performing arts brings in “a way of choreographic thinking,” (Brandstetter 25), and a way to “rethink the strategies of curating in terms of composing space, objects and bodies, in opening paths and structures of participation and placement through movement” (Brandstetter 25).

As a kind of curatorial framing, Pepatían moved curating activities beyond only the “container” of an organization and its next produced performance. Soto and Osorio shifted their thinking and work towards a more flexible and mobile series of connections that could support artists, audiences, venues and other communities through the creation of artworks that refer back to this Bronx community. As a place-based practice, their curatorial practices also encouraged artists to find inspiration in the South Bronx.

Historical Background of the South Bronx

In the history of the South Bronx, there is always the complex relationship to New York City, specifically the development of Manhattan and its links to the global marketplace.

Factory jobs had long been a strong source of employment for Bronx residents (primarily African-American and Latino workers), but between 1947 and 1976 over 500,000 factory jobs were lost as industries, both big and small, moved out of New York City leaving behind high rates of unemployment (E. Gonzalez 2002: 118). The Bronx also historically housed many of New York City's dirtiest industries--wastewater treatment plants, prisons and the nation's largest food distribution centers, the New York City Produce and Meat Markets -- which were all part of helping Manhattan become a global power. As Mike Davis observes in *Dead Cities*, "rich cities are not necessarily more stable than poor cities," however, rich cities do have more resources to export their refuse, or as Davis writes, their "natural contradictions" farther away from their sources (Davis 2002: 387-88). In other words, New York City had its Bronx to support its growth and ascendancy in national and world markets.

Federal funds also helped pay for the construction of three major highways that cut through existing neighborhoods - the Major Deegan Expressway (1956), Cross Bronx Expressway (1963), and the Bruckner Expressway (1973) – and further contributed to the destabilization of residential areas in the Bronx. These treatment plants, prisons, distribution centers and other industries, coupled with major highways, brought high truck traffic to residential areas, and this construction still has a direct effect on local health. According to Clean Air Communities, studies show that one out of every three children who live in the Hunts Point section of the South Bronx has asthma (Northeast States Center 2003-09). An imposing neighbor, Manhattan defined and continues to impact the Bronx and its residents.

In particular, the Cross Bronx Expressway, built by Robert Moses (with support from others in power) was designed to transport commuters from the suburbs of New Jersey through Upper Manhattan and Queens as quickly as possible. To build this Expressway, Moses and the city exercised "urban renewal rights of clearance" in the Bronx to kick out entire neighborhoods of lower middle and working class citizens. Moses caused havoc for residents in the borough. Later,

to soothe commuters driving through the failures of the impact of the Cross-Bronx Expressway's construction in the area, Stanley Simon, the Bronx Borough President in the 1970s and early 1980s, tried to cover up the miles of ruined buildings lining the Expressway with decals that portrayed peaceful domestic scenes with plants and curtains. An utter failure, it seemed to only make things worse (Berman, "Views" 73).

For the scope of his projects, Moses was hailed by many as a "building maestro." He initiated and enacted a range of public works—from bridges, highways, pools, parks, playgrounds--that transformed New York City during his reign from 1934-1968 (Ballon and Jackson 65). Moses' career moved from high praise for this ability to make these larger-than-life projects become reality to subsequent criticism for his inability to incorporate residents' opinions and perspectives on the effects of his works on their lives. One example of such critiques is Jane Jacobs' acclaimed *The Death and Life of Great American Cities* published in 1961. This groundbreaking book made her one of the most influential writers on urban planning and in it, she outlined her complete disagreement with Moses' vision. In contrast to Moses' primary focus on efficiently moving car traffic in and around Manhattan, she argued instead for city planning that supported and helped sustain healthy, urban neighborhoods. In particular, she argued for diversity in city streets and districts with frequent streets and short blocks to permit the "fabric of intricate cross-use among the users of a city neighborhood" (Jacobs 1961: 243). A far cry from Moses' highway construction, Jacob's outlook prioritized generating diversity and catalyzing the "plans of many people besides planners" (Jacobs 1961: 243). Her positioning was on the everyday, street-level; she wrote about the "intricate sidewalk ballet" (Jacobs 1961: 65) and the improvisational movements that generated an orderly unity of movements in her downtown Manhattan neighborhood. Criticized later for its "pastoral" outlook, Jacob's neighborhood was mostly racially homogeneous and included none of the everyday frictions that can happen in multi-racial neighborhoods with people from wildly different cultural, racial and religious backgrounds (Berman 1982: 324).

Another critique of Moses include the influential biography *The Power Broker: Robert Moses and the Fall of New York* published in 1974 by Robert Caro, which links Moses to the city's decline. This mammoth epic is a stark and thorough review of Moses' career. He focused on the

incredible influence Moses had in his multiple, unelected positions to bend elected city officials to his will.

The late Marshall Berman offers a specific perspective on the impact of Robert Moses in New York City and specifically the Bronx, his birthplace, in his acclaimed work *All that is Solid Melts into Air: The Experience of Modernity*. In a personal anecdote, Berman writes of driving on the Cross-Bronx Expressway in the 1970s. He writes of the irony of speeding by his childhood home, remembering how the Bronx had been, and also how he felt relieved to be out of the Bronx as fast as possible, knowing at the same time that the construction of the Cross-Bronx Expressway had made the destruction of his remembered neighborhoods possible (Berman, *All That Is Solid* 291). Berman also writes how he had, in fact, grown up with the idea that he would leave the Bronx, that to leave was progress, moving up in the world. Berman's perspective on Moses, his power and his destruction, is also tempered by the pull of his modernization of the urban environment and the "expressway world" he created to publicly showcase New York City (Berman, *All That Is Solid* 290). While writers like Jane Jacobs and Robert Caro might state that the Bronx would have thrived on its own without Moses, Berman argued that people who grew up in the Bronx in the 1950s, before the Cross-Bronx Expressway, before the destruction of the borough, would not have stayed. It was not about staying. "The Bronx of my youth was inspired by the great modern dream of mobility" (Berman, *All That Is Solid* 326). He later echoed this idea in an essay for a catalog that accompanied the 1999 "Urban Mythologies: The Bronx Represented Since the 1960s" exhibition at the Bronx Museum of the Arts. Berman wrote how Manhattan, for him, was part of his Bronx. There was a fluid connection, and Manhattan was the place to reach towards (Berman, "Views" 70-71).

In 2007, a three-part exhibition entitled "Robert Moses and the Modern City" at the Queens Museum of Art along with an accompanying book reviewed and mostly celebrated his impact. This was the first major publication dedicated to Moses since 1974 and provided a revised perspective on this urban renewal projects. Rather than accept Caro's perspective of Moses as an "evil genius" (Jackson 2007: 68), Kenneth T. Jackson, the co-editor of *Robert Moses and the Modern City*, argued that he was less a visionary than a builder who had a "consistent and powerful commitment to the public realm: to housing, highways, parks and great engineering

projects that were open to everyone” (Jackson 2007: 70). Jackson states that Moses' success was eventually brought down by public defeats caused by his later works in which had moved from the peripheries of New York City into highly developed areas that caused displacement of neighborhoods and communities, as well as the growing resistance of urban Americans to the construction of additional highways (Gutfreund 2007: 92-93). In this exhibit, Moses is overall regarded as “responsible for building the infrastructure that secured New York’s place among the greatest cities in the history of the world” (Jackson 2007). In *All that is Solid Melts into Air*, Berman writes how he also partially shared this positive perspective of Moses, even though he was personally aware of the local costs that shored up his public works in the Bronx. Unlike Berman, Ellen Pollan, Deputy Director for Development and Programs at the Bronx Council on the Arts, said to me in conversation, “I don’t think you’ll find many people in the Bronx who’ll agree with that revision” (Pollan).

During construction of the Cross-Bronx Expressway in the late 1950s and early 1960s thousands of apartments and private homes were demolished and an estimated 60,000 residents were forced to relocate (Yee and Hertz 104). With the destruction of neighborhoods came urban renewal. Federal programs included “Model Cities” legislation that built more subsidized housing. Criticized as scattered, restricted in scope, and peppered with bitter infighting of who should control the funding, this housing served to further entrench the poor in the South Bronx (E. Gonzalez 2002: 127). As Jill Jonnes in *South Bronx Rising* states, “Jane Jacobs’ classic work *The Death and Life of Great American Cities* championed the very kinds of neighborhoods urban renewal set out to replace” (Jonnes 1986: 182).

Particularly damaging was the 1974 policy of ‘planned shrinkage,’ promoted by Roger Starr, New York City’s Administrator of Housing and Urban Development (1974-76). This policy called for the systematic withdrawal of basic services – including police, fire, health, sanitation, and transportation – to force people from poor neighborhoods in order to replace the neighborhoods with highways and industrial zones as envisioned by Robert Moses (Yee and Hertz 104). Author and pastor Heidi Neumark writes in *Breathing Space: A Spiritual Journey in the South Bronx* that Moses’ work to develop New York City created and supported ecologies of urban poverty in the South Bronx (Neumark 2004: 73). Neumark charges that Moses “tried to

make the South Bronx a place of intentionally disorganized amnesia” with not “one shred of civic friendship in evidence” (Neumark 2004: 73). As Jeff Chang describes in *Can't Stop, Won't Stop: A History of the Hip Hop Generation*, it was a “deliberate program of slum clearance” (Chang 2005: 13). As Omar Friella, founder of the Mott Haven-based organization The Green Workers Cooperative that helps others start “green” businesses, has stated: “And where else, what better place to go than to some place where people aren't really expected to fight back? So, that place wound up being the South Bronx” (Friella).

The result was a catastrophe. In the gloom of the nearly bankrupt New York City in the early 1970's came a further removal of services; in the South Bronx, seven fire companies closed after 1968 and more companies were laid off during the 1970s budget crisis. The number of fires in the Bronx reached its peak in 1976 with 33,465 fires (commercial, housing, vacant buildings, automobiles, refuse). In 1977, this figure drops to 29,564 and in 1978 to 25,487 (Yee and Hertz 104). Often these fires were set by landlords to collect insurance money, and in one day, 40 were set in three-hour period (Chang 2005: 15). Fires destroyed some of the vital social networks that nourished and sustained neighborhoods, and the result was homelessness and street violence. A crisis of instability developed in the aftermath of restricted services (garbage removal, housing inspection, rodent extermination) and the lack of city resources for its residents. In this geography of poverty, public health deteriorated.

The South Bronx was left to fend for itself as regional and global resources became concentrated in Manhattan. Mike Davis' *Dead Cities* outlines additional structural factors involved in the physical decline of the South Bronx, among them: white flight, housing and employment discrimination, anti-urban (pro-suburban) federal policies, and securing of city revenues for corporate rather than neighborhood priorities (Davis 2002: 387-88).

On the street-level, as the late poet and Bronx resident John Rodriguez succinctly stated to me in a phone conversation, “no one on the planet cared about what was happening in the South Bronx” (2001). Wally Edgecombe described how building rubble that covered city blocks were referred to by locals as “brick beaches” (2013). In the late 1970s, the local section of *The New York Times* listed all the buildings burned or destroyed the previous day or night. Marshall

Berman, Bronx native and author of *All that's Solid Melts into Air*, describes how “the ruins went on and on, building after building, block after block, mile after mile” (Berman, “Views” 72). One result was that the Bronx was “often perceived by outsiders as a frontier, an empty space ready to be used or transformed, a dominated space with disposable people” (Hertz 27).

Here was a vulnerable population. In the void, gangs developed and provided a kind of structure in the chaos for local youth. In the Bronx, there were one hundred different gangs claiming 11,000 members; 70% of gang members were Puerto Ricans and the rest were African-American (Chang 2005: 50). Violence escalated until Afrika Bambaataa, founder of the Universal Zulu Nation and a “founding father” in the history of hip-hop, was able to create relationships throughout the different gangs. This massive gang peace movement began in the Bronx in 1971 and released powerful creative energy into other directions. Hip-hop was born.

To briefly explore his impact: in 1975, Afrika Bambaataa won an essay contest and traveled to Africa: “I saw black people...doing whatever they have to do to keep the country happening. Compared to what you hear in America about, 'black people can't do this and can't do that', that really just changed my mind," and when he returned to the Bronx, Bambaataa decided to help guide the local culture into an atmosphere that was more optimistic, celebratory, and stylish (Chang 2005: 101). Music was the guiding force that helped launch hip-hop. Local parties at community centers featured three influential D.J.'s: Bambaataa (located in the South East Bronx) as well as D.J. Kool Herc (centered in the West Bronx; specifically the recreation room at 1520 Sedgwick Avenue), and D.J. Grandmaster Flash (based in the South Bronx). B-boying dance styles (Rock Steady Crew, among others) evolved with the music. The dances were aggressive and a “competitive bid for dominance” (Chang 2005: 116). Sometimes a dance was enough to settle or start off a problem. For the graffiti artists, it was important to publicly “tag” their name as much as possible. Bambaataa also helped mobilize local culture by bringing music and the style of the “black and brown Bronx” into the white art and punk rock clubs in lower Manhattan (Chang 2005: 92).

Through art, Bambaataa’s visionary work helped support the youth of the Bronx to become more visible outside the borough. Chang wrote in *Can’t Stop, Won’t Stop: A History of the Hip Hop*

Generation: “living young and free in the Bronx was a revolutionary act of art. To unleash on a social level these vital urges was the surest way to ward off mass death” (Chang 2005: 106). A community formed through hip-hop strengthened the site of its origination, the Bronx.

With the Bronx crumbling into ruins in the late 1970s and early 1980s, Berman’s description of the once-fluid relationship between the borough and Manhattan became distanced. Yet he wrote how the kids in the borough, creating hip-hop, made the Bronx “more culturally creative than it had ever been in its life. In the midst of dying, it was going through rebirth” (Berman, “Views” 73). While his generation in the 1950s were not going to stay in the borough as he described in *All that is Solid Melts into Air*, those that did stay, showed how “social disintegration, and even existential desperation could become sources of life and creative energy” (Berman, “Views” 75). This creative explosion in the midst of ruins also attracted other artists to come uptown and make artwork in the borough.

As the South Bronx continued to emerge and re-build out of the destruction of the 1970s and 1980s, its artists and residents found ways to push back outside forces, allowing for more organic community growth (Edgecombe 2013). In addition to the creation of the worldwide phenomenon of hip-hop, more non-profits were launched in the South Bronx in the 1980’s than in the two previous decades combined (see appendix three: Bronx non-profits). Over time, a growing legacy of social struggles gave residents more inspirational sources to draw upon for strength and strategies. This empowered narrative is part of the history of the South Bronx, but it is nearly submerged in the public gaze under the portrayal of the South Bronx as mostly a center for prostitution, drugs, destruction and violence. Creating new multiple art forms like the moves, sounds and shapes of hip-hop, building casitas as community centers in abandoned lots, initiating and managing more empowered campaigns for improved quality of life, fighting the city to keep the local Hostos Community College open – these were all sustained efforts that became more impactful to the future of the borough and its residents than only survival tactics. Later, in the mid-1990s, there was a marked increase in environmental and social justice groups. These moves towards self-authorship buck up against socio-political hierarchies and other sensational media and film to help create more opportunities for new sites of resistance and greater activist citizenship.

One such example is the South Bronx Clean Air Coalition, an organization that successfully targeted the closing of a medical incinerator in 1999. This incinerator burned 48 tons of medical waste from three states every day and its closure was an energizing victory for residents. What follows is an extensive quote from “Victory in the South Bronx: What It Took to Win” which gives context and shows a wide-ranging sourcing of support in their struggle to close the site,

The South Bronx is a low-income neighborhood, whose residents are mostly people of color. The largest ethnic group is Puerto Rican. It is a community with poor health, which has been particularly devastated by AIDS, but which still maintains a rich culture. Part of that culture has been a history of struggle with many battles through the years over civil rights, healthcare, schools, and housing. We have a history of social involvement with clergy and social justice organizations including the Black Panthers, Young Lords, and in more recent years, the National Congress for Puerto Rican Rights and other Latino justice organizations. We benefited from this legacy of activism through the experience, resources, and support that current and former members of these organizations brought. But the South Bronx also has a history of inaction and total corruption on the part of our politicians, virtually all of whom backed this incinerator (Feinberg).

In the nation’s history, the South Bronx has a symbolic presence. From President Kennedy, who visited the borough in 1960 during his Presidential campaign, to the media that accompanied President Jimmy Carter’s 1977 visit and recorded the widespread devastation and destruction, the Bronx offered a focus of powerful attention. The negative images projected during Carter’s visit made such an impact that succeeding Presidents and presidential candidates also visited the Bronx: Ronald Reagan (1980; his prepared speech interrupted by protestors) and Jesse Jackson (1984; his visit included a one-night stay with a local family at the Forest Houses housing project). Internationally, a nine-member delegation from the Soviet Peace Committee visited the Bronx in 1980, led by a New York City Councilman seeking \$5 billion in foreign aid to rebuild the Bronx (Yee and Hertz 104). And positive, grass-roots changes have occurred. Think of it this way, the last President to visit the South Bronx was President Clinton in 1997; it’s no longer understood as an easy national poster child for despair. Yet international support speaks to its ongoing challenges. A visit in 2005 by the Venezuelan President, Hugo Chavez, led him to set-up a charitable foundation that has donated millions of dollars specifically for non-profit

environmental, and arts and community organizations in the South Bronx, and also sparked much controversy about international aid for a borough just outside Manhattan.

Public Art Projects in the South Bronx

Hip-hop was a creative force based in, drawn out of experiences from Bronx streets, community centers, parks, and the subway trains gliding throughout the metropolitan area with Bronx-based graffiti messages. In addition to hip-hop, most of the experimental public art and community works in the Bronx, until *Familias*, was rooted in the visual arts. A few specific artists from downtown were attracted to the kind of work happening in the South Bronx and came up to the borough to pursue their own practices. Berman wrote for the *Urban Mythologies* exhibition catalogue about a few of them. Stefan Eins established Fashion Moda (1978-1993; most active 1978-1985) in a storefront on Third Avenue near 147th Street. From this storefront space, Eins worked local government offices to get artists (like John Ahearn, Rigoberto Torres, John Fekner and David Finn) additional public spaces to mount installations in schools and parks, streets and in the many abandoned apartment buildings.

Another visual artist, Tim Rollins, launched an innovative teacher-student “Art and Knowledge Workshop.” He collaborated with 40 “at-risk” junior high school students in the South Bronx who created original murals under Rollins’ direction. The teenagers called themselves K.O.S. / Kids of Survival and their collaborative work with Rollins became so successful - with offers from colleges across the country, town halls in Europe, important collectors and media - that the group eventually disbanded from the pressure (Berman, “Views” 78).

Sculptor John Ahearn, lived and worked in the South Bronx in the 1980s and 1990s, and with Bronx native Robert Torres, created casts of local residents, painting them and turning the sculptures into outdoor friezes on building walls. In 1986, Ahearn received a commission from the city to create sculptures for a plaza in front of a new police station on Jerome Avenue. His choices for his sculptures were people known in the neighborhood who were not uniformly liked by residents. The works identified with hip-hop and the celebration of the street. These

references were both part of the solution, mostly for the kids, and part of the problem, mostly for the parents, who wanted to protect their children from such influences (Berman, "Views" 82). They were criticized as too "street" (a man kneeling with his pit bull, another man with a boombox and basketball, another on roller skates), and were denounced by a few community members and the Assistant Commissioner in the New York City Department of Cultural Affairs as not exhibiting the kind of inspirational sources that spoke to the community's future (Berman, "Views" 80-81). The location of these street scenes to celebrate the opening of a new police station was also part of the mix of criticisms. In the end, Ahearn was not able to withstand the pressures from the community and New York City Department of Cultural Affairs against the works and paid to have the works taken down. In the midst of this push-and-pull, Berman concludes: "anybody who cares about the Bronx has to see that a sacrifice of noble and dedicated people and their work is the last thing the Bronx needs" (Berman, "Views" 80).

These artists and community members had artistic success, while perhaps short-lived, with their collaborative works. From a curatorial perspective, both artists were personally connected and community inspired. Rollins invested in personal relationships with the students of K.O.S. as they created the work together. Ahearn lived in the Bronx and created his work primarily one-on-one with the neighborhood residents acted as the physical sources for this sculptures. Their works of both artists were object-based visual art projects created for the public, and their "performances" took place more in the relationships that developed between them and community members.

In terms of public performance works in the South Bronx, there was the unstoppable force of Hip-Hop, as well as other community sources like the musicians and dancers of *Los Pleneros de la 21* (first founded in the Bronx in 1983), and *Rincon Criollo/ Downhome Corner* or *La Casita de Chema* (internationally recognized as a "school and performance" space in a community casita; founded 1987) which sought to re-enliven and promote the traditional Puerto Rican folkloric forms of *bomba y plena*. Previous choreographers in the borough, including Chuck Davies (formed the Chuck Davis Dance Company at the South Bronx Community Action Theatre in 1967, later moved to Bronx Community College; later founded DanceAfrica), Joan Miller (founded Joan Miller's Dance Players based primarily at Lehman College for over 20

years, 1970-1990), and Jawole Willa Jo Zollar (who lived in the Bronx 1981-1994; founder of Urban Bush Women), made their works in studio with their dance company members, primarily for the purpose of performing in theatrical spaces. Their main focus was not on incorporating community participants into their works.

Osorio and Soto describe how they felt their artistic work was at the convergence of their own experiences between their downtown Manhattan experimentations and their life in the South Bronx. In addition, *Familias* brought their art-making practice to the intersections of Bronx performing arts histories of individual choreographers and companies with community-based, multi-disciplinary practitioners. *Familias* drew influences from the Bronx streets and its residents as well as their experiments with their own artistic collaborative practices. As artist-curators, Soto and Osorio were accompanying the borough in its transformational efforts from the ruins of the late 1970s and early 1980s to a more empowered narrative about themselves. In the mid-1990s, several community-based organizations were founded: *Nos Quedamos/We Stay* (1992), The Point Community Development Corporation (1993/94), Youth Ministries for Peace and Justice (1994), For a Better Bronx (1995), in Pregones Theater moved from its previous home at St. Ann's Church in Mott Haven to a new theater at 700 Grand Concourse, just a few blocks north of Hostos Community College (1995), and just after *Familias*, choreographer and dancer Arthur Aviles returned to the Bronx in 1996 at the invitation of The Point to teach dance classes and create new dance works. The Bronx was expanding its possibilities in community building and art-creation in the mid-90s. As Kim Solga, with D.J. Hopkins and Shelley Orr state, performance also plays a role in the development and renewal of urban spaces. It can reshape our interactions and offer greater understandings of our shared metropolitan experiences (Hopkins, Orr and Solga 2011: 2-3). Through its lengthy, personal research and collaborations, *Familias* offered viewers artistic insights into South Bronx families through its public theatrical presentations. This work helps reconfigure interactions by presenting the strengths and challenges of the South Bronx as a home, as well as the relationships created to generate the work.

As more of a performance project than a collaborative and purely visual art installation in the borough, *Familias* represented a shift in curatorial models in the South Bronx. An acclaimed

visual artist, Osorio had been selected in 1991 by El Museo del Barrio for a retrospective of his work. His collaborative contribution of sets, costumes and installations in the prolific works of choreographer Merián Soto (see appendix 4: Merián Soto choreography) was a significant element to their works together. Their collaborations were about the creation of multi-disciplinary works, and this included performing together in “How to Dance the Cha Cha Cha” (1986) and “Cocinando” (1985), among others. Logistically, the artists also showed the breadth of their collaborative acumen through their work with Hostos and their abilities in fundraising to support the projects. By working with the Hostos Center for the Arts & Culture and pairing up dancers with participating family members, the artists opened up the spaces of Hostos as well as private family homes to make them more public. Through this increased fluidity, they were able to ease up questions of power and to enlarge, as Rosalyn Deutsche argues in her essay “The Threshold of Democracy,” the sense of democratic possibilities (Deutsche 100).

Familias in the South Bronx

Familias was part of reclaiming the Bronx for the people who live there, including Soto and Osorio. Living in stressful environments and ignored by those with resources, many South Bronx residents were open to and turned further towards the arts to tell their stories and gain a public voice. The ending of the theatrical work *Familias* is significant; after moving through a mosaic of insights into the local communities, the work comes to rest in a concluding scene outdoors in a public garden. This dream of a greener Bronx, to take over abandoned lots and build something useful for the community, is where the full community moves together in a slow build up of interconnections in the space. Near the close of that scene, the group of dancers and family participants, eleven people, with a group of children playing on the stage nearby, are holding hands in a circle, almost galloping, until they more slowly move together into the center of the circle. Then they move out again and like an extended thread, run through an archway made by a couple holding hands together high above their heads. The others hold hands and burst through, like the #4 train out of the tunnel and into the sky at 161st Street.

This project, as well as its lead artists Merián Soto and Pepón Osorio, thrived at a crossroads between its community participants, artists, organizations and funders. The work itself, its structure and approach, listened and the artists created from that empathetic curiosity and engagement. This reach of the artists, venue, organizations and funders towards each other also spoke to the abilities of Soto, Osorio and Wallace Edgecombe (Director of Hostos Center for the Arts & Culture and project host) to facilitate and convince others that supporting the project would be beneficial to all their interests. All were brought together by the impact that the project would offer by placing the community on center stage, literally and in the development of the work. The project would honor the local community's approach to its proposals and work in Spanish, English, dance, images, textures objects and music to craft their combined expressions. *Familias* created a network of collaborating interests. Funders recognized the impact that *Familias* could bring to the local community and wanted to be part of the artists' vision. They felt the urgency and trusted the artists and venue to bring the project to fruition.

As artist-curators, Soto and Osorio were a unique collaborative team. Their artistic vision for this multi-layered project dovetailed with the direction that Director Edgecombe had for the Hostos Center. Together they were a team of multi-disciplinary curators able to work institutionally and separately to realize the project. Unlike "star curators," their conceptual approach to the performance work was rooted in community and in their company of professional dancers. Soto and Osorio did not perform in the work themselves, but created the context and structure to support the work as well as developing its content. Their work was about relationships in and with a particular borough. *Familias* was a conceptually oriented performance project that included the performing arts, with professionally trained dancers and musicians. More than focusing only on their personal relationships with community members, they also paired up the dancers with local family members to connect outside of rehearsals. This personal engagement was the internal material that helped develop the work. The lead artists were not, for example, creating a conceptual map of locations throughout the borough with performances at various sites. The center of their focus were the new theater facilities at Hostos, located in the heart of the South Bronx, at 149th Street and the Grand Concourse, with interconnecting 2,4,5 subway lines. These engagements between the dancers and participating family members helped erode some of the creative hierarchies. Originally the artists had wanted to include family stories in the

work, but learned that the participating families did not want their personal dynamics revealed publicly. Soto and Osorio then altered their artistic direction to create another way of thinking about families that would keep participants more comfortably engaged with the project. In its creative development, the artists created room for flexibility and let the process inform the work.

By the time of *Familias* in 1994-95, Osorio and Soto had created eight collaborative works. Their work *Historias* in particular incorporated community members into its performances. After its premiere in 1992, *Historias* toured until 1999 with two or three performances per year (dancer Niles Ford received a Bessie Award in 1993 for his dancing in *Historias*). At each site, the artists worked with local Latino residents and artists to incorporate them into the work. The artists' ideas of community "inreach" (discussed further in this thesis) were mobile and part of their national touring initiatives. By the mid-90s, Osorio also had his work in critically acclaimed solo works in individual exhibitions in New York, Philadelphia, Connecticut, Ohio, in addition to other curated group exhibitions in museums, art galleries, as well as his self-initiated storefront installations (Gonzalez J. 2013:100-104).

Familias was also partly a development of their earlier curatorial practices. Merián Soto was actively supporting and promoting new Latino dance and performance artists, often in collaboration with Manhattan's Dance Theater Workshop/DTW (now New York Live Arts). These collaborative curated projects included: *!Muevete!* (1991; 1994), *Aqui Se Habla Espanol*, and *4 Latinas* which showcased artists like Livia Daza Paris, Evelyn Velez, Patricia Hoffbauer, Elizabeth Marrero, Jaime Ortega, David Zambrano, among others. Another co-curated project, *Revisiones: Estruendo en el Nuevo Mundo* (1992) included a collaboration with Pregones Theater along with DTW and showcased dance artists like Gabri Christa, George Emilio-Sanchez, among others. Additionally, *Rompeforma: Maratón de Baile, Performance & Visuales* was the international Latino artists' festival in Puerto Rico that Soto co-directed with Viveca Vázquez (1989-1996). As a six-year performance series, *Rompeforma* in particular provided significant support for multidisciplinary artists from the national and the international scene. These artists included pillars in the performing arts like Guillermo Gomez Peña, Coco Fusco, Pepón Osorio, Awilda Sterling-Duprey, Patricia Hoffbauer, George Emilio-Sanchez, Karen Langevin, Teresa Hernandez, Gabri Christa, Arthur Aviles, David Zambrano, among many

others (Homar 214). These curatorial initiatives increased the visibility of the artists and created other kinds of networks in New York City and Puerto Rico for Latino artists and new audiences.

Soto brought her experiences curating performing arts initiatives from an activist positioning to support other Latino artists and connect with audiences to the creation of *Familias*. When choreographer Ralph Lemon was asked by Judy Hussie-Taylor about the effect of his curatorial projects on his other works and practice, Lemon described how his “art-making practice is getting more spatial, so maybe it’s the curatorial work encouraging a kind of wideness. I mean, I don’t feel like I’m moving away from performance as I know it, but I’m much more interested in what’s holding it and how it’s thought about” (Hussie-Taylor 113). In a similar way, Soto and Osorio’s previous curatorial practices leading up to the creation of *Familias* influenced this work. The artist-curator can draw from influences on “both sides” for their layered approaches to art creation.

Hostos’ support for the project sent a significant signal that their new theater would be for the community. It was not just a place that would show finished productions on tour at many venues throughout New York City or nationally, but would be a creative site to incubate and support new, artistic work developed within the borough. To have that kind of institutional theater available to local artists and organizations as a creative site to grow and develop work for home audiences was powerful. Opening up the institutional space to a public community and allowing them to interact and relate was a curatorial move made through a multi-tiered collaboration of Soto, Osorio and Edgecombe and the Hostos Community College administration. This joint response between the artists and directors of a major local institution and their combined commitment to the project helped ease institutional hierarchies.

The work energized other connections within the community. Local media and grassroots sources made the most of their resources to support the work. By the time *Familias* opened in December 1995 local interest in the project had spread through word of mouth, the widely distributed *Familias* newspaper (a collaborative effort which included participant profiles, art work, poetry, recipes, etc.), and through BronxNet, the local cable station which provided extensive coverage of both the work’s process and final performances. *Familias* did not rely on

print media in the borough, which devotes little space to the performing arts, and even less to experimental performance works.

BronxNet Community Cable Producer and Editor Michael Max Knobbe and his team filmed the world premiere at Hostos and disseminated the performances with more than thirty screenings of the final performance of *Familias* in April 1996. In addition to documentation, BronxNet's involvement was also generative. Their Bronx Live program produced a documentary video of *The Making of a Family* which gave behind-the-scenes insights into the creation of the work. Bronx Live! is an award-winning monthly cable TV series dedicated since it began in September 1995 to presenting Bronx performing artists and arts venues and organizations. The series is part of BronxNet Community Television, a private not-for-profit community television station serving the borough of the Bronx since 1988 (Cablevision channels: 67, 68, 69, and 70). This documentary was recognized by The National Academy of Television Arts and Sciences as an outstanding Fine Arts program and nominated for a 1997 Emmy award (BronxNet "Bronx Live"). Their work helped to further raise the visibility of the project, and thousands of viewers had access to the work through BronxNet distribution (Soto 1999: 2). Additionally, this archival documentation with interviews of participants, lead artists and dancers functioned like a visual "catalog" of influences that accompanied the project and helped contextualize the work for remote and future audiences.

Familias engaged participants and organizations within the community as well as offering a variety of funders – government, corporate and foundations – outside the community with opportunities to connect with residents in one of the poorest congressional districts in the United States. Soto and Osorio were awarded a coveted MAP/Multi-Arts Production Fund to support *Familias*, via their non-profit organization Pepatián, in addition to grants from foundations: Jerome, Greenwall, Harkness, Joyce Mertz Gilmore. Government support included: New York State Council on the Arts, New York City Department of Cultural Affairs. New York Community Trust and the Bronx Council on the Arts, plus corporate support from AT&T Foundation and Con Edison/Chemical Bank, also supported the project. Hostos received a \$3000,000 production grant, one of the largest NEA/National Endowment for the Arts grants, in

addition to another \$20,000 NEA grant (Wachter). Pepatián's total project income was approximately \$314,000, in addition to Hostos \$106,250 in-kind project support.

This reach of funders, artists and arts organizations towards each other in support of this project suggests that they are, in fact, in relation. Within the history of the South Bronx, this effort towards relationship is a statement in itself. Their funding for this performance project did not help solve the infrastructural depletion of the area or resolve its ongoing poverty, but it does provide a gesture of support and replenishment towards an underserved borough.

Familias acted like a facilitator, mediating the transformation of daily living into artistic creation, and increasing the visibility for artists and borough residents. *Familias* helped pushed the more-than present in the borough, the multiplicity of stories through both performance and media. After *Familias* in 1995, Pepatián's mission was updated to more closely align with creating work for the South Bronx, its artistic home: "Pepatián strives to encourage audience understanding and appreciation of the diversity of contemporary Latino arts in New York City, across the US and internationally, but feels a special commitment to its home base in the South Bronx" (Gabriels, "Pepatián organizational background").

The South Bronx: what comes to mind?

The mingling sounds of Salsa, the latest pop song, Hip-Hop or Latin Jazz from open windows and cars that accompany your walk on a sunny day from 149th to 165th on the Grand Concourse?

The sight of an apartment window on the third floor facing the street with a pillow on the window ledge and a small Puerto Rican flag tucked around a plastic palm tree in the corner.

The young mother just off 161st Street screaming with her full heart and breath into the old-school payphone: "where my \$500?! where my \$500 dollahs at?! You get out your house now and you get that money, you feel me? You feel me now?"

Chapter Three: Pepatián and the South Bronx

Before diving further into the work of *Familias*, this chapter explores the works relationship to the non-profit Pepatián, and its impact in my curatorial projects as its Director. These insights into my own practices and creative engagements with the creation of *Familias* were part of the foundational materials that led to the creation of a performance piece: *How I Became a Boogie-Down Rican*.

How *Familias* helped author Pepatián

Familias contributed to authoring Pepatián and helped the organization develop a stronger understanding of its role in the South Bronx. *Familias* was part of the foundation that connected Pepatián and its artists with the local community.

Familias could also be understood as literally helping to author Pepatián through the artist's understanding of funding; knowing where to ask for financial support, how to write about the project convincingly, and following through with project reporting to a variety of government, corporate, and foundation organizations.

Familias also authored the organization by understanding itself as a frame to express images and experiences not present in other media. The work connected with live and remote audiences via its successful six-night, sold out run at Hostos Center for the Arts & Culture, later viewings on BronxNet TV distribution, its reviews in the press in New York City and Chicago.

By the time *Familias* was created, Patti Bradshaw, the third co-founder of Pepatián, was less artistically involved as a collaborator with Soto and Osorio. She performed as a dancer in Soto's choreographies, and began to develop her own projects, briefly using the umbrella of Pepatián's non-profit status to support her work. As the organization became more focused specifically on Latino-based works, Bradshaw explained to me in an email that "with respect for that position and recognition of my own more Eurocentric point of view, it seemed appropriate to head off in

my own direction.” As a strong part of the original Pepatián, she stated: “I loved being a young collaborator with Merián and Pepón. I learned a lot and felt the supportive energy and creativity that came from three minds and bodies all looking in the same direction” (Bradshaw email 3 April 2014).

By 1994-95, Pepatián had evolved from primarily supporting the work of Soto and Osorio and had expanded to support and present dance and performance works by other Latino artists in a variety of platforms (*jMuevete!*, *Revisiones*, *Rompeforma*, etc.) in New York City and Puerto Rico. *Familias* helped to define further Pepatián’s specific relationship with the South Bronx, its residents and venues. The work created community, and sited this community (in the South Bronx). The community created via *Familias* enabled the artists to create other works supported locally in various mobile, pop-up installations and collaborative configurations with institutions in the Bronx and Manhattan.

Through *Familias*, more connections were created that inspired more projects, which, in turn, created additional community. As a project-driven organization located in the South Bronx, the experiences with *Familias* helped support *El Cab*, the 1997 mobile installation created by Osorio post-*Familias* as a memorial to a murdered livery cab driver, Sergio Jimenez; as well as Osorio’s video and sculpture installation project: *Las Twines* (1998), which drew attention to racism within the Latino community. *Las Twines* was created and installed in a vacant storefront at Southern Boulevard and Tiffany Street in the South Bronx, and also included the participation of UNITAS, a local youth group. This public work offered residents opportunities to discover the work over time, and gave Osorio opportunity to experience the work with the community over the process of making it. The installation was next shown at the Hostos Arts Gallery, and then in downtown Manhattan at the Ronald Feldman Fine Arts Gallery in 1999. Crafting and showing the work first in the South Bronx was also partially a way to show the borough that their voices were vital to the creation of this contemporary work about issues in the Latino communities.

Additionally, four years after the premiere of *Familias*, Soto created the first *Bronx Dance Fest* ’99 of performances and community events at Hostos Center for the Arts & Culture in collaboration with Dance Theater Workshop/DTW (now New York Live Arts/NYLA) and the

New York State DanceForce. The New York State DanceForce was founded in 1994 as a think-tank that evolved into a statewide network of twenty dance organizers committed to increasing the amount and quality of dance activity across New York (New York State Danceforce). Similar to how *Familias* was created with ongoing community engagement over 15 months, the *Bronx Dance Fest '99* provided multiple access points for artists and the public to engage and connect through a variety of performances, jams, dance classes, talks and workshops.

These three Pepatián projects: *Familias*, *Las Twines*, *Bronx Dance Fest '99* were also understood to create a bridge into the South Bronx for Manhattan venues, funders and organizations. Securing funding to successfully realize *Familias* also helped further author the organization by establishing and maintaining relationships with a wide variety of funders; gallery owners had to travel to the South Bronx to see Osorio, the recent high-profile MacArthur Fellow, and his latest installation work; and the *Bronx Dance Fest '99* provided access for organizations like then-Dance Theater Workshop and the New York State DanceForce to participate in South Bronx art-making projects and connect with Hostos Center for the Arts & Culture.

The experience of working on *Familias* showed the necessity of intensive meetings to help connect the artists with local families as well as the importance of support from the participating venues. To best support the work, the artists needed to replicate the incubation that the South Bronx had provided. After the premiere, the work was engaged to perform nearby at Rutgers University. In preparation for this residency, Soto traveled to New Jersey multiple times to visit the venue and local participants in advance of rehearsals to translate the project to other communities outside of the Bronx. The artists built up the needed relationships over time to best support the project.

Familias supported the organization's mission to craft artistic work designed to broaden conversations with and about Latinos, within the South Bronx into wider communities and directions.

Interlude: Mobility

Another way to understand *Familias*' part in supporting the authoring of Pepatián is its process of creating multiple points of access to the process of creating the work (workshops, rehearsals, group meetings, individual partnering with artists, six nights of performances, etc). These multiple platforms of engagement fit well within the lives of people from the South Bronx and became a conceptual model used in other local Pepatián projects.

The Bronx is defined by movement. Known internationally as “the Boogie Down,” choreographer Arthur Aviles points out, “You think about the Bronx and you think about dance. It’s the Boogie Down Bronx. No other borough refers to itself in that way, talking about movement and culture. When you come to the Bronx, you got to get down, move your body and get funky” (D. Gonzalez. “In New Home”). Not only in name and reputation, but the Bronx is also about movement due to its rate of rental apartments, the size of the borough and its transportation systems. For a community on the move, the *Familias* project was tailored to busy schedules and offered multiple possibilities for residents to participate with the work. This logistical move was a curated choice based on place.

A unique aspect of the Bronx that supports (or enforces) mobility is that its home ownership rate is the lowest of all the boroughs (20.7%) according to 2011 New York City Commissioner survey (Wha Lee). The average age of rental buildings where residents live is approximately 78 years old (Broer). The percentage of rental households is 81%, and higher than all the other counties in New York State (DiNapoli). In 2012, the Bronx had the highest proportion of renters (nearly 58 percent) with housing costs of 30 percent or more of income (DiNapoli). In other words, the high percentage of renters in the Bronx also makes up the highest proportion of households that cannot afford their rent. Overall, it is not a borough of homeowners with steady incomes who can make the kind of long-term planning necessary to pay a mortgage.

A person rents so they can move. It is a life that is on the edge and also a life with others on the edge. With the majority of residents living in apartments, people are sharing at least one wall with each other. One-third of the many rental apartments are in buildings with only 1-4 units.

With fewer large house complexes and more small apartment buildings than in other boroughs, the Bronx offers a certain intimacy (Broer). Just outside their door, residents can smell cooking down the hallways, hear music, the sound of voices singing or talking to each other or on the phone, the TV playing in the other apartments.

The Bronx is a place of stimulation, with influences and connections happening in shared elevators, knowing families in the four other apartment units, passing each other on the stairwell as residents take out their garbage, carry their clothes to the laundry in the building or down the street. These interactions happen in other places with apartment buildings, but the Bronx is also home to many immigrants newly arrived in New York City, now largely from West Africa (the largest concentration of African immigrants, mostly from Nigeria, Ghana, Gambia, and Sierra Leone), as well as Bangladesh, Mexico, among others (Bonds).

To give more scope to these ideas of mobility and influences on its residents: Charles Rice-Gonzalez², novelist and Executive Director of BAAD!/Bronx Academy of Arts and Dance described,

one of the main reasons the Bronx is special is because of the people who live here - there's a certain kind of perseverance, a bravado and a certain kind of fire that Bronx people have. Many have this passionate, close relationship with the borough, and can get very defensive of it. You just 'don't mess with the Bronx,' with Bronx people. That's how we feel about it. And I think it stems from the love that we have for ourselves. When you think about it, some neighborhoods, there's not a lot to love, they don't have amenities and the buildings aren't so great. It's the people that make it special. The Bronx has this special energy (Rice-Gonzalez "Interview").

It's worth mentioning this background, because Rice-Gonzalez also noted how the public transportation system of New York City is far more geared towards getting people in and around Manhattan, and not so much into and out of the Bronx. He stated how for people living in the borough, these vast distances between borough destinations "creates a sense of separation and then the closeness needs to be created again" (Rice-Gonzalez "Interview").

There is this moving, and then resettling, this separation and then the closeness that is again rebuilt. As dancer Jessie Flores states, "there is a richness in the Bronx, in attitude, in style, community of people, it feels more tight-knit" (Flores "Interview"). All of this movement has an

impact. If you are living and traveling around a borough that has large distances and requires one or two trains and a bus to reach a destination, and where the majority of people are renting their homes, you are in a borough that is incredibly mobile. Here is a sharing of influences with people settling into apartments in new neighborhoods and at the same time, remaining ready to leave as needed, and connecting with others who are also ready to move and re-settle. Even when circumstances can be difficult, ongoing movement brings a certain vitality to the borough. People interact because they are out there on the subway platforms, waiting for the next train, on the buses, waiting and moving with other people in the borough on long journeys; there is a certain concentration and compression in between long commutes.

While ghetto can be the word used to describe the South Bronx by the media and also sometimes by the people who live there, that limiting word is not its only story. True, it can be a ghetto that its predominantly working class population finds hard to escape economically, but it also has access to a wealth of creativity in its everyday life in the borough. If an artist or resident is looking for ideas or new approaches, the mixture of people in the Bronx can provide creative riches uncontained only by location. This ability of residents to “make something out of nothing” influences artists and in turn, artists can influence others in the community in ongoing cycles of inspiration.

Familias is part of the creative richness of the borough and of the ongoing creation of knowledge about the borough itself. The Bronx is not the same after an arts project is realized with community; it is not the same in its imagination of itself and its strengthened sense of continual empowerment. As Omar Friella, founder of Green Workers Cooperative, stated: “It’s only natural where people have been feeling the brunt of pollution and joblessness at rates so far ahead of the rest of the country – this is where innovation comes from” (Prentice). That spirit of experimentation is also understood to be part of the inspiring creativity of “the ghetto.” In the South Bronx, there is a need for more local authorship by its primarily Afro-Caribbean-Latino populations of their local neighborhoods. *Familias* is part of this drive, and its successful ability to secure space for local South Bronx voices to be understood (and misunderstood) meant that additional opportunities to be heard were safeguarded for others, creating more sites for transformation and struggle.

The impact of *Familias*' fifteen-month creation period is mirrored in Osorio's year-long residency in a Bronx storefront, is mirrored in the multiple performances and community activities during the two-weeks of the *Bronx Dance Fest '99*. These extensive, ongoing projects have a similar consideration of time needed to connect with the residents making their homes in the intense mobility of the South Bronx.

This quality of constant movement in the Bronx makes it challenging because it is hard to get a grip on the borough. It's easier to call it a ghetto, the media does and so do people who live there; the one constant is that the South Bronx was and is still very poor. Yet, another part of its identity is that within that circumference of poverty and its attendant crisis, the amount and velocity of motion can be understood to create ongoing changes in the borough, and this movement is also a strong part of its identity.

Legacy: *Familias* and *Pepatián*

Through its creative process and productions, *Familias* contributed an understanding of how to best create performing arts work in and for the borough. I understood the influences of *Familias* in the history of the artist's non-profit arts organization *Pepatián* through the *Bronx Dance Fest '99*, which was designed to help highlight Bronx-based artists. By 1999, Soto had created several successful curatorial platforms, in collaborations with other artists and venues in Manhattan and Puerto Rico to support other Latino dance and performing artists. This success had led to further funding opportunities for the organization and one result of this added funding was that I was hired in July 1999 as Managing Director for the organization. My first job was to help Soto coordinate this Bronx-based curatorial initiative and its mix of artists, venues and organizations for the festival. I learned how Soto and Osorio activated their approaches to support experimental work in the borough, and how *Familias* had left traces of its impact that had also become part of the underlying organization of the *Bronx Dance Fest*.

The two-week festival included a diverse range of performances and community events at the Hostos Center for the Arts & Culture, located in the heart of the South Bronx. Like *Familias*, the *Bronx Dance Fest* supported the accessibility of local artists with audiences, and created multiple points of contact to the festival via free dance classes, public discussions, a variety of performances, a public dance jam in the Hostos atrium, among others. Conceptually, both initiatives considered the community as a creative and sustaining resource for the work, and the festival valued these deepening connections of artists, venues and organizations with local communities. It was a concentrated two-week burst of activities that worked to entice and inspire residents to attend and participate by offering a range of low-cost events (free to \$12 performance tickets) and importantly, featured artists whose dance works in salsa, hip-hop, Afro-Caribbean, modern and other contemporary dances mirrored the diversity of the borough. The project was curated as a local, populist event.

Both *Familias* and the *Bronx Dance Fest* helped raise the visibility of the artists, and via collaborations, the borough itself as a destination for multi-disciplinary, contemporary performing arts works. Like *Familias*, the *Bronx Dance Fest* continued a similar approach to working collaboratively with venues and other Manhattan-based organizations. These ongoing interconnections helped develop the organization and its way of working in the borough. Bringing more performance opportunities at the Hostos theater and media exposure to the artists through the concentrated activities of the festival also helped ease feelings of isolation of their work and brought their work to greater inclusion on the New York City performing arts scene.

A few of the artists who participated included, among others: Arthur Aviles Typical Theater (see appendix five: Arthur Aviles), Pepatián/Merián Soto (in 1999, the organization name was the same name used to describe Merián Soto's performance works) featured Soto's salsa-inspired work *Así se baila un Son/How to Dance a Son Montuno* (see appendix four: Merián Soto), and Full Circle Souljahz. In particular, Full Circle, the hip-hop dance company founded by Kwikstep and Rokafella, shared an evening with Dance Theater Workshop's sponsorship of Compagnie Kafig, a French-Algerian experimental hip-hop troupe. This shared performance was reviewed in *The New York Times'* Chief Dance Critic, Anna Kisselgoff who held the role from 1977-2005. She wrote while Compagnie Kafig "is rightly one of the most talked-about groups on the

experimental dance scene in France, Full Circle Souljahz, Bronx-based, deserves to be talked about more”(Kisselgoff). Full Circle performed *Soular-Powered*, and the review stated: “Full Circle was riveting on a deliberately didactic level, steeped in pop culture and social-protest ingenuity” (Kisselgoff). This festival review in *The New York Times* by Kisselgoff was a first for Full Circle and offered powerful support for the Bronx-based dancers.

The success and public visibility of Pepatián’s performing arts projects *Familias* and the *Bronx Dance Fest* produced in the borough meant that I was being introduced to a conceptually developed artistic response specific to the South Bronx. In other words, I was walking into a specific artistic understanding of and a way of working in the borough.

***Familias* and my curatorial work**

I began working at Pepatián, Soto and Osorio’s non-profit organization, and sought to continue its mission to create, produce and support performing arts works in the South Bronx.

By the time I was hired in 1999, the organization had shifted. Soto and Osorio had previously discontinued their artistic collaborations in 1996 to focus on their separate projects, and in 1999, Osorio was awarded the Herb Alpert Award and the MacArthur “genius” Fellowship, Soto was hired by Temple University, and they moved with their two young sons to Philadelphia.

In thinking of *Familias* impact within the organization, I understood that there were transversal pulls in several key areas of empowerment, accessibility, community created through its works, collaboration and inclusion working across Pepatián’s projects. I strove to keep the empowerment that is fully part of Bronx history and that I witnessed at the *Bronx Dance Fest ’99* growing. My goal was to pick up this charged organizational mission of transversal influences that had been fed by *Familias* and the *Bronx Dance Fest*, and keep it moving forwards. The following highlights how the *Bronx Artist Spotlight* series connects with *Familias* and how the Bronx, a historically underserved borough, largely continues to be its own resource.

Curatorial Projects: Bronx Artist Spotlight series *Jump It UP & Fall Into It*, 2001-06

By Spring 2001, I had secured enough (new and previously established) funding and met enough local artists to create a new curatorial initiative, “Jump It UP: Bronx Artist Spotlight.” To find collaborating partners, I had tapped into the organization’s legacy by capitalizing on Osorio and Soto’s artistic renown and emphasizing their connection with the organization to interest local venues, funders and artists to work with me, as someone very new to the borough. Pepón Osorio’s recent MacArthur and his stature as the first Puerto Rican to receive this award, along with Soto and Osorio’s well-regarded collaborations and other individual works, often meant that other artists and venues returned my calls with interest and pride in connecting in some way with the organization. The title “Jump It Up” referred to the organizational mission to support the work of Bronx artists and I wanted to add some fire to the project title to show that even with Soto and Osorio no longer as based in New York City, I would be working hard with the artists to get our work out there and visible.

My relationships with other professionals working in the field helped frame the project. From my conversations with arts consultant Kim Konikow, I described the work as a community celebration. Charles Rice-Gonzalez at BAAD! suggested “Bronx artist spotlight” for the series title. Bronx-based poet John Rodriguez (now deceased) reassured me when I felt uncertain about the broad definition of Pepatián projects which included artists living and/or making work in the borough, “Jane, the most important thing is that its happening IN the Bronx!” The title “Fall Into It” played off the spring series title and was suggested by visual artist Wanda Ortiz. The first year of performances and activities functioned like a festival but soon became more of an ongoing borough-wide performance series with showcase opportunities and other residencies and performances that helped incubate and support artists and their work. I understood the title to be something of a mantra for movement, and used it to help drive an understanding that we (myself, the artists and venues I collaborated with) would be working together to drive forward our network into greater public awareness.

By 2000, Pepatián was defined as the umbrella organization for three projects: Merián Soto Dance & Performance, Pepón Osorio Projects, and the Bronx Artist Spotlight series: “Jump it UP and Fall into It.”

Jump It UP was a borough-wide performance series and community celebration, and also became Pepatián’s main initiative to further strengthen and celebrate the cultural vibrancy and well being of the borough (Gabriels “Pepatián proposal”). After two years of planning and activating Jump It UP over four-to-six weeks in April and May, I was able to begin another seasonal program in 2002 entitled “Fall Into It.” Each season featured over 60-75 artists (including several of the artists I first met through the Bronx Dance Fest, including dancers with Merián Soto’s company, Arthur Aviles and dancers, Full Circle Productions hip-hop dance company) with collaborative projects at venues throughout the borough, helping to make artists accessible to the public in a variety of neighborhoods. My goals were to create a feeling of momentum and artistic development through consistent programming, and from 2001-06, the series served to nourish, strengthen and support participating artists with consistent performance, teaching and networking opportunities. In total, the two seasonal projects of this series helped galvanize approximately 550 artists and companies at seven collaborating performance venues and community spaces throughout the South Bronx over six years. This flurry of sustained performances and activities included: workshops, panel discussions, occasional visual art exhibitions, mentoring opportunities, dance classes, open rehearsals, etc; all free or low cost. From this inter-borough circulation and steady development of work: moving an artist from smaller stages to larger theaters; from a shared evening to a full-evening length material, we (the artists, venues and myself) developed our own community of relationships. It was not about hierarchy; it was about movement and inclusion. It was about shifting movements of relation between and with the artists, local venues and organizations and their publics. Like *Familias*, consistent access to performance opportunities, training and sharing stages together helped participating performing artists develop their craft. This movement of artists to different venues also meant that new audiences would see their works and/or participate in their teachings.

Collaboration: Venues & Accessibility

I was able to coordinate activities and performances in different neighborhoods to create more points of public access with artists and audiences. Between 2001 – 2006, venues that featured the work of Pepatián’s Jump it UP include: BAAD!/Bronx Academy of Arts and Dance (Hunts Point), The Point (Hunts Point), Bronx Museum of the Arts (165th St/Grand Concourse), Pregones Theater (including La Casa Blanca) and Hostos Center for the Arts and Culture (both located near 149th St/Grand Concourse), Lehman College Lovinger Theater (Kingsbridge), PAL/Police Athletic League (Longwood Avenue), Passages Academy, Juvenile Detention Center Bronx Department of Probation (149 St/3rd Avenue), as well as Bronx International School (Morrisania), Bronx High School for the Visual Arts (Morris Park). Many of these venues continue to collaborate with Pepatián. I worked with venues and artists to reach and connect with different communities in the South Bronx. This network of venues created another movement of artists and audiences. Linking a moving borough into another set of relationships. Keeping up with the pace.

A few collaborative projects during Jump It Up involved direct audience participation in a way that connected conceptually to the work of *Familias*. Pepatián’s *Bronx Hip-Hop Academy* (2004-2014) with teaching artists creating workshops and performances with local teens via after-school and in-school programs. I created this project with a group of artists to celebrate hip-hop in the Bronx and connect local artists with youth to engage them with its history and skills in music, dance, spoken word and visual arts. *RING* (2002) was a one-time installation performance at the Bronx Museum of the Arts with live action painting with Bronx-based visual artist Wanda Ortiz in collaboration with choreographer/dancer Arthur Aviles. There was a boxing ring with grass flooring and a plexi-glass wall that separated the artists. Both postured combatively as heavyweight fighters with Aviles creating macho-gestures and Ortiz painting the energy of his movements on the glass partition. Created in collaboration with director Ibrahim Quraishi, the work incorporated a group of five local dancers. The public could walk throughout the space to engage with the various dance performances, video and sound projections. These two projects actively incorporated community members with artists. My other curatorial work through Pepatián focused on engaging with the local community mostly as audience members. As a project-based organization, I continued Pepatián’s legacy of nurturing contemporary, multi-disciplinary art by local artists. I responded and engaged with their creative needs as Pepatián’s

core mission. *Familias* had become a taking off point for the organization, its' *Bronx Dance Fest '99*, and my later work that focused on strengthening a community of artists by supporting the development of their work with performance, creative development and funding opportunities.

Interlude: Bronx Talk

And the Bronx keeps speaking, it's not a quiet place, it has an opinion and a swagger and often I hear it proclaim itself to Manhattan: "Over here! You see me yet? Oh you don't? Well forget you then." And turns its back to realign itself to its own borough. Lets the money in Manhattan twinkle into the darkness and hunkers inside its own frame for comfort and support.

I hear its voice and it nudges me to speak up when I have to because in a room full of arts and cultural workers, I'm often the only one working in this "particularly urban area" (read: predominantly artists and communities of color) and I feel like I have to step up and represent "the community" because I am there in that room and the artists I work with are not. So I do, I speak up, and it sometimes works fine and sometimes I feel ... the truth ... that I am not of and what I am now representing and yet, in that circumstance, in that place, I am. I am that feeling of unimportance, or not as important as Manhattan. Part of that steady feeling of being unseen. Part of a story that those listening think they already know. Of not being cool and hip enough to matter in the experimental performing arts worlds after years as a producer and curator of multi-disciplinary works in the South Bronx without a record of reviews to show for it, not pulling the kind of audiences and funding budgets to warrant attention. Or not being supported enough with institutional backing from a venue that is seen as pulling weight with other similar sites around the country. Pats on the head for trying so hard. People mistaking the work that I do for social services. I'm not the only one approached this way; Bill Aguado, former Executive Director of the Bronx Council on the Arts said: "There was no respect for what we were trying to do here in the 1980s. The image they had was there was no local culture. They saw me as a social worker who had to educate people about the beauty of the major cultural institutions downtown. My belief was the art from our communities had to be recognized, and not just as folklore" (Gonzalez, D. "Arts Leader"). Struggling with having to explain, no, struggling with so

much to explain. Not knowing where or how to begin. Thinking its possible to be clear (it's not). It is a process. Staying patient with the process. Getting distracted, wanting to talk about different things.

Or there was an interest expressed, and when I looked back at the work, especially from 2001-06, I realized how much better it all could have been if I had known or understood more about what this entrepreneurial inspired work was attempting to do. I tried to learn more about supporting the artists' practices and performances, and took classes in writing grants, writing dance reviews, attending arts administration programs. None seemed to be enough to help me envision more of what was needed to move the artists and organization and achieve a stronger sense of support and stability. Most arts and cultural workers and artists seemed content that I was creating showcases and working in the borough. For people outside the borough, it was enough that I was working "there." It was also enough inside the borough to be creating a community--of artists, designers (lights, audio, graphic), videographers, photographers, local TV and venue directors and staff--from the work we were creating and producing together. That was the fuel. To engage others outside the community created by the artwork who were outside of its generative site was more challenging.

I remember the frustration when I learned over the phone that Pepatián received a dissatisfied comment on a final report from the National Endowment for the Arts. The video that accompanied the final report showed performances taking place in the lobby of the Bronx Museum of the Arts. This had been a choice the artists and I made with the museum. We wanted people walking by to see that they were welcome to come in and participate. That there were local artists that looked like them and who also spoke Spanish making work inside the lobby and outside on the museum sidewalks (instead of performing tucked away downstairs in the more formalized stage). The NEA thought it was inappropriate, that the location of the performances and activities downplayed the importance of the art being presented, that it needed to be shown more preciously. I never got the chance to explain. It didn't seem to matter because they had made their decisions. The point of our work was totally missed in 2005.

Maybe we were just ha! ahead of our times, speaking too quickly, leaving out words in an excited flurry of “we are doing something!” right now. I hadn’t even thought the video needed a specific explanation when I wrote the final report. It seemed...as clear as the windows looking out onto the Grand Concourse and 165 Street that we were moving our energies closer to the neighborhood. Maybe we were speaking too much, crowding the space with our combined energy. The NEA wanted something more refined, quieter. Maybe from another neighborhood? They just weren’t ready. They wanted more of a frame, but we had long ago stepped outside of frames. The residents--in the apartment buildings, the people walking to the bus stop just outside the museum doors, to the C-Town grocery store around the corner, the bodega’s along 165th Street--they were watching. Some of the public participated by creating chalk-drawn figures on the sidewalk. Then entered the lobby to see the teaching artists (Rokafella, RephStar, Wanda Ortiz, Caridad De La Luz/La Bruja) from Pepatián’s Hip-Hop Academy working with students from the Bronx High School of Visual Arts and Bronx International. Together this work was bringing the artists, students and audiences to create another community at their local museum. We were highlighting the energy moving between people as directly as possible. Maybe we were talking too much and at the same time, blurring boundaries. Maybe this made other people outside the borough nervous?

The Bronx speaks through this enormous chip on my shoulder. It is difficult to shake it off unless I let it go. Let it go, or soften it, but that might mean letting the fight go. And where would we be without windmills to challenge? If I create a platform for myself that is also with artists that I work with closely, why wouldn’t I use it to support the artistic community in the South Bronx? It’s hard to stay quiet. Call it a creative tension. A discomfort that works with urgency. Using that available energy to pull forward. Holding hands or leaning shoulder-to-shoulder. Walking together in an understanding of what we feel, and have experienced, and what we are up against.

I was learning about the challenges of placing art and community into context for institutional forces outside the borough where the material is generated. It was a lesson in the extra work needed, the added perspective. Lessons I hope this writing will offer someone else. Sharing these experiences offers a way of learning, of preparing. Escaping these ongoing loops of “discovery,”

of “Bronx Renaissance,” of the feeling that maybe its not changing but knowing that it must always be changing. Trying to stay with, and possibly ahead, of the pace.

The Bronx lets me speak. It lets me be without a frame, or it gives me another until it seems I have none at all. It pushes me to find a vocabulary to better talk its talk to others who might not have the familiarity with its directness. It pushes me to find my own voice, to call it like I see it and then say it. After nearly 15 years, I do speak, and often it is in the multilingual urbanized Spanglish of the Bronx, in this accent which has become mine because it’s hard to avoid. The borough just talks so damn loud. It likes to take over.

Legacy: Bronx Artist Spotlight series and Pepatián

Over the course of the Bronx Artist Spotlight series, Pepatián provided stable support as this group of artists developed solos, duets, and group works for shared evenings, taught classes and workshops, and over time, created first full-evening length works, site-specific outdoor performances and other transformative art and community projects.

Pepatián helped nourish the artists’ aspirations and my abilities to support their work. Our working relationships developed as we created together. At the beginning, my curation had a light touch. I created opportunities for artists to share their work with audiences and programmed the artists at venues with which I had newly partnered and whose theater size and length of performance suited their work. Over time I started to initiate defined frameworks to support the artists with themes that I felt were suggested by their works and our conversations. The *Hip-Hop Academy* (2004-2014) offers a mobile group of teaching artists to various schools, universities and community centers. Two one-night events entitled *Dancing the Beat* (presented at Lehman College in 2002 included five groups showcasing their dance work in mambo, salsa, hip-hop, step, and improvisation) and *Out of La Botanica* (presented at BAAD! in 2003 offered a shared evening featuring nine dancers and poets) offered some sort of thematic bridges between the artists’ works and intentions. In other words, my approach began to become less “showcase” oriented as I found loose themes to bring together particular groups of artists. The volume of

work created during Jump It UP helped the series become as platform from which other movements could take place. The expansiveness of the series helped support the evolution of other differently focused projects. Similar to *Familias*, I was interested in offering new possibilities to enliven more of what was already there and present in the South Bronx. I created mentoring projects with peers/artists within these performance projects and enlisted artists help with curatorial suggestions and support. I tried to stay open to what the artists wanted to do, and to also look for the intervals, the spaces of fluidity, between where they felt they were presently in their work and where they wanted to go. My role was to help activate, realize, and accentuate possibilities for their creative expressions. To move the relation the artists might only be beginning to notice in their own work to another place of public contribution.

Community created via Pepatián

One of the main things that had attracted me to the work of Pepatián was what I call the “village vibe.” I remembered the informal dance jam at the *Bronx Dance Fest '99* and how the crowd cheered even more when one man stepped into the circle spontaneously to show his moves, his keys and coins spilling out of his pockets as he turned on the floor. He wanted to dance and he did, stepped into the center of that heightened circle space, surrounded by a crowd and let the everyday things fall where they may.

During an early conversation in 2000 with Hostos Director Wally Edgecombe and internationally recognized visual artist CRASH / John Matos (who had been part of the earlier 1970s Fashion Moda scene in the Bronx), I described how I wanted to spiral the activities and energy that I had witnessed at Hostos Center into other sites in the borough. Crash liked the idea and described the project as “magic Saturday.” That image immediately engaged my interest. “Magic Saturday” was the possibility of transformation of the ordinary into the extra-ordinary through artistic activities and an agreement that the day promised to be different from all others. Like stepping into the circle of a dance jam. A *more-than* day. Creating an artistic village to create traces between different locations that would help interconnect and engage the borough. I wanted to

expand the kind of gatherings I had witnessed between the artists and audiences during the *Bronx Dance Fest '99*. It seemed possible in the Bronx.

By building on the description of the *Bronx Dance Fest* as a “populist event that connected audiences with professional artists based and/or making work in the Bronx” (Gabriels “Pepatián proposal”), I was able to make a link to the creation of this new Bronx-based performing arts series, *Jump It UP: Bronx Artist Spotlight*. I described *Jump It UP* as “helping to provide a regional draw and a vital network for performing arts” (Gabriels “Pepatián proposal”). Over time, this populist event became more defined. The aim was to raise the visibility of professional dance and multi-disciplinary art forms in the Bronx by working with a variety of Bronx venues and non-profit centers to create more access points with different publics through performances, dance classes, panel discussions, workshops, post-performance audience talkbacks, etc. The series found a niche with the artists and venues. *Jump It UP* supported Merián Soto’s Salsa Trilogy dance projects, specifically *Asi se baila un Son/How to Dance a Son (Montuno)*, *Prequel (a): Deconstruction of a Passion for Salsa*, *La Maquina del Tiempo/The Time Machine*. Arthur Aviles praised *Jump It UP* in 2002 for “its ability to provide unity in the Bronx artistic scene. For more emerging choreographers, it provides opportunity and visibility to show work in the Bronx” (Aviles 7). Pepatián linked very different venues (and their staffs) in various neighborhoods often with artists who were sometimes unfamiliar to the venue and new projects. Each show ended with a call to attend the next scheduled event at another venue. Similar to *Familias*, the Bronx Artist Spotlight series became an artist and community cultivation project that served to further engage the South Bronx. Over the years, the series continued to open up these distinct venues and form another network. As the artists (and the series) performed, the work also provoked new places towards which to pull our work. Audiences and venues gave feedback. Artists were inspired by each other’s performances and their work developed. For every artist that created new works, more territory was made to grow towards.

Several artists in particular were supported consistently via the Bronx Artist Spotlight series: Christal Brown, Marisol Diaz (photographer), Sita Frederick, Violeta Galagarza, Marion Ramirez, Antonio Ramos, Richard Rivera, Rokafella/Full Circle Productions, Tory Sammartino, Noemi Segarra, and Rhina Valentin. Pepatián also helped spark the creation of *Areytos*

Performance Works, founded by choreographer/dancer Sita Frederick and visual artist Jose Ortiz.

Inclusion

Inclusion of the Bronx Artist Spotlight in the public media and with other presenters was not as apparent.

During the six years of producing the Bronx Artist Spotlight performance series with its spring and fall events that reached over 650 audience members annually at participating venues, I felt responsible for raising the artists' visibility as much as I could. Even when working with the venues administrative and marketing departments, I was not able to create much substantial media or presenter interest in the work happening in the borough. Press from Manhattan attended the Bronx performances when there was a significant artist in a full evening length program who had been recognized already by known-institutions like, for example, the New York Dance and Performance Awards, as with Arthur Aviles, Pepón Osorio and Merián Soto.

With six years of performances and residency opportunities, media efforts resulted in three articles in magazines, four newspaper articles (three focused on the Hip-Hop Academy and one was in 2012 for the celebration of Pepatián's 30th anniversary) and a total of ten listings in the Dance and Art sections of *The Village Voice*, *The New York Times*, and *Time Out* combined. Since there was no principal artist to focus media attention, and the series produced a variety of artists often for one night, it seemed overly challenging for the media to consider sending a reviewer to write about the work. The one published review we did receive was in 2005, from a writer that I had personally connected with previously in a dance workshop I was attending. Chris Dohse had promised to attend a performance and came to the Lovinger Theater at Lehman College to see the work. Dohse wrote in *Dance Insider*: "I see a vivid dialogue in these works that sheds a light on multicultural performance that I haven't seen anywhere else."

Laurie Uprichard (the then Executive Director of Danspace Project who came by subway from downtown) was also able to attend the same performance evening in November 2005. From 2003-2006, after Jump It Up had started to build up energy, I had often contacted Uprichard as well as other downtown venue directors with offers to pay their car service from Manhattan to make it as easy as possible for them to see the work and give feedback. It seemed like we were ready to be seen and hopefully produced by others with more resources. She was almost the sole producer from downtown Manhattan to see the 2001-06 series. Transversal loops with the media and presenters did not happen easily.

Empowerment

With funders, I described our assessment parameters as those arising from Pepatián's mission:

“are we furthering and strengthening Pepatián's support of the Bronx performing arts community? Are we providing robust artistic engagement and opportunities to strengthen the work? Are audiences engaged with our projects? Are we providing enough access points and activities to maintain and increase their involvement? Are we supporting artists, audience, overall community, performance venues and non-profit centers in such a way that the borough is keeping a vital home for its creativity? Pepatián is primarily grassroots and our ability to listen and respond quickly to the needs of the field has been Pepatián's proven method of success. We aim to stay in touch with the needs of the Bronx, its layered Latino-Afro-Caribbean roots and the artistic creation and production of multidisciplinary, contemporary performing arts” (Gabriels “Pepatián final report”).

The legacy of Pepatián's mission as envisioned by Soto and Osorio, and my work to activate and create a pattern of supportive stability served to empower these artists and their contemporary works with funding and a consistent platform at a growing network of venues. The artists and venues were pooling resources with Pepatián to make projects happen by connecting in a plurality of forms: sharing performance evenings, sharing work in rehearsals, teaching classes to local youth, having group meetings in various venues, and influencing each others creativity by growing and deepening the work together. We were creating another ecology of practice that altered our own relation to the borough, developing our own awareness of the neighborhoods at these different performance sites.

Pepatián is part of strengthening support for more artist and community transformation through art and relationships. From my collaborative conversations with Soto, I began to describe Pepatián’s work as: “our work and the way we work is all about empowerment – strengthening the creative work in the community in which it is born and giving it back – by passing on resources directly to neighborhood organizations, artists and neighborhoods (Gabriels “Pepatián proposal: project description”).

Since reviewers were not engaging with the work and the developing artist community, I began to document artists and their work by interviewing dancers for a series of articles entitled “Eso Es!” for *Bronx Dance Magazine* (2003-05). I was also invited to write an extensive article about Pepatián’s Bronx Hip-Hop Academy for *TGC/The Grand Concourse*, a magazine published (in limited run) by the Bronx Museum of the Arts in 2005 (the same year as the negative remark on the projects final report from the National Endowment for the Arts). I proposed and was selected to write an article about the three artists who had collaboratively created *Out of La Negrura* (2004) with Pepatián support for the *Movement Research Performance Journal*. I also hired writers (Sion Dayson, Erin Hylton, poet Sheila Maldonado, among others) to attend performances, not to review the work but to have some writing presence accompanying the work and the artists. The writing was often published online on the Pepatián website or in *Bronx Dance Magazine*. If our work was not part of the Manhattan-based press (and this was before the days of strong dance writers who had their own blogs), I tried to empower the artists by including these written responses in other print and online medias to raise their public visibility.

Tonito Arroyo said in the 1995 documentary *The Making of a Family*: “You have to believe in yourself” and I realized later that I was impacted by that Bronx spirit even though I had never seen *Familias* live or previously watched the documentary. In 2013, I made t-shirts for Pepatián with the slogan “Find your Inner Bronx!” which to me is an ode the resourcefulness of the borough and speaks directly to letting dreams and imagination be strong guides towards the manifestations of your visions. You are your own resource. Your relationship with the virtual, the “movement beyond its actualization” (Manning 2009: 10) is a place of possibilities. The writing of this thesis and creation of a performance piece is part of this envisioning and strives to

contribute to the public documentation and articulation of our work in the borough. You are also a resource for (and with) others. There is always more to do.

Accessibility and curatorial projects

To give more support to Bronx-based artists, I wanted to help support the artists engagements with new and outer-borough audiences and for these publics to meet the artists. Partly inspired by Juan Flores' *The Diaspora Strikes Back: Caribeño Tales of Learning and Turning*, my idea was to create another form of "circular migration," with artists moving out of the Bronx to share their individual works as well as Pepatián's curated projects to develop them, and then return to the Bronx with these new experiences. In *The Diaspora Strikes Back*, Flores, instead of exploring the Puerto Rican migration to the mainland, examines how the return of U.S. Puerto Ricans in a "circular migration" impacted Puerto Rico. He writes about the "migratory counter-currents" which shake up the discussion that "immigration as a one-way, one-shot move" (Flores 2009: 34). The idea of a circular migration of artists to and from the Bronx impacts audiences outside the borough as well as local audiences by helping to make the borough even more of a center for incubation and production of contemporary and experimental performing arts. A strength of our work was that we were also a group, a collective body, that had strongly connected during the Bronx Artist Spotlight series. This core collective body could form and unform itself, have distance and regain closeness again; its practice was the Bronx itself and its constant movement.

For the artists, possibilities to move their work into conversation with other publics meant they had further opportunities tell their stories, and offer other viewpoints beyond images popularized by media. Documentary photographer Marisol Diaz told me how her family had lived in a building where the landlord hired an arsonist in 1977 to burn down their home while they were sleeping. In her words: "When I exhibit or show my work outside The Bronx, I want them to see us as equals and not look down on the people of The Bronx, specifically the South Bronx. We are no longer in the 70's nor were we responsible for torching the borough" (Diaz "Interview").

While the artists might not work with community directly in their projects like *Familias*, most of the artists in the Bronx have an awareness of the neighborhoods that inform their work. From 2003-07 and 2010, I produced showcases that featured over 40 artists during APAP/Association of Performing Arts Presenters at City Center Studios to help connect the artists with other performance opportunities nationally. Ken Maldonado, founder of ZIA Artists, a management company for contemporary dance, was working with Soto in the early 2000s and invited me to share a studio showcase with his companies (Zia Artists “About”).

The result of the showcases, in addition to other connections via the New York State DanceForce, the artistic stature of choreographer Arthur Aviles and Merián Soto, and my own relationships with a couple of venue directors, led to residencies and performance opportunities at a number of sites including the legendary Jacobs Pillow Indoor/Out Stage, Cornell University (Ithaca NY), Temple University (Philadelphia PA), Huntington Summer Festival (Long Island NY), among others. Other venues outside the Bronx included several which focused on Latino arts, others were located in downtown Manhattan, and a few outside of NYC: Bowery Poetry Club, Danspace Project, Nuyorican Poetry Club, Joe’s Pub at The Public Theater, Painted Bride (Philadelphia, PA), The Living Room, Latino Film Festival Vanguard events, Acentos Poetry Project, Stuyvesant Cove Park Dance Series, Lexington Arts Center/Ensemble Theater Project (Lexington, NY), in addition to Studio 303 and Casa del Popolo (Montreal). Often the dance artists were in poetry settings downtown; we were intent on bringing a multi-disciplinary focus to our work and connecting with publics outside of the dance community. As a group, the artists had shared stages and conversations throughout the Jump It UP series. We were ready to do more.

The mission of Pepatián as originally described by Soto and Osorio was generously worded and allowed for many kinds of activities and projects to happen. As the Bronx Artist Spotlight series progressed, the artists, venues and I had created a supportive force together. I could consider different project collaborations and workshop ideas with the artists and experiment. My work developed with the artists and was supported by long-standing partnering venues like BAAD!, Pregones Theater, Hostos Center for the Arts & Culture, BronxNet, Bronx Museum and The Point in particular.

To amplify the work of poets in the South Bronx, I self-published a book and recorded a CD of poems as a development of Jump It UP. Poets included Caridad De La Luz, Rokafella, John Rodriguez, Jessica Roman, Tory Sammartino and photographs by Marisol Diaz and with beats on the CD by G-Bo Vazquez accompanied the work. This booklet entitled *Shout Out* helped give greater insight into the textures, words and rhythms of The Bronx, and the book project as a tangible piece of work led to more performance opportunities and artistic development.

By 2006 I re-focused the organization away from a borough-wide series into smaller collaborative projects. Soto had joined Osorio in stepping away from the organization to create her work through Merián Soto Performance/Practice. I became Pepatián's Director. The mission remained essentially the same with an added focus on the Bronx; "Pepatián is a South Bronx-based organization dedicated to creating, producing and supporting contemporary multi-disciplinary art by Latino and Bronx-based artists."

The rhythm of creating work together with the artists was changing. I was no longer living full-time in New York City, and this distancing became a constraint as well as generative place to reconsider what we could still do together. I began to focus Pepatián on collaborative projects and showcases to support artists with future engagements. The *more-than* generated through the Jump It UP series supported this next stage. This community that had developed through our six years of working together was able to bridge distances and remain in connection. Projects emerged and developed through a balance of my initiating a possible direction and bringing artists together and then supporting the development of the work as the artists formed and unformed its original point of departure. The projects were sustained movements-in-thought. I guarded and carved time and resources to allow the artists to create and re-create their conversations and deepen the work.

These projects include the dance theater work *Out of La Negrura/Out of Blackness*, created by artists: Sita Frederick, Ana "Rokafella" Garcia, Marion Ramirez. This project began literally from a dream that Merián Soto had about developing work that would bring Latina women together to create a spiritual reinvigoration of their connections with African ancestry. I

approached Sita Frederick, Ana “Rokafella” Garcia, Marion Ramirez and Awilda Sterling. They expressed interest in the project. Sterling returned to Puerto Rico after the first performance and the work focused on the trio. The project developed off and on between 2004-2009 with two residencies at Cornell University, a residency at Temple University and two performances at Pregones Theater, among other informal showings and free rehearsal space generously provided by the Bronx Museum of the Arts and BAAD!.

The project became a challenging and inspiring meeting place for three movers with very different approaches to their work and trainings (Hip-Hop and breaking, Afro-Caribbean and modern, release and improvisational work). The description the artists were most comfortable with states: *Out of La Negrura* explores Caribbean/Latina-American experience through dance. This openness allowed the artists to take the work into any direction they felt spoke to them. The dance work very much moved in collaboration from their embodied experiences, inspirations and concerns. The work did not specifically address the interconnections of Latina experiences with African roots as Soto had initially suggested, but this concept was still partly implied in their work.

Audiences at the studio showings at Cornell University were fascinated with how the artists, when making the same movement like a headstand, had such different physical patterns to finding their balance upside-down – from releasing weight into the ground and reaching up through the body’s structure to remain in the air to muscularly moving the body smoothly through space and engaging its strength to remain balanced. In the projects’ development, the three experienced dancers learned each other’s movements and began creating their own collaborative style while retaining space for their individual voices.

As the three artists lives and work began to move in different directions, the piece was never able to fully move beyond its 2009 performance to continue to develop and reach other audiences. To create some sort of culminating platform out of the richness of the projects’ development, I began working with the existing documentation and recorded interviews with the artists. I secured a film editor (Naeema Jamilah-Torres) to collaborate and create a documentary film on the artists’ process making the work and their insights about the project five years later. The 40-

minute film will be ready for distribution in 2015/2016, approximately ten years after its first rehearsals. I am fundraising for a project to show the final film in Spring 2015, along with short performances by the collaborating artists of their current work, as well as a series of workshops. I've also asked the artists to select three emerging dancers and mentor/work with them to introduce their performances to the public during this 2015 event. Merián Soto has been invited to guide a discussion with the audience and all the artists to further enrich the platform with her experience and thoughts about the paths the project has taken from her original dreamed idea. My aim has been not to halt the development of work that seemed to still have an impact and a relation with the artists. It seemed that they were also nurtured in some way by the process or they would not have participated in the filmed interviews or this next incarnation of the project. *Out of La Negrura* is providing a platform for their creative growth and can now open itself to others as a site for support. I made sure not to lose the thread of the project's engagement, and to find ways to amplify its impact.

Shadow Lands is a collaborative dance theater work created by poet Caridad De La Luz and dancer Cynthia Paniagua that is becoming an open platform for continued discussions about women, gender violence and society issues. In 2010, I had secured funding for a new collaborative, multi-disciplinary project. I brought a group of artists together to develop work in Spring 2011 and 2012. Originally, this work, entitled *BX-Rated: La Mezclatina Rising, Volume 1*, included collaborators dancer Jessie Flores and filmmaker Nadia Hallgren and explored issues of "first and second-generation Latina identity... in the tight rope between urban life and ancestry" (Pepatián, "Projects: Shadow Lands"). By its premiere at Pregones Theater in 2013, the work was a duet renamed *Shadow Lands* and, with support of directorial consultant Teresa Hernandez, issues of societal pressures, feminine prowess and vulnerabilities, released through fragmented memories and failed healings began to emerge as its focus (Pepatián "Projects: Shadow Lands"). Over time, the work had moved into a greater understanding of its role in the artists' lives, their creative and personal interconnections, and what the piece could do in the world as a site for discussion on challenging issues. The work seems to have now found its rhythm with itself as both a performance and platform and the artists are ready to tour. The current project description states, *Shadow Lands* aims to "facilitate creative healing of violence against women" (Pepatián "Projects: Shadow Lands"). This project offers workshops, as well as

a 60-minute performance with moderated audience “talk-back” with a representative from a partnering organization, “VIPMujeres / Violence Intervention Program, Inc.,” an organization that provides domestic violence services to Latinas and their children (VIPMujeres “About”). This partnership, established through contacts of the collaborating artist Caridad De La Luz, further helps support the artists and audience members who might need expert support. As the artists engage with other audiences, the work can continue to evolve as needed and we have discussed how the performance could also incorporate local artists in other communities in small but significant ways. Rather than closing down around itself, the project can remain open to incorporate new information and people into its process. It can be a mobile site that will reveal and inspire other opportunities.

The Bronx Hip-Hop Academy, mentioned earlier, brings teaching artists (music, dance, visual art, spoken word) into local high schools, colleges, universities and other non-profit community organizations. This project began from a conversation on the street corner near Union Square with Rokafella and Kwikstep in late 2003. We brainstormed how we could set up a space for a hip-hop school in the Bronx. I knew that I did not have the experience with real estate and a capital campaign. Instead of that responsibility, I thought we could create a mobile school. In 2004, we began with a series of workshops on-site at local junior and high schools with culminating performances and weekend workshops at the Bronx Museum of the Arts. Pepatián paired with other high schools until 2012, we began partnering exclusively with BronxWorks community organization (1130 Grand Concourse).

BronxWorks has remained a steady supporter and this partnership has given the artists and myself an opportunity to create and deepen our approach to connect with the 20-25 teens (mostly from West Africa) in their after-school program. This project evolved from individual workshops to a more integrated series of teachings culminating with a final informal showing that blended the different elements into a whole performance. Teaching artists “Rokafella,” “La Bruja,” “Toofly,” DJ “Fred Ones,” “DJ DP One,” among others. After conversations with the participating artists, I added an “Entrepreneurship for Teens” seminar with local business owners (DJ Fred Ones, T.M.E. Pro Studio and Jamie Jones, The ShoppeBX). Even as fluctuating

budgets impact the number of workshops we offer each year, this consistent partnership gives us an opportunity to discover where other points of connection can happen to support the teens.

Lastly, *Bronx Moves (2013-2014)* is a project that sparks awareness of local arts centers through outdoor performances at multiple sites. This work began development in 2011 through my work at the ICPP/Institute for Curatorial Practice in Performance at Wesleyan University. I was later invited by Executive Director Judy Hussie-Taylor to launch the project at Danspace Project in downtown Manhattan in 2012 as a Guest Curator. My original aim was to work with two couples (dancers Marion Ramirez and Jung Woong Kim, Alicia Diaz and Matthew Thornton) who had earlier expressed an interest in collaborating together. They were specifically interested in dancing on the rooftops visible from the windows at BAAD! (841 Barretto Street).

After organizing performances of their separate works at Danspace Project, I wanted to layer meetings with local community leaders to create a grounded approach to the artists' relationship with Hunts Point. It felt important for the artists to know more about the neighborhood and its residents. To support the artists' work, I created a micro-residency at BAAD!. The artists had rehearsal space and time in the venue and I also organized informational meetings with Petrushka Bazin Larsen, Program Director at The Laundromat Project; MacArthur Fellow and urban revitalization strategist Majora Carter; a neighborhood tour with Arthur Aviles (co-founder BAAD!), and a meeting with Kellie Terry-Sepulveda, Executive Director at The Point Community Development Center. This research helped feed the artist informal performances which took place outside and inside BAAD!'s theater space. Bronx-based visual artist and cultural producer Hatuey Ramos-Fermin also participated in the work with audio and visual collaborations.

After BAAD!'s forced move from Hunts Point, the project shifted. The mobile work begun through local meetings and a walking tour in 2013 led to a larger plan to have outdoor performance at various arts sites throughout the borough to draw attention and give added support to their work. I attended a Movement Research workshop from and later approached Larissa Velez-Jackson to create an artistic response to this idea, and connected with BAAD!

(who had been part of the original grant proposal) and Casita Maria Center for the Arts and Education and invited them to become collaborative partners.

Velez-Jackson and her dancers created a series of mobile performances with music playing from car speakers in her sister's car. The car and the multiple costumes (with changes taking place en route between sites) were part of the material of the performance. This project particularly meshed well with Casita Maria's visions for connecting artists with their space as well as nearby outdoor sites to draw attention to their organization. Performances were held outdoor at BAAD!, The Point, the Bronx Music Heritage Center's project at a café along Southern Boulevard, and on the sidewalk outside of Casita Maria and with the children's program in their auditorium. It's a reaching towards without physical contact that moves the relation local residents and arts organizations have with each other. The artwork helps create community. Other aspects of the project included how Velez-Jackson's grandparents met in the Bronx and part of the event included visiting the building where they had first met and the church where they married. Casita Maria Center for the Arts & Education connected with the Bronx Music Heritage Center and The Point to include them in the project and provided a variety of project support (free rehearsal space, artist stipend, marketing and documentation).

With all these various collaborations, this project's mission is to work with the intervals between art spaces and the outside public to suggest other possible connections. As changes with rented theater spaces and other city-led developments happen in the borough, this small but significant multi-faceted collaborative project seeks to help support the artistic venues and grassroots organizations which manage to keep their work growing and moving with the borough. The rhythm of this project and its approaches to connect the public with its local arts organizations are not static and continue to evolve along with the borough.

To entice presenters and funders to learn more about our work, I changed approaches during the annual Association of Performing Arts Presenters conference. Instead of producing artists at City Center studios in mid-town Manhattan, I organized artist showcases in 2011 in collaboration with Bronx venues and organizations: BAAD!, Hostos Center for the Arts & Culture, Pregones Theater. With support from the Bronx Council on the Arts, we offered presenters and funders

transportation from mid-town Manhattan to the Bronx, lunch and a tour of these venues to see the artists work.

In a move to reduce hierarchies, I was able to provide lunch for artists and presenters with time for conversations. My curatorial aim is to provide access to a diverse group of contemporary, multi-disciplinary artists making work in the Bronx. This APAP project in the Bronx was an effort to change techniques to attract the presenters, venues and artists. Venue collaboration is vital to help make the project possible. The showcase project creates its own kind of specialized, temporary community between artists, venues, organizations, presenters, and funders. These showcases organized during the Bronx tours have resulted in more work for the participating artists than the City Center studio showcases. For example: Merián Soto one year residency with multiple performances at Wave Hill; one year residency with performance opportunity for choreographer Antonio Ramos at El Museo del Barrio; interviews with Kwikstep and Rokafella with a lengthy article published in a European arts journal; full evening length dance program at BAAD! for choreographer Christal Brown; residency with performance opportunity for choreographer Larissa Velez-Jackson at El Museo del Barrio, among other performance and teaching opportunities.

In 2015, the project has been renamed *Bronx Artists Now: Showcases & Conversation*. Presenters will have opportunities to connect with 11-12 artists at their showcases. The project will take place only at BAAD! (we were unable the previous year to travel to its new location in our restricted timeframe) and the artist showcases will be followed by lunch and moderated conversations-in-the-round with organizations and artists speaking on different themes: performing arts context in Puerto Rico; making site-specific work in the South Bronx; the multi-disciplinary arts scene in the South Bronx; hip-hop updates from the Bronx, and; teaching artist and residency exchange projects in the Caribbean. I will be marketing this project to presenters and funders as an opportunity to “join the conversation not happening anywhere else” during APAP. Each year, I try to provide something to interest and entice presenters and funders to spend a precious five-six hours during an ultra-competitive conference with us. Providing transportation from Manhattan to the Bronx is crucial for their attendance. I can provide 5-7 minutes showcases and not full-length performances because of the time and distance. With the

tour, I have tried to provide a comfortable place for all the participants to land and exchange resources, information, knowledge, inspiration.

It's worth noting all of these different artists and projects because they show how the community is growing through new multi-disciplinary projects. Pepatián's projects continue to influence and impact local artists, venues and communities. The artistic "family," the *more-than* of community in the Bronx, is evolving. Opportunities for other kinds of curated projects to help strengthen the local, artistic ecology are possible.

These curatorial projects signal another way of understanding the borough. Instead of the expansive performance series like "Jump It UP and "Fall Into It," these more projects changed Pepatián's rhythm of creating and producing new often collaborative works with local venues. Similar to *Familias*, these projects also evolved over time and different audiences participated in the work's development.

Operating with Pepatián's project-based budget and without its own space, I have been able to experiment and introduce new projects. Artists did not approach me to create their project. I reached out to them to make the invitation and describe the initial structure of the work. The artists then made the opportunity their own and created performances that suited their unique approaches. These more finely tuned artistic and curatorial relationships have deepened the work and our collaborations.

Unlike *Familias*, I am not creating artistic projects directly with community for a stage presentation. My work is more focused on developing a community of artists and venues through the creation of new works to continue strengthening our networks and abilities to connect artists with many audiences. Some of these artistic projects are like *Familias* in that they are extensive, open platforms that connect with audiences in artistic process. The differences between these projects and *Familias* also show just how unique *Familias* is – not every artist can organize funding, venue resources, local participants and artistic collaborators over fifteen months to realize six-nights of sold-out performances. *Familias* happened at a particular time, 1994-95, with a grouping of funds that is not common now. *Familias* was a particular crystallization

foregrounding the collaborative possibilities between community participants and artists. The work created an impact in the borough and traces of its legacy continues in the organization Pepatián.

Curator

In the early-2000s, Soto called me a producer in the performing arts. This was the role I inhabited. At that time, curator was not a term often used in performance. The only venue I knew that had “curators” was The Kitchen, a non-profit, multi-disciplinary art and performance space whose work focused on cross-disciplinary explorations located in Chelsea area of Manhattan. Debra Singer, Executive Director and Chief Curator at The Kitchen (2004-2011) described in an interview, “Up through my predecessor through 2004, each discipline at The Kitchen had its own part-time curator and they were artists....so you still had, artists picking other artists. And then when I came, I changed that structure to make the staff smaller and we hired just a few full-time curators who could curate across multiple disciplines” (Singer “Interview”).

As the projects’ artistic directors, choreographer Soto and visual artist Osorio, created community through the process of creating *Familias*. Working in collaboration with Edgecombe, Soto and Osorio selected the artists and created the works context. As *El Diario/La Prensa* stated, the artists made their self-generated community and its interconnections with the Bronx, “the star” (*El Diario*).

My curatorial work strove to strengthen and create other opportunities to support empowerment, accessibility, collaboration and inclusion through multi-disciplinary projects. As a principal collaborator with the artists, I feel that there is a strong connection when we are together; we feel almost unstoppable because we believe in each other’s work. We sustain each other through the creation of new pieces. From the artists, I glean suggestions of possible projects. I pursue these propositions with further contextual ideas, funding and partnerships. The artists and other collaborators further craft the project to suit their visions. I give time for the artists to discover

what the work needs to become, allowing it to evolve and strengthen its creation and their collaborations.

The curation is a lure, a landing site from which the artists build further. Artist and curator Hannah Hurtzig describes “curatorial art” by referencing the work of Irit Rogoff, a Professor of Visual Cultures at Goldsmiths, as “creating opportunity” (Brandstetter 26). The artists suggest ideas. I look for other ideas. We come together to explore what offers the strongest possibilities for growth. Like *Familias*, our work centers on our collaborations.

This continued work of artists with Bronx venues, organizations, residents and audiences support and amplify the borough’s capacities for transformation. The network of collaborations with area venues and organizations sustains itself through the creation of artworks. We continue our work and encourage media, other writers and public to “catch up and catch on” to a greater understanding of this self-empowered South Bronx.

I am also am also working to “catch up” with our work through this writing, and the after-effects of this writing, in conversation with the artists and other collaborating partners. As Vivre Sutinen, IETM/International network for contemporary performing arts president, former co-founder of Kiasma Theatre Helsinki and current director of Dansens Hus Stockholm, describes, “providing context, presentational frame, and analytical interpretation, is crucial for the identity for visual arts curators, but sometimes still feel as optional with performing arts curators” (Brandstetter 27). I did some of the contextualization work when I created these different projects, but I am interested in the future of our projects and how to increase our understandings of our working processes in the field.

My vision is to continue supporting projects in the South Bronx, to secure funding and collaborating partners to incubate the work in the borough, to introduce other artists and curators to Pepatián’s mission and work with them to support creative exchanges and further envision the future of Pepatián. Together we can work to move the work out to meet other audiences. Additionally, the archives could be made more accessible with a series of video documentation of the artists work with interviews and accompanying written texts. This work can help new

artistic and curatorial patterns emerge that can help transform negative perceptions of the artists' home base, and strengthen existing histories and grassroots works. *Familias* played a role in authoring Pepatián and its future, and our work can be to further unfold these influences into the next phase of Pepatián.

Pepatián's performing arts initiatives like *Familias* (1995), *Bronx Dance Fest'* (1999), the *Bronx Artist Spotlight series: Jump It UP* and *Fall into It* (2001-06) and its collaborative projects signal an ongoingness; *Siempre Pa'lante / Keep on keeping on*. Especially in this historically underserved borough, there is always more to be done. To evolve our work further, I am learning that I now need to collaborate more with venues and organizations with different resources to create more opportunities and creation of knowledge about our work and the artists. This is happening now with Shadow Lands and our evolving partnership with VIP Mujeres/Violence Intervention Program. In future, Pepatián will keep its mission but its mandate might be revised. If I am able to generate enough funding, I am interested in supporting and developing a team of curators (artist-curators, independent curators working closely with Latino and Bronx-based artists) to increase the scope of our work and support for Pepatián's mission in the borough. I would like to think that writing this thesis means that everything is different from today.

The South Bronx: what comes to mind?

Images of a burning South Bronx building (it was an elementary school) televised from helicopter cameras as they panned the borough at the top of the 2nd game of the 1977 World Series at Yankee Stadium?

All you can hear are the drums playing. Four drummers nestled on a park bench underneath the trees, three guys and one woman, interweaving the beats. Staring out across the park, looking down at the drum, getting lost in the rhythm.

Or do the words mean nothing in particular to you, but a place indistinct from Brooklyn and connected with NYC, maybe along the east side of the island, up past 86th Street?

Scenes of break dancing from the movie *Wild Style*.

Maybe it all depends on what you are looking for, hoping to find, seeking to build, ready to discover...

Chapter Four: *FAMILIAS*

You have not been to the South Bronx. Or you have been to a Yankee game, and maybe ventured out to buy a Yankee t-shirt on River Avenue, or the Bronx Zoo, but you have not spent time in its neighborhoods. You don't know anyone who lives in the borough. You're not sure but you might have a relative buried in Woodlawn Cemetery.

You have traveled to NYC many times but mostly to explore the arts scene in Manhattan, possibly galleries in Brooklyn, a performance at the Brooklyn Academy of Music, maybe you travel out on the 7-train to a special event at the Queens Museum or MoMA PS 1.

You do not go to see performances held at Pregones Theater, Hostos Center for the Arts & Culture, BAAD!/Bronx Academy of Arts and Dance, the Bronx Museum, etc. You do not think of the performing arts and the South Bronx in the same thought. The work there will not be experimental enough, there are no useful connections to be gained, you are unsure of the quality, it's too community-based to really have impact in the contemporary arts. It's all still new up there, not advanced enough, or it's going to be the same story of marginality, told and re-told...and you've heard it already. You do not want to take train to 149th St/Grand Concourse and walk in that area. You've been warned that it's dangerous.

Maybe you are not a visitor to NYC but work in the performing arts scene in Manhattan or Brooklyn, and have never visited a Bronx venue, or just once, maybe during a tour of its venues that I set up annually in January, or maybe once back in the mid-1990s. No way were you going to Hunts Point and then walk from BAAD! to the #6 or #2 train after the performances were over. I try to arrange car service for you to encourage you as a dance presenter at a downtown venue to see the artists work. You still don't come to the performance.

Rare are the reviews of the performing arts in the South Bronx that appear in *The New York Times*, and the local papers don't cover experimental performing arts. You don't hear about the work from other cultural workers you meet at national performing arts conferences or international festivals. Or you already have selected the "Latino group" for Hispanic Heritage

Month at your venue, and don't need to explore another group until next year. If you work at the Brooklyn Academy of Music, you already know that your immediate neighborhood is becoming more and more Latino, but work by Latino artists is rarely programmed on your stages. You do not receive newsletters or attend conferences or workshops produced by professional organizations that actively support Latino artists like the National Association of Latino Arts & Culture or New York University's Hemispheric Institute. You already have a network in place that keeps you aware of the next up and coming artists. If someone was doing good work, you'd hear of it.

Most of the time, but not always, performances at Bronx venues are included in the listings section of *Time Out* magazine. You read a listing there for a dance performance and you arrived at BAAD! without any introduction to join local Bronx audiences. It wasn't a big deal. You are from Europe.

These experiences are part of the impetus for this writing. How did it happen that the Bronx became so backgrounded in the New York City arts scene? Why does there seem to be almost a resistance to accepting its artists and venues as part of the overall NYC cultural ecology? How does this affect the artists making their work in the South Bronx?

Popular media often portrays the borough as a ghetto of unchanging poverty and violence with a positive spin primarily when described as a potential site for gentrification. Is that really the only way we can view the Bronx today? Sure, the South Bronx is one of the poorest congressional districts in the United States and has remained so for years, but its financial context is complicated and, of course, not its only story. An alternative narrative does exist in the rich history of non-profit and grassroots organizations founded in the borough by its residents to improve their quality of life. The history of the area speaks to an acute understanding of how to organize to support social and human rights.

If you have lived and/or worked in the borough, do you have these moments when, just like that, you can't think of anything else but standing on the platform at Burnside Avenue and looking south to see the Empire State Building? And you remember when the sun caught its skyline, and

how you wondered if there was anyone there looking to the South Bronx with a similar sense of wonder? You shake your head at the improbable thought. And how it feels when you walk down the stairs from the uptown # 4 train and into a more Caribbean and African inspired world, all rolled up in a concentrated beat that hugs the air close?

Bodies feel physically more present, there is a charge in the atmosphere. Four different families are arranging birthday picnics with balloons and barbeque throughout Joyce Kilmer Park and children run and yell to each other around the playground. Michael Jackson's music is playing out an apartment window, Celia Cruz out another, and HOT 97 radio from the fifth floor, and someone is slamming down dominoes on the table like they're playing against their cousin for the family *finca* (farm) on the island.

There is a cricket and a baseball game both being energetically played in separate corners of open grass. Inspiration is mingling and calling you into its embrace of what might happen next. You're in the city, but this feels like a small town. You'll find a place here. You can be who you are. A woman suddenly appears to ask you for legal advice because you are standing near the 161st Street courthouse. She looks disappointed and annoyed when you tell her that you have no legal background and cannot help. It feels important to remember the dreams when faced with the struggles of survival and keeping families together.

Or you have lived in the South Bronx your whole life, but never realized that the Bronx Museum was there, or open to you, or that you would feel comfortable walking into its open spaces. You'd rather watch TV at home instead of going through the hassle of going out. Or your partner won't let you go out alone at night and the tickets were too expensive for you all to go. You work the night shift. Or you do go out to a show and are relieved to see people who look like you on stage, singing about a context - like being from Puerto Rico and living in NYC with family still back on the island - that mirrors your own life. Or you are one of the steadfast supporters, like 92-year old Mrs. Ross, who makes an effort to see nearly all the performances BAAD! has produced. You cannot believe how the South Bronx does not yet have its own building for a Hip-Hop Hall of Fame or a Bronx Hip-Hop Museum to honor the birthplace of this international artistic phenomenon.

In the velocity of these various impressions and points of view about the South Bronx, a strengthened articulation of its impact as a generative site for artists and artistic-led community development is needed. To consider the relationship between potential and possibility, philosopher Brian Massumi states that potential is activated in the virtual and conjures possibilities that then feed back into and propel potential (Massumi 2002: 9). The virtual, for Massumi, is not the opposite of the actual – it is how the actual expresses that share of experience which is still full of potential. You have to sense that potential exists, and that it's possible to activate in your lifetime. Potential, just out of reach, a futurity, a degree of freedom is, really, always present. To talk about the differentiations between potential and possibility in the South Bronx—where possibility is always aligned with the already-thinkable, as opposed to potential's openness toward the future—it is immediately necessary to go beyond convenient media portrayals of poverty and violence and meet its local artists and residents. This focus of attention already changes ideas of the borough's potential.

We dive here into *Familias*, the 1995 dance theater work created by artists Merián Soto and Pepón Osorio in collaboration with borough residents. Thinking with *Familias* offers another perspective to add to and amplify the existing stories of an empowered South Bronx. This is what I want to bring with this project. An engagement with a work. *Familias*, an engagement with how it dances, how it speaks, how it listens, how it is understood and misunderstood.

Familias is a contemporary dance theater work that involved eight members of diverse local families from the surrounding Afro-Caribbean-Latino neighborhoods. These residents, who were mostly from the Puerto Rican diaspora also included families from Chile and Mexico, and all collaborated with artists Soto and Osorio for over 15-months to create the final work. The piece was performed once in Chicago as a work-in-progress before its final run at Hostos Center for the Arts & Culture in the South Bronx, December 1995.

HOW DOES *FAMILIAS* DANCE?

Familias emerged from a convergence of ideas that foregrounded the collaboration of artists and residents, languages, music and dance, non-profit organizations, institutions and local media. More precisely, *Familias* arose from an agreement from the leaders of these organizations and institutions to facilitate its dance of co-composition with local community. Soto and Osorio came together with the Hostos Center for the Arts & Education Director, Wally Edgecombe to formalize their converging interests.

A bond of what a community could be, could do, together brought these leaders together to co-compose. One of their main project models was the *Teatro Puerto Rico*, a popular concert hall in the 1940s and 1950s for Latino performers in the Bronx that had been widely attended by families (Soto 1999: 1). Located at 490 East 138th Street in the Mott Haven section of the South Bronx, the 2700-seat *Teatro Puerto Rico* “was for the Hispanic community what the Apollo Theater in Harlem has long been for the black community” (Verhovek).

Venue: *Teatro Puerto Rico*

To understand the connection between these local venues, which were popular in different time periods, it is important to note that memories of this *Teatro* danced strongly in the area. Serafin Mariel, president of the New York National Bank, a community bank based in the South Bronx, explains that “growing up in East Harlem in the 40s and 50s, it was a central point that everybody knew. My grandmother would take us, and we would get to see Hispanic singers and comedians live and a movie, too. It was the place to go” (Rother). Stories of performances there—iconic musicians and composers like Tito Puente, and singer Héctor Lavoe (who is credited with starting the salsa movement in 1975)-- conjured this venue as an almost mythological place of connection and transformation between those who attended and those who played on its stages. It was “the place to go” where performers and families connected to share, enjoy and re-affirm a shared love for the beats of the clave, to hear the music move through the room, to sweat together when moved to dance, to laugh with the big personalities on stage, to

shout when the musicians let loose, to get lost in the rhythms. The show was in the audience as much as it was on stage. The venue was a meeting place that brought people together, that collapsed the separation.

Located in the Mott Haven section of the South Bronx, *Teatro Puerto Rico* had been a stabilizing force in the neighborhood (Rother). Its heyday spoke to a time before the borough was torn apart by the construction of expressways, loss of manufacturing jobs in NYC and resulting unemployment, gang violence, building decay, the cataclysmic arsonists and fire department closings, etc. that took place in the 1960s and 1970s. It had been popular during a specific time period in the community; before television was available, and before there were TV shows in Spanish. In the mid-1980s, there was an effort to re-open the venue but it was unsuccessful.

Soto and Osorio's 1994-95 plan to create their next performance in collaboration with local families met with a similar interest from Hostos Center for the Arts & Culture's Director Wallace Edgecombe who wanted to revive memories of the old *Teatro Puerto Rico* and its impact with families in the borough.

Memories of this venue in particular, which like Hostos was located in the heart of the South Bronx, indicate strengths that were substantially more than only what happened on their theater stages. The performances at *Teatro Puerto Rico* and the *Familias* project at Hostos Center for the Arts & Culture (in addition to its multiple partnerships with local non-profits) were participative experiences that tapped into a blurring of relations between performers and residents.

This blurring was intensified in *Familias*, where a different rhythm of connection was created in the Bronx between performers and audiences. While shows at *Teatro Puerto Rico* often generated unscripted audience participation, *Familias* was driven by active participation from the onset. The blurring became further condensed; famous musicians were not on stage, local families were performing. The project extended for over one year with rehearsals and other workshop and open rehearsal meeting-points with community, and every performance of its six-night run was sold out. *Familias* changed the rhythm of the relationship between performers and audiences in the South Bronx; the project brought them closer until it was the family members'

commitment to rehearsals that made the difference between who was on stage and who was in the audience. In a sense, the audiences and performers were nearly each other. Even if a local community member came only to one workshop or work-in-progress showing, these multiple access points along the project's development provided ways to include future audiences of the final work into the project.

This close connection also happened in the work itself between the main family performers and the other community participants on stage. Community members who stood together along the periphery of the birthday party scene energized the dancing by shouting out the name of the local family participant in his solo moment: "Go Tonito! Go Tonito!" The family members in return pulled out their best dance moves for an audience that could easily recognize the energies of their movement vocabulary. They were from the same community.

With this local link to the past in the present, the artists found a supportive alignment between their project with local families and the community interaction that had taken place at the *Teatro*. More than activity at a particular venue, their project answered the lingering force of a community that was attuned towards participation and collaboration. This was the heart of the connection, and the transformations that happened at these meeting locations. *Familias* was like a long-held whisper from this sense of public community fifty years ago when the South Bronx was home to bustling neighborhoods of working class families who attended evening theatrical performances, Spanish-language films, live music and dancing. Performances at these different venues prompted sharing expression and experience, less hierarchy between performer and audience, between professional and amateur, between "high" and "low" art - the feeling was that all were in it together. *Familias* was an act of empowerment. The mutual affirmation, the ongoing connections between local families, artists and borough residents participating in the project showed significant strength in this historically underserved area.

Neither the artists Soto or Osorio, nor Hostos Director Edgecombe had lived in the Bronx in the 1940s or 1950s. The stories they heard led them to explore reinventing this past into the present. By thinking with the influences of this past iconic theater and its memories in the South Bronx, the artists expressed their similar desire to create a strong impact in the community.

The community is introduced early in *Familias*. Immediately after the opening scene with five professional dancers moving across the stage in near darkness, lights surface on a couple. They are sitting on two couches pressed together. We see the man talking on the phone. The woman is in labor and is getting up off the couch. He quickly hangs up the phone to guide her to the door. As they move slowly out, the lights dim. It is a gesture of inclusion near the beginning of the work that underlies the roles that family participants play in anchoring the project.

The potential to champion and affirm arts and culture specific to Latino audiences had remained present since the first large influx of Puerto Ricans arrived in New York City in the 1940s and 50s. Like *Teatro Puerto Rico*, *Familias* also generated new opportunities for families to enjoy live performance from Latino artists at a public venue in the South Bronx. The work made a link, not a déjà vu feeling, with a previous time when Bronx neighborhoods and its public venues were intact. It leapt over the destruction caused in the 1960s and 70s and took its inspiration from a memory of a time when the borough's organic development was more possible. *Familias* worked with what was already there, and what had been there and was present in memory and story. *Familias* served to underscore how these sites of culture were a fundamental part of the borough, and not easily forgotten. The project helped create a link to a neighborhood legacy.

Like a DJ sampling records on two turntables, *Familias* found its rhythm in skipping over parts of the song, of the history, to finding strength in the hooks, the places that grabbed the public's attention. The DJ creates a beat by moving between hooks to make a new song possible. *Teatro Puerto Rico* "hooked" its audiences; its shows provided a lure to attract families. *Familias* similarly lured families and audiences through its partnerships with local participants and organizations. The work used histories of this past relationship between audiences and performance to enact a project for contemporary times, and pick up where the possible development of previous venues had left off.

Teatro Puerto Rico was also part of hinting towards that connection with an island, with a culture, that was for many in NYC also a memory. A place returned to once or twice a year. A culture they were not immediately part of, but which was all around them in their South Bronx

neighborhood. The project and the venue were both part of larger dreams of connection, of interconnection, of creating spaces to acknowledge and celebrate Spanish-speaking cultures. They were landing sites for people who had moved away from their family homes and were looking for ways to maintain links to their past into a now that they were inventing, co-composing.

There is a scene in *Familias* when an older Latina woman struggles with one of the dancers, James Adlesic, to take a bottle of liquor away from him. She physically pushed him and was being pushed, and grabbed for the bottle; she was fully invested in trying to stop him from harming himself. He took a drink but she got the bottle from him. The effort of her actions showed that another future could be possible; she cared enough to demand a more positive outcome.

More than that, the work reclaimed a creative space of inclusion. Most of the families involved in the project were from the Puerto Rican diaspora; either from the island directly or Nuyoricans whose families were from Puerto Rico but who were born and grew up in NYC. There were also family members from Chile (the couple who ran the collaborating organization *Vamos a la peña*) and a Mexican family. This rich mixture of Latino cultures created a new family for the project. With members of eight local families involved in the work along with multiple points of public access in its development, *Familias* stirred up and supported feelings of community, of belonging. The artists embodied the role of *Teatro Puerto Rico* to bring its past importance in the community back to life. They provided the impetus, secured venue support and the necessary funding, and helped realize the project with various partnerships and collaborators.

The ongoing connection to the performing arts signal that local residents remained very aware of the potential of creativity in the borough. Any narrative about the South Bronx has to acknowledge its continued poverty and historical neglect from political and economic sources. These remain powerful constraints on the quality of life for many borough residents. These daunting forces place limitations on potential and remove possibilities, yet at the same time, *Familias* (1995) and its historical connection with *Teatro Puerto Rico* (1940-50s), show that these difficulties are not its only story.

Familias does not shy away from showing the difficulties and challenges of urban living as well as its joys. The piece includes young people, scenes of interactions with police, house parties with everyone together dancing and sharing food, public memorials honoring those who died, usually early or suddenly, as can sometimes happen in the South Bronx.

The South Bronx is historically underserved; residents and artists often have to create what they need from materials that are available from and with others. From the founding of multiple non-profit organizations and safeguarding local institutions, local residents have known how to create their own possibilities in the South Bronx. In this corner of the borough, there is little need to instill artistic constraints to generate the work. The constraints are mostly pre-set by the surrounding environment. Locals were aware that their own histories and stories were not often part of mainstream America. The residents and artists participating in *Familias* were eager to champion the unique history of the borough by aligning themselves with its strengths. This alignment served to increase greater potential for more similar choices of empowerment. Strength upon strength.

Venue: Hostos Center for the Arts & Culture

Before exploring the impact of *Familias* at Hostos Center for the Arts & Culture, it is worth noting that housing the project at Hostos Community College also connected the work to previous actions of community working in solidarity specific to the institutions history.

The college was first created in 1968 in response to Puerto Rican and other Latino leaders who urged the establishment of a college to meet the needs of the South Bronx. A bilingual institution, the college was founded in the heart of the community, at the intersection of 149th Street with the Grand Concourse. Named after Eugenio María de Hostos, a writer and activist revered both in his homeland of Puerto Rico and in the Dominican Republic, the college name spoke strongly to the cultural background of the majority of its students. He had promoted the

independence of Puerto Rico and Cuba, and was also an abolitionist and an early supporter of women's rights.

Eugenio María de Hostos was a powerhouse who made many contributions to Puerto Rico, the Dominican Republic, Cuba and Latin America. In particular, he is known for his work to create a federation amongst all the Antillean islands ("Confederación Antillana"). This utopian vision sought to unite all the islands, whose citizens spoke different languages due to their colonizers, into one nation. As Soto described to me in conversation, "he was beloved."

During New York City's fiscal crisis in the 1970s, the existence of Hostos Community College was threatened. Between 1973-1978, students, staff, faculty and community members fought to prevent the Board of Higher Education from closing it down. As chronicled by Hostos Professor Emeritus Gerald Meyer, this five-year struggle was one of the most prolonged and successful mass movements in New York City and, for large portions of the Latino community, the college was a real achievement in the fight against discrimination and for the right to bilingual education (Meyer 2003: 73). Hostos Community College remains a site of resistance that speaks to the perseverance of Latino culture, specifically from the Spanish Caribbean, in New York City. *Familias* became an important part of Hostos' programming.

Hostos Community College opened its new Center for the Arts & Culture in 1994, and *Familias* became part of the drive to create artistically compelling work that showcased Latino voices and could also help bring new audiences to the Center. In the South Bronx, community and artistry often intertwined.

In addition to institutional support from Hostos and Director Wallace Edgecombe³, *Familias* involved extensive planning and collaboration with other local partners. There was a pooling of resources to support the community directly and indirectly involved. The artists and participants also needed strong individuals at these collaborating organizations who remained committed to the project. The project success depended on relationships.

Project Partners: *Familias*

The artists used their own non-profit organization, Pepatián to initiate and support the project.⁴ Soto and Osorio connected with Nieves Ayres, a survivor of torture under General Pinochet's reign in Chile, who was co-founder and co-director of *Vamos a la peña* or "Let's go to the rock," a vital community space located close to Hostos. Ayres and her husband Victor Toro were committed activists for human rights. Their protests against the military government in Chile led to their imprisonment in the 1970s. After being tortured and spending years in prison, they were then exiled from Chile. The couple came to New York City and settled in the South Bronx. In 1987, they founded their organization. Ms. Ayres and Mr. Toro selected the South Bronx as the site for *La Peña* because it is home for underserved generations of African Americans, Puerto Ricans, Ecuadorians, Hondurans, Mexicans and the Garifuna diaspora. *La Peña*'s mission is to reach out to the most disenfranchised, and the organization welcomes all with no papers or documentation required (Union Square Awards). In 2011, Victor Toro (then 68 years old) was threatened with deportation. His asylum efforts failed, and he continues to fight against deportation and speaks on current immigration policies (D. Gonzalez "Victor Toro" 2011).

Working on their own, the artists had been unsuccessful in their informal efforts to recruit families into the project. Ayres was the "key person in the neighborhood who would endorse and anchor the project in the community" (Soto 1999: 2). The mission of *Vamos a la peña* strongly supported the project: "*La peña* believes that any activity can happen so long as the community organizes to make it so" (Union Square Awards). According to Soto, the organization helped spread the word among their constituents to help ensure the projects success, and provided space for gatherings where they discussed the project, performed sections of the work and shared food together (Soto email 15 Aug 2014).

Familias artistic collaborators also included original music performed live and composed by Carl Royce. The score, as Soto described to me in conversation, used string instruments from all over the Americas as a "family" of instruments. Video images, created by Irene Sosa, ranged from street scenes to other more dream-like, abstracted sequences. During the performance, the music and video images delivered supportive contexts for different scenes.

At certain points, the video images felt foregrounded. One such instance was when we first meet the “family” of five dancers bickering with each other at home. During the emotional culmination of this scene, there was a brief video that showed close-ups of the dancers faces, especially their eyes. Their faces, shot in black and white, shimmered in the light. The images seemed to evoke how these individuals are powerful with their differing points of views, their needs and dreams, and also provocative when they together compromise a family.

The music was vital to cueing the work and creating moods to support the performers. In the birthday party scene, the music signaled the changes of dance movements for the performers and community members. Dream sequences were aided by the music that underpinned their qualities of timelessness.

Familias was a multi-disciplinary work that told multiple stories of a community through a variety of sources. These include set choreographed and improvisational work, party dances, street scenes with young girls miming playing double dutch and turning jump ropes, abstracted solos with sudden falls to the ground or falls that flowed as the dancers eased their bodies to meet the floor. Live music was in turns melodic then with a more urban beat. The final image projected in black-and-white of a train moving through a Bronx cityscape until the camera focuses on a bouquet of flowers foregrounded in technicolor vibrancy. The image is held in the frame as if to shout: through all the struggles, we are still here, alive and blooming.

Not every large-scale project is able to thrive and continue developing long-term. Projects like these need committed partnerships that understand the demands of working with community and family schedules. With this significant amount of institutional and organizational support, *Familias* was a radical act of community working together long-term to generate a project. Collaborating with local organizations, artists and residents in the South Bronx also increased connections with the public. This creativity of possibility increases the potential for more projects that create accessibility in the borough. The potential to create work in the South Bronx is fed by the possibilities of multiple collaborations between a variety of institutional and

grassroots partners that raise project visibility. The more people know about it, the more the chances are for someone to also be inspired by its pull of participation and engagement.

The aim of *Familias* as expressed by Soto and Osorio was to work with “communities whose representations in the mainstream media are consistently negative and stereotyped,” and to “look at the experience of urban immigrant communities as they see themselves, not as they are represented from the outside” (Soto, “MAP Fund”). The artists worked with other locals to move their narratives into the public eye.

The continued development of this project was also partly due to a common understanding that the leaders of organizations, artists and residents in the South Bronx share alike: if they don't tell their own stories, who will? And if others tell their stories for them, what is included and what is left out? The voices of this community were not present on other stages, their stories often not told in the media. For this group of artists and residents to have continued working together over 15 months also meant that the project was needed in the community; if the interest wasn't there, the dedication would have faltered. The support the artists and local participants received from multiple layers in the community signaled the importance of the project's mission and the participants' desire to have their stories disseminated publicly through an inclusive artistic process they trusted.

Public perception of the borough was skewed by popular media's negative and damaging emphasis on drug use, prostitution and violence in the South Bronx. Films and popular media often depict and popularize mostly negative views of Puerto Rican/Latino diaspora and the South Bronx: *West Side Story* (1961 theatrical release); ABC-TV aerial cameras which moved beyond the 1977 baseball game at Yankee Stadium to show neighborhood buildings on fire which created a defining image of the Bronx in the 1970s; *Fort Apache: The Bronx* (1981; starring Paul Newman as a policeman at the 41st precinct); *A Bronx Tale* (1993; an American crime drama film set in The Bronx during the turbulent 1960s), and the two-part HBO's America Undercover series -- *Hookers at the Point* (1996), followed by *Hookers at the Point: Five Years Later* (2002) (Rivera-Servera 2012: 51-53).

This project offered another experience of the borough unfiltered through mainstream media and its historically biased perspective. This helped funders, dance reviewers, viewers of documentation disseminated by the local cable TV channel BronxNet, as well as audiences at the work-in-progress showing at Philadelphia's University of the Arts (January 1995), and others new to the borough another way to gain an insiders perspective.

In Progress Showing: *Familias* in Chicago

Merián Soto and Pepón Osorio were invited to create a version of *Familias* at the Dance Center of Columbia College in Chicago, May 1995. The artists and their dance company were given a two-week residency along with the opportunity to create a work-in-progress showing months before the works' final premiere in the Bronx in December of that year.

Soto and Osorio explored ways to integrate the Chicago families into the piece. To introduce the project, they brought video letters of the Bronx family members speaking about their experiences making *Familias*. The artists had limited time to meet and rehearse with the families, and in the end, decided that local participants would be present on stage by walking and performing simple tasks, as well as being featured in some of the video materials projected during the piece. The artists presented the work as a "chamber piece," and afterwards, Soto stated that in Chicago, "the performance was only partially successful. It became clear to us that we wanted the families to act as much more than extras in the completed work" (Soto 1999: 2). They received one scathing review (discussed in a later chapter in this text). Local family members were not as profoundly integrated in the work. Soto and Osorio were not as able to visit Chicago often in advance for ongoing meetings about the project, and the artists were more dependent on the venue to connect with local families and make arrangements. For the artists, the experience in Chicago reinforced how *Familias* demanded frequent interactions with the local families, and that to achieve this meant that the venues involved had to be as committed as the artists. With only two weeks to introduce new material and work with local family members, Soto found that the community that was created felt somewhat artificial. She explains that the challenge, during our conversation:

“we were trying to wet our feet with the material. The residency was successful, but not in the way we wanted it to be.”

The different experiences in Chicago and the Bronx underscored the importance of lengthy amounts of time to develop a community-based performance work and showed how pooling resources from different parts of the community (in the Bronx: the college arts center, community center, local cable TV network, artists, non-profit organization, residents) activated and allowed the relationships and resulting work to grow. The experience of *Familias* in Chicago suggest that the kinds of connections necessary to pool resources and space that happen in the South Bronx is not easy to replicate elsewhere. Creating opportunities for expression requires layers of commitment, over time and/or a few strong, local leaders who completely support the project.

Collaborations themselves are generative. Relationships are material for work. In the Bronx, these relationships emerged from the need to support the expression of the participants’ own stories for themselves, which in the Bronx also helped to nurture its local and cultural legacies. In Chicago, the project seems to have been limited. Perhaps the project partners in Chicago did not have the same intense commitment to the project, and its specific demands. There could have been other difficulties that did not help sculpt the time needed to develop and strengthen the crucial relationships between the artists and families to make the project a more powerful experience locally.

In Process: *Familias* in the South Bronx

In creating *Familias*, artists and residents created work based on a tug towards memory, reframing positive elements to support a re-established sense of belonging. These artists were reminding residents of that other possible Bronx, that previous potential of place, before the destruction and decay eroded communities. *Familias* was an effort to maintain an organic connection with something vanished. It was a creative effort with layers of community support that worked to continuing helping, as Edgecombe stated in a conversation with me, “to bring the

Bronx back;” not through a nostalgic sense of the past, but in recognizing and empowering what was present in the borough to continue supporting its own organic growth. This was work activated an often-repeated motto I’ve heard from Bronxites. “We know how to make something from nothing.”⁵ This drive points to a creative impulse towards a “something.” It speaks to an existing sense of openness to a situation’s own futurity, and creates a sense of expanded potential and degrees of freedom even in challenges of daily survival.

Familias and Families

Familias became a “chosen” family of residents, artists, dance company members, leaders of different organizations and venues. These different groups bonded together to make this project family. The call and response was already there. Residents already affiliated with the participating organization, *Vamos a la peña* and Hostos Community College, were open to participating in this project for over one year. There was interest in discovering what Soto and Osorio would create about South Bronx familial experiences.

The families who participated in the project represented a range of experiences (as many families in the Bronx are not nuclear families) with families headed by gay men, grandparents, and/or single mothers and fathers. Over the residency period, the core group of five dancers (James Adlesic, Patricia Dávila, Niles Ford, Merceditas Mañago and Kathy Westwater), film/video artist Irene Sosa and composer Carl Royce were “assigned” a family with whom they worked and developed close relationships. Working together over a year enabled the artists and family members to share stories and cultivate material throughout the creative process. Soto and Osorio worked with the dancers to cultivate material for the piece. At certain moments, each of the main dancers has a character and relates to the others in their created family dynamics. The relationships include an inter-generational combination between parents and children: Niles Ford is the inter-generational father figure, Patricia Dávila is the inter-generational mother figure, Kathy Westwater is the daughter and sister and also a mother to Merceditas Mañago, James Adlesic is the son and brother and also the uncle of Merceditas Mañago (in descriptions of the work, the dancers are often referred to by their first names in this text). *Familias* offers both a

critique of family at the same time that the project builds community. The family is central as well as often dysfunctional.

In one scene, dancer James Adlesic confronted and kicked everyone out of the kitchen and then sat at the table wearing his bathrobe in the near-darkness. Lit by the television that had been left on, he sat and drank. Later in his alcoholic trip, he then removed his robe, walked forward to stand in his white briefs before slowly turning to show the elaborate tattoo on his back that read: “*perdóname madre*” (forgive me mother). He walked forward again, and seemed to want to be out of his body, as if he was ready to give himself over to something else. He made the sign of the cross.

A figure appeared in a cloak of shimmering fabric. He was on his knees praying. He stood and took on a powerful pose, then collapsed, posed again and fell, circling backwards before falling to the ground in a fast drop. He paused and seemed to wake and push himself off the ground, pushing himself into leaps, larger and more complete, his full body in the air, parallel to the ground. He stood, opened his arms wide, balancing on one leg. He fell to the ground, on his knees, his hand covered his eyes, and the other extended in front of him, imploring, asking. He threw his own hand away, pretended to shoot himself in the leg, to hurt himself. He fell crawling on the ground, disgusted and rolling, mocking himself. Then he lifts himself up to his hands and knees, struggling to regain his dignity, his hand on his heart.

Other figures appeared and all the three women dancers were on stage: Kathy Westwater, Mercedes Mañago, and Patricia Dávila. They wore similar cloaks as they mimed playing piano, harp, violin. They had a romantic presence incorporating angels with wing-like sleeves, playing instruments in the air slowly and dramatically. They stood with their upper bodies open towards the sky before easing into a slow fall and bend at the waist. It was all so exhausting for them. They reached out to James, then brought their arms over their heads before letting them fall by their sides as they stood watching him, bowing down their heads. Their spacing apart from each other on the stage, and how the size of the cloaks made them appear slightly larger than their individual forms seemed to help them hold the space steady for James’ unraveling. They looked

like angels or sometimes seem to pose like statues of the Virgin Mary prepared to save James from himself.

One figure touched James and they all took off their cloaks and went to him. Their garments were silky. He pulled at them, they pushed him, carried him. They turned him, he held onto them, and let himself be rocked and carried. It seemed like they would carry and care for him, no matter how difficult it was for them. His wishes would be supported.

They helped him to walk, soothed him, he held on to one of the dancers, but it was too much weight. They carried him high, and he opened his body to the sky. They led him to the floor headfirst and from their hands, his body fluidly embraced the ground. He asked for help to get up, he pulled at them, he wanted so much of their support. They helped him.

Then the father figure (Niles Ford) entered and took off his coat and hat and the three women held his things and brought him his chair. James called out: “Hey, hey. Me.” He wanted to fight Niles, but the three women ran to hold him back. They ran again to give their attention to the father on the other side of the stage and gathered around him. A dancer took the fabric away, signaling an end to that scene.

James was upset, and turned towards the kitchen. A Bronx family member was there and handed him his bathrobe. James turned and hugged him for comfort, and was hugged back. This hug in the recessed corner of the stage was powerful. It showed the depth of shared understanding. In my conversation with Soto, she identified James’ character as the gay alcoholic son, hugging his lover.

Familias was also about creating a new family from a group committed enough to the project and who wanted to participate with other families in addition to their own. To make a family from families suggests a large and generous sense of family. Family becomes not something to run from, but to embrace, to grow, to include, to pluralize, and then to make singular. *Familias* became a *familia*. With an extensive creative period and multiple access points that allowed more people to enter into their work--via workshops, open rehearsals, in addition to the final

performances—artists and residents opened up the possibility to make the borough itself part of their (distant) family.

How does *Familias* dance: Merián Soto’s “Energetic Modes”

I was looking for a way to dance my own dance, not only the steps I had been taught but something that spoke of my own experience as a Puerto Rican woman in NYC. To achieve this, I needed to trick myself out of patterns. I also wanted to train myself to dance in ways that I envisioned. Pepón [Osorio – her husband, visual artist and MacArthur Fellow]'s mentor, Klemente Soto Beles had told me that "the dance of the future is levitation" and it startled me into trying to figure out if that was at all possible for me. I realized that I probably wouldn't levitate but I could dance energy, I could dance the energetic body. Aura mode particularly expands the body in this way” (Soto email 19 Sept 2012).

As the quote makes evident, Soto outlines how she strove towards dancing the energy of the body, of linking into the potential that is the *more-than* of the gravitational form. Energy suggests expansion through and from the body -- supplemented, sourced, inspired by/from surroundings, personal context, fantasy, environment, a future wish, the interplay of these qualities – and energies accentuated are powerful sources that dance the body. A dancing body forms from this *more-than* body in motion. The dance comes from the body, but it also emanates from something more than a physicalized source. Energy is the *more-than* of the body that dances its movement. Whatever energy becomes foregrounded also backgrounds other energies, other possible dances that are in the making. Soto’s energy modes are an exploration of these possibilities; she wants to dance in ways she had “envisioned,” not physically accomplished, but envisioned as something nearly beyond the possible. The possible were “patterns,” trainings she had already experienced and that were part of her muscle memories. As Soto states, “my work is about transformation” (2013). Soto focuses on these energetic resources to guide and become her dance. It’s a flow of resources.

Soto defines herself as a Puerto Rican woman living in NYC, one who left the island and returns for visits, speaking in English/Spanish/ Spanglish, as situations require. Her work, as suggested above, is about the *more-than*, the expansion of the body, energy, and transformation through the

dance of energy. While there is a stated identity, hers is a much greater concern than only this. Soto's work shows others how to become more than only what they think they are, and could be. She turns to the body for her inspiration, but also to the body's excess, to the more-than of what might be perceived in its fixed form in time and space. In an interview with *The Washington Post*, for example, Merián Soto described how she worked with images and movements from Mexican and Hollywood films as movement sources in her 2004 work: *La Maquina del Tiempo/The Time Machine*. She explains: "the chain of appropriation is interesting because the Mexicans copied Hollywood's interpretation of what it is to be Latino, which was often copied from Mexican films. It's the issue of how the stereotypes feed on each other" (Traiger). By focusing on the *more-than*, Soto shows how past identities are in-flux just as much as they are currently. Her work seeks a place of limitless conversation and expression that reaches beyond single notes of accustomed identity structures towards moving an energetic and physical body into and through the world. The energy modes are more than technique. While they are a physical training, Soto's work is about unbinding formal techniques like Salsa, Ballet, Modern in order to reveal, to engage with the technicities that outdo technique, even while depending upon it. Techniques can limit the body even as they free certain ranges of movements. Soto's energy modes endeavor to release the body through its energies to find more opportunities for multiple ranges of movements.

Soto developed her practice of "energy modes," to explore the body and movement as media for creative research and expression (Soto email 19 Sept. 2012). In describing a solo she made in 1987 entitled *¿Cómo nos ven? ¿Vemos?* Soto said she aimed to "keep moving either fluidly through these forms or sharply from one to the other or combining/layering, for example line mode with salsa mode simultaneously" (Soto email 15 Sept. 2012). "The Modes," Soto writes: "... are unifocal practices that hook you in to specific energies, and these energies have specific expressive qualities. The unifocus provides structure, so that in a way you find yourself performing instant choreography. You focus in, you hook into the energy and you are danced. Modes magnify what is already there. It's pretty trippy" (Soto email 15 Sept. 2012). Another aspect of her work is what I informally call "Merián Movement." It is her way of synthesizing in the body all of the above influences, and working in other quotes of "pictures, snapshots, images that trigger some kind of recognition" (Soto email 15 Sept 2012). In the documentary film

Making of a Family, Soto said that she works with “emotionality through a physical direction. I set up structures, move, and bring awareness of how it feels. In our bodies is our history” (Cacippo, 1996).

To give a snapshot of this practice in Soto’s body: In the beginning of *¿Cómo nos ven? ¿Vemos? / How are we seeing? Do we see ourselves?* (1987), we hear the rhythm of Soto’s body moving and as the lights come up, we see her dancing *plena*.⁶ The rhythm is articulated in her body as she moves, and stays mostly in one place. From *plena*, Soto quickly asserts line mode, softens into aura mode, then back to *plena*, into a pose, and then to salsa mode.⁷

First, *plena*. We feel the catch and the 1 and the 2, the feet planting into the ground, the move through the hips, the swivels along the soul of the foot moving with the break at the elbows, and the 1 and 2 and 3, the catch of the foot, the move of the hips, the break, the shifting of the shoulders, the breath moving into its rhythm with the feet stepping into the ground, the break, the arm extending upwards, it comes back, the body moving as both the drum and the melody. A leap outwards. A leap, a flow into space reverberating with rhythms just created, not dissolved. Leaving this previous form completely behind, Soto moves with the legs straight and the arms creating delineated, directional lines. These strong contrasts of form filter their energies strikingly. The arm then brings back to the body a softening, the pelvis moving in circles, then the ever-softening of the whole body in aura mode, the body drifting in its own rhythms, moving slowly, sensing its energetic way into movements, the arms and feet then briskly and declaratively moving through *plena* again, the feet punctuating the floor, the break at the elbow and the arms reacting, bracketing the air, with the palms open the fingers alive. A stopping as one leg balances, and the fingers release to the ground as Soto lifts her other leg out in front of her, then pulls both arms to one side, lengthens her neck into a presentational pose.

Soto stated in a conversation with me that she works with a quality of literalness in her dancing, and here she moves from *plena* into a series of unfolding poses (9 Aug. 2014). It’s a departure and an arrival. Yet that movement of her fingers towards the ground as she focuses on entering the pose feels like an echo of *plena*. In that moment she releases something of the more-than from *plena* in efforts to rebalance the energies. There is a literal movement between forms and

yet the virtual of the body contained in this moment expresses a fullness of potential. In the release of fingers, this small and perhaps unconscious movement, the body shows its freeness. What if enough energy had not been released? Could the fingers have pulled the body off balance? Energy matters. A break in concentration, a tug, and maybe lifting the leg would have been far more challenging.

As the body collects itself into this next pose, it does not close into itself. The exuberant energy from the *plena* movements appears in the pulsating aliveness present in the pose. There are no longer *plena* movements but the energies of *plena* are not entirely over. Its' energies as well as the pose exist in the more-than of their dancing forms. The emergent energies of the pose are then more activated in this moment.

She steps out, dropping this held position, and looks directly at the audience to begin dancing Salsa, moving throughout the space, it feels like a freeing release after the pose. Another pause in the flow and there are recognizable ballet movements, then sharply moving into line mode and quickly to Salsa again. There is clarity to each of the movements, a build-up, a change of tempo, and a total commitment to each change of rhythm, intention. The differences of the forms are foregrounded as they emerge from the more-than inspired by Soto's energy work in movement.

It is worth noting how others articulate what modes can do. Deleuze states: "a mode ceases to exist when it can no longer maintain between its parts the relation that characterizes it and it ceases to exist when 'it is rendered completely incapable of being affected in many ways' (218 qtd in Manning 2007: 150). Manning expands this quote in *Politics of Touch* to state that "modes are transient" and "every existing mode is altered by its relation to other modes" (Manning 2007: 150). A mode only "works" when it is distinct from another mode. This sense of distinction can be through an acute foregrounding of energy that when it appears, backgrounds another energy mode at work. Dance brings the body to undo its "form;" the body is no longer one form but capable of moving across several dancing identities or patterns as movements of different energies emerge in the dancing.

In her practice of playing between modes of body-forming/body-unforming, Soto strives to bring dancers back to their bodies and capacities to be part of many differing movement worlds. As certain energies become foregrounded, others are backgrounded. Energetic shifts alter this relationship and dancing emerges within these intervals and through them. In hooking into the energies of the body, different forms of dancing can be part of the same unforming, the same worlding, the same bodily resource. Soto is not as concerned with what previously learned technical movement training can do, but in a technique that comes from sensorial and physical improvisation and that discovers energetic sources of dancing movement. Her technique is rooted in improvisation and a movement practice that can involve repetition and repeated movement evolutions within a context of improvisation.

Soto's work has more of a relationship with technicities of movement and stillness itself over the specific techniques usually foregrounded in the establishment of such qualities. Dance that dances itself depends on technique but dancing is definitely the more-than of technique. Technique brings its technicalities to the fore; technicities are vigorous forces. As Manning further explains, technicities are a field of incorporation where the work comes alive with the complexity of technique; is the more-than that you cannot quite grasp; it lurks within technique but is disentangled from its mold (Manning 2013: 35).

The body has choices, and its energy can move towards one choice more clearly than another, then back and slide into a transversal approach to another landing site in the movement. The ongoing conversation continues in the energy of more-than that dances the movement. With this, Soto's practice allows technique to shift to technicity -- to the more-than of repetitive practice -- to discover this or that original force and charge that made the movement necessary. The event is the need to express. Movement and energy follow, moving towards the more-than in each curve of gesture.

This concept of the mode is also part of her most recent seven years of explorations with *Branch Dances* (2006-2013). In this work, Soto, and the dancers participating with her in this practice, work with one or multiple branches (each 10- to 20-feet long) to create a connection between the flow of movements, directionality and gravity. It focuses primarily on modes of stillness to

discover the “detailed sequencing of movement through inner pathways; the investigation of gravity through dynamic shifting of balance and alignment; and the investigation of a spectrum of tempi” (Soto, meriansoto.com). It’s moving into stillness without ever really being there. It is an envisioning of something impossible, like levitation, like dancing the energy of the body accompanied by an object which dances back, like a live body endeavoring to become “still.”

How does this practice of energetic modes dance *Familias*?

Familias begins with just the dance company members, with all five of them holding hands being pulled and pulling and pushing each other through the space as the space pushes and pulls them. There is a light in the stage darkness that they move towards as much as they seem wary of it, looking to each other, looking out into the darkness and again to the light, uncertainly. There is a strong punctuation to their movements as the dancers hold a rhythmic beat in the space, anchoring each change of direction between them and the space around. They begin kneeling and maneuvering their bodies on the floor, holding hands as they move towards ... something... and the space seems to move towards them.

One dancer (James Adlesic) stands and pulls the others in one and then another direction, propelling the group to follow until another dancer (Niles Ford) interrupts. The line breaks, they come back, huddled with their arms around each other’s shoulders, upper chest, and waists. They breathe together before breaking apart again, the dancer James Adlesic leading them back and forth. Niles Ford anchoring the moving line to slow down their trajectory. And then again, the dancers break apart, they spin in circles, release and come back together again, arms slung around each other, staring out.

The dancers respond together to the constant elasticity of the world they’re in on the stage and beyond the stage, seeming at times out of control, or still in control but then pushed beyond what is controllable, and then moved into another place of momentary control that whips them out and back into a pattern of being blown to find their feet again in the space. There are stumbles, and

still they hold on together. A hand slips out of an embrace and is pulled back into another. The space cannot conquer their unity to be together.

Another dancer, Patricia Dávila moves them away from the huddle until they break and lose each other again in the space. And again, they come together, then move away and back together until the three women lean on each other with the two men standing behind, framing their exhaustion. This opening scene is called “border crossing” and Soto explained in conversation with me that it was created to show the plight and experiences of many immigrant families.

The open space triggers intensity. They are not in a known location and they move in and into near-darkness together. When they break apart they do not stay apart. They return to stand and compress their bodies together as a unit. Separated they lose direction and spin in circles, together they know where they are.

In this mode, there are subtleties. What is a push if there is no pull? What is an elasticity of moving if there are no points in tension? What is leaving if you cannot go? Stumbles only happen when there is a need to be in two places at once; looking to the right while moving one’s foot as it skids over a branch in the path. Here there is a pull towards the next pocket of open space at full tilt with a grasp of a line of hands to hold and be pushed by in the continuous running. What is an individual here? There are individual movements, but there is not a separation. A family of differences, holding a line intact.

How *Familias Dances*: Pepón Osorio’s set installation

Wherever Soto and Osorio created their work together, they were experimenting. Osorio describes the creative process in a filmed interview in *Portraits of Bronx Renaissance Artists*: “we felt we were at a crossroads, with all this cultural expression happening in the Bronx and our participation in the experimental downtown scene; we borrowed from one to another and wove these experiences together so it made sense for us” (Osorio *Portraits*). This weaving together of disparate sources and inspirations also meant that wherever they showed their work, whether it

was in the Bronx at Hostos Center for the Arts & Culture, or whether it was at *P.S.1* Contemporary Art Center, Osorio and Soto were creating something different that what was usually shown at these sites

Cocinando and La Casita

To begin thinking about the installation in *Familias*, we first turn back to Osorio's 1985 installation at the *P.S.1* Contemporary Art Center (now known as MoMA PS1), and one of the oldest and largest nonprofit contemporary art institutions in the United States located in Long Island City, New York. MoMA PS1 defines itself more as an exhibition space rather than a collecting institution, and operates as "a catalyst and an advocate for new ideas, discourses, and trends in contemporary art, MoMA PS1 actively pursues emerging artists, new genres, and adventurous new work by recognized artists in an effort to support innovation in contemporary art" (*MoMA PS1 2014*).

Merián Soto had been commissioned to make a new work during the museum's Spring Dance Series: *Dance and Popular Culture* (May 5–June 23, 1985). She invited visual artist Pepón Osorio to create a set for the work entitled *Cocinando* (Cooking). During this performance, Osorio built an entire *casita* (little house), and completed the scene with live chickens. The construction of a *casita* signaled a place of connection between Puerto Rico and the South Bronx, and was, by its very nature, about appropriating space. For this installation and performance, Osorio was selected to receive a New York Dance and Performance Award⁸ ("Bessie") in 1985. With this recognition, Soto stated: "he busted into the downtown dance and performance scene" (Soto, *Portraits*).

In this performance, Osorio and Soto offered a different glimpse into contemporary art and popular culture; they brought the innovations they experienced in the South Bronx to this elite cultural institution. Osorio explained, "we were importing that sense of experimentation in the South Bronx. That hybridity for us was unquestionable. It was a hybrid of our experience" (Osorio, *Portraits*). These were not passive gestures; Soto was literally carried into the space,

Osorio built a casita during the performance, other elements from their personal lives and the lives of others living in the Bronx were physically embodied. Soto stated: we were interested in “appropriating spaces. We had a cast of thousands, with live music, and we brought our culture into that space” (Soto, *Portraits*).

What emerges in the artists’ choice of content and presentation is the idea of “taking over” a space well known in the formal art worlds and firmly part of the art establishment, and immersing it into their Bronx worlds. When Soto said, “we brought our culture into that space,” there is the sensation that they brought their lives, observations from their walks and artistic explorations in the South Bronx, with its particular mix of urban and island, directly to the *P.S.1*, a site not as familiar with either Puerto Rico or the South Bronx (Soto, *Portraits*). Borrowing a tactical method from Michel de Certeau the work infringed on institutional terrain in order to create space for dialogue that included their voices: “everyday life invents itself by poaching on the property of others” (de Certeau 1984: xii). Poaching is defined as trespassing on another’s territory. Yet de Certeau is talking more than only about ownership of land, for instance, in everyday practice, “to practice space is to be other and to move towards the other” (de Certeau 1984: 110). In this analysis, de Certeau moves beyond ideas of self and other to consider the element of space itself. He states that space is something like a “found object,” a place in urban planning that is transformed into space by walkers (de Certeau 1984: 117), as an “other moving towards other” (de Certeau 1984: xii). This set of decisions has great creative potential; while walkers might not change the urban design of a city, they can create a “metaphorical city” within the planned city (de Certeau 1984: 110). In doing so, individuals participate in authoring their city (de Certeau 1984: 93). In this piece, Osorio and Soto were creating their own vision of their city, introducing the Bronx and Puerto Rican diaspora to an arts institution in Long Island City, NY and vice versa.

In Puerto Rico, casitas were built by the working poor and most often in the countryside on unoccupied land using “squatters’ rights” as a way to eventually gain ownership. This was a strategic move that allowed land to be kept by small families who didn’t have a lot of societal power. Speaking in the context of New York, Luis Aponte-Parés states that “building community was less an act of settling and shaping neighborhoods and more a process of a people being

expelled from place to place by the relocation officers of city agencies, unscrupulous landlords or the heat from the last fire” (Aponte-Parés 1997: 56). In NYC, casitas were built in the primarily Puerto Rican neighborhoods in the South Bronx, El Barrio/East Harlem and the Lower East Side⁹. Joseph Sciorra in *The Drama Review* states that in the South Bronx, casitas were constructed in abandoned lots as community spaces for and built by residents who had lost social cohesion in the poverty and resulting poor living conditions from systematic neglect by government officials for two decades (Sciorra 1990: 156).

Casitas were built in an effort to have some control in areas left abandoned and became sites of transformation, inspiration and creativity, sorely needed to uplift the residents in these neighborhoods. The construction of casitas was an empowering movement to create a community space in underserved areas (Sciorra 1990: 158). Jennifer A. Gonzalez wrote about Pepón Osorio for the *A ver/ Let's see*, a series dedicated to the contributions of Latino and Latina artists to American and world art history, and pointed out that in the South Bronx, this practice of building casitas was a resourceful move that spoke to the spontaneity of Puerto Rican cultural traditions. In the face of land dispossession, reclaiming land rights by individuals and neighborhoods meant they wouldn't lose housing sites to the elite economic and political systems (J. Gonzalez 2013: 5). Aponte-Parés argues that the action of building casitas creates spaces for neighborhood meetings and social events and are also sources of Puerto Rican pride in the otherwise anonymous space of the city; “the decline and loss of institutions, bodegas, churches, social centers, schools, friends and neighbors has led to a collective need for people to play an active role in rearranging the environment, and thereby restoring the community's sense of well being” (Aponte-Parés 1997: 55). Casitas are gathering sites for music, dancing, and sites of intergenerational exchange of histories and stories. Casitas are places where children can play safely, intensely competitive games of dominos take place, birthday parties are held; they function as neighborhood social clubs linked to the islands' history. Miguel "Micky" Sierra, who frequents the oldest casita in the South Bronx, *Rincon Criollo* said, "When I come here, I feel like I'm in my country." Traditional knowledge and skills are used to create order out of the chaos that makes up the post-Koch, post-Reagan landscape (Sciorra 1990: 158).

When constructing a casita at *P.S.I*, it was necessary to bring this sense of personal, historic and artistic empowerment into the high stakes of the art establishment. Soto and Osorio were not treating *P.S.I* as a precious space but as a working space in which they could create any world they wanted, much like the casitas that were created in spaces where governmental powers did little to make more habitable for its citizens. Here the artists were taking a particular kind of claim on space to rethink and reorient territory by experimenting with this transversality of sites in low-income areas where residents were historically underserved. In doing so, they were also creating a site for themselves in institutions which could largely ignore artists that mixed “low” with “high art” except for specific, one-off events like this one -- *P.S.I*'s Spring Dance Series: *Dance and Popular Culture*. This multi-disciplinary performance was not just about the casita, the bicycles, Merián Soto's dancing, the other performers, musicians and chickens; it was about the attitude of “taking over.” Some could think of this as “pushing back” against the art establishment but it could also be about inclusion.

It's worth thinking about what might have happened if this performance piece had been presented at a venue in the South Bronx. It is not as certain that anyone from the Bessie Committee in 1985 would have attended and later nominated Osorio for a New York Dance and Performance Award. It was and remains somewhat difficult to get “cultural gate-keepers” in Manhattan to travel to the South Bronx to see work by its artists; the South Bronx is often thought of as “far away,” and out of the loop of the more important art and performance institutions in other boroughs. Institutions in Manhattan, Brooklyn, or specific arts and cultural institutions like MoMA PS1 located in Queens, are the more popular spaces where the professional arts field often attends performances. The difficulties that the Bronx incurred from their long history of government neglect has had a damaging and lingering effect on how others outside the borough relate to the people and artists who live there and their local arts institutions. To build a casita at the *P.S.I* and bring other scenes from daily life into that space had a different sort of register; it was something different, it had not been seen there before, it offered an insight into what was happening in the Bronx and what its Afro-Caribbean-Latino residents had been creating in spite of the continued neglect of their living conditions. This event at *P.S.I* gave Osorio and Soto the visibility they needed to keep their artistic careers moving with further opportunities.

Familias: South Bronx Homes

For the *Familias* set at Hostos in the South Bronx, visual artist Pepón Osorio created a living installation, a textured home interior from materials present in the local community crafted into a heightened state of theatrical dramatization.

Each corner of the stage was delineated into different home areas. The refrigerator, stove and cabinets in the kitchen area were festooned with magnets and stickers, the table was covered with a cloth and bowl of fruit; all were reminders that every object had a past breathing into this present. There was a casual approach to the furniture, as if to reinforce the idea that while furniture is necessary, home is how you make it, how it's personalized. The furniture, covered with history and mementoes, is backdrop to the living going on around it.

The kitchen area, boundaries marked by its large appliances, functioned as a kind of inner, stable courtyard. During the performance, the kitchen was a place where dancers could make smaller emotional and physical gestures without the need to project their expressions as loudly. In another community scene, the kitchen was where the small gang of eight children crawled under the table to take each other's seats while parental figures stood nearby. The kitchen was a familiar space for relaxation, play and memory.

Closer to the audience, there was an armoire for clothes with doors covered with family photos, a large washing machine, and ironing board. There were solid pieces of furniture occupying the other back corner: two big couches, side tables, a large red chair, plus TV, phone, and a wall cupboard with a mirror and painting of a family above. Placed high above the furniture, the lamps were like lighthouses, overseeing the space. Lamps and multiple TV sets were often left turned on; the light present in the background letting you know that the stage, like the apartment buildings and nearby projects, were never silent, always there was some energy moving through its rooms, elevators, staircases and corridors. Rather than relying only on stage lighting, the use of lamps kept the space alive in more familiar ways. Even when the large pieces of furniture were not directly lit, the density of their presence remained felt in the space. They remind us that the stage, like the neighborhoods surrounding it, does not ever fully sleep. In *Familias*, the set is

Osorio's performance; the objects and their ecologies danced the work, the performers, the empty space, and audiences. Osorio reframed the set as an installation and accentuated the materials as fully interactive pieces of daily life reconfigured as artificial reenactments in a theater space. This was an environment that supported the dancers and all the participants who were often sharing the staged home and outdoor spaces.

The red chair was sometimes only a chair, and other times became like the throne where the "father" demanded to be served and cared for by his family. Sleeping areas were makeshift; bed covers on a couch and a fold out cot. The living room area became a sleeping area, but the kitchen was always a kitchen. Other than the significance of the red chair, the set did not create an experimental use of objects; its experimentation was for these objects to be present on a public stage. Even when the kitchen table and chairs were often moved into the open space in front near the audience, the table loaded and unloaded with food or presents, the table still always remained a table.

Huge venetian blinds were behind the furniture set and were sometimes lifted partially to reveal a woman combing a girl's hair, a man drinking coffee, a mother and a young daughter talking together. In another scene, the blinds functioned as frames around flashes from a camera taking pictures of people in profile as if in police court. The blinds were like porous walls reminding that the separation between interior and exterior worlds could be very thin. The sounds from the streets often filter into apartments, affecting life indoors, and pull attention towards its energy, or it provides a constant audio and visual backdrop, the street and traffic lights always on, the cars and buses moving past, always music somewhere leaving its traces along the block.

Unlike building the casita at *P.S.1* in 1985, Osorio here used found and readily available objects to create shifts in perceptions. The set was inspired by the South Bronx and this use of familiar local landmarks inside and outside the home both anchors and expanded the work. By putting their environment on stage, the installation created a distance that led Bronx families to recognize their own surroundings differently, while others could feel immersed in the Bronx-like environment. The proposition was that amplifying the objects to provide an immersive experience offers a way to see the Bronx from the inside out. The set offered a birds eye view

into local apartments and neighborhoods with an amplification and compression of materials that raise the level of its theatrical impact.

This 1995 project took place a decade after *Cocinando* when Osorio built a casita at *P.S.I.*, a choice that was impactful for its foregrounding of differing parallel lives located in the same city. With *Familias*, Osorio was concerned with unbinding the familiar to expand its sensorial and textured sense of home. It was more than a transversal move; Osorio's craft of space was an expansion of possibilities for the materials to become active propositions in the performance work. Osorio was still "taking over" the Hostos stage, as was his aim at *P.S.I.*, and this time it is with family photographs located on multiple surfaces: the armoire, the wall cupboard, and in the final scene, the wings (side curtains) are covered with individual portraits linked together visually to create a collective force of people on stage.

As well as providing an environment, the set provided both restraints and opportunities for casual movement. For the performers, the kitchen table became a set within a set that supported specific scenes: two performers playing cards, family members preparing a meal, a place where the daughter opens up her birthday presents to show them to her mother as they put the plates away. Downstage, closest to the audience, was kept open and clear for group dance moments. The red chair gave the dancer Niles Ford an authority where he sat with a commanding presence and demanded to be served, and later it was the site where he chose to sleep and retain his authority in the house.

There were specific scenes when the space changed more dramatically. A birthday party, for instance, congregated all the families who entered the stage and covered the table with food and presents. The table is turned into a site of regeneration and celebration. The stage full of participants -- a woman pacing while on the phone, two younger community members watching TV together and passing a bag of chips, another woman ironing clothes—making a family, a neighborhood evident. The home site later expanded into a dream sequence. Baby dolls lie in lines like crops in a field. This dream scene unnerved by an accompanying audio of babies crying and video of a baby just out of a bath. The tenderness of the baby's vulnerability and of the parents, reminding us how families with small children are on call, never able to really rest,

often close to crisis and working to give and support all that they can. Later small groups of different families gathering to remember loved ones with flowers, small candle-like lamps, a large photograph, and bottle of rum to pour and honor their passing. This recreation of vigils was a specific allusion to scenes that can happen in the South Bronx most often for young men who are victims of crimes. Finally the stage is re-created in an outdoor community garden with large boxes of plants. The set danced the space in these moments, and lifted the environment from more than a home-like place into a multiplicity of possibilities that while including the wider sense of home, as well as invent a place beyond it.

In these changes of scenes, movements altered with each setting: dancers cradled and rocked the baby dolls to sleep in ways that provoked sensitivities in the dancers movements. The dancers brought the dolls to life in their tender way of holding the baby's head carefully as they raised the doll near to their shoulder to pat the baby's back and rock with the baby doll held close to their chest; the dancer twisting and turning on the cot trying to sleep, with the cot lit as if another theater area on the stage, two dancers simulating sex with each other, the continued movements of dancers half-asleep and moving slowly from one baby to another, struggling to soothe them and bring peace and remain peaceful in the nighttime air.

Although the dances were first created to explore a set of propositions, the later introduction of visual and material gestures impacted the work. As an example, the solo of Kathy Westwater was made in a collaborative process between the dancer and choreographer. Collaborator Irene Sosa added a short video of an angel figurine falling and breaking apart in slow motion, and Osorio later contributed the material gesture of a hooded cloak made of a somewhat stiff and shiny gossamer-like fabric. Although the dance was not originally made as a duet between the fabric and the dancer, the introduction of the material did seem to alter the experience of the dancing. Its material effect seemed to invite other kinds of dances in the choreographic structure. The fabric and length of the cloak did not allow it to flow easily away from the body and the silk slip she wore as an undergarment.

These material gestures seemed to underscore the intent already present in the choreography. As Westwater explained in a conversation with me, dance movements were often repeated in the

rapid structure and phrasing of movements, often changing their intention in the repetition, transcending, breaking down, collapsing, recommitting to the structure again (11 Aug 2014). The fabric became part of her movements. During the dance, the fabric had to be made to move with and away from her feet searching the floor. Her presence and concentration in this duet draws the viewers to watch her movements and not the fabric; the material is a texture that helps contextualize her. Sometimes it was like a burden that she must push way to move; sometimes it was comforting, a material that she touched with her hands before going into another movement phrase; sometimes the fabric engaged with her moving body, creating more pathways to startle movements somewhat unplanned as she moved in between the folds of the fabric to find a way to bring her feet back to the floor. Her feet become wrapped up in its gauzy cover, she then moved quickly before the fabric had time to gather around her legs. She moved faster than the fabric could find her. She slowed down to let it envelope her again, the fabric and hood folding in around her neck and shoulders; she forgot about the fabric, and moved, it caught below her feet, she responded by lifting them off the floor quickly, then moving on tiptoe. She lets the fabric catch up to her again, to enfold and seemingly to enlarge the shape of her form as much as it hides her body. The fabric seemed to bring the focus to the physical and the more-than that was created in movement. Sometimes it was like ornamentation, sometimes an obstacle. The moving cloth acted like a visual tracking of her movements, and as Westwater described “the fabric became part of the dance and had to be dealt with” (11 Aug 2014). Her experience was an unexpected result of Osorio’s gesture with the original movement material.

In James Adelsic’s nighttime alcoholic trip, the tattoo on his back was part of Osorio’s material gesture. While the tattoo was not fabric, it underscored Osorio’s contribution to the movement sequence. It was a storied, visual contribution that James’ movement framed within his slow but declarative turn to the audience that allowed the tattoo to be seen and read.

Clothing was also part of the work’s language and provided a signal, like shorthand. Kathy Westwater received a stylish winter jacket as a present at her birthday party and we saw her show it off to her daughter. When the daughter later announced that she was leaving, Kathy gave her the jacket. Her decision to leave was not easy for the family or for herself, but she does leave

and they support her choice. The jacket is obviously not for warm climates, she is going north to the mainland, to the Bronx, and she is leaving, maybe instead of her mother.

There were also the white sheets, blankets, pillow that were unfolded to make up the couch and cot for sleeping. The sheets seemed to invite tension as the dancers twisted the material around their bodies while pretending to sleep before being woken up during the night. The bedcovers were left unfolded the next day, to show the traces of the difficulty of sleeping, and the activity during the night that made it difficult. Fabric here is something mobile and changeable in its uses; white sheets left on the beds show the activity of the person that was there, and later white sheets are necessary to clear the stage to make room for the final outdoor scene in the gardens. At that moment, stagehands (who were the community participants) covered the furniture with large white cloths before taking them off stage. It was as if it was necessary to state that the furniture was no longer active in the space, and the white cloths were used to silence their presence. Covering the furniture also gave the stage a moment of quiet before large boxes of plants were brought out to activate the space as an outdoor site. Manning states: “ Objects extend beyond their objectness to become ecologies for complex environments that propose dynamic constellations of space, time and movement” (Manning 2013: 92). This is exactly what has happened with the set and the way it underscored and amplified the choreographic material in *Familias*.

Post-*Familias*

Merián Soto and Pepón Osorio had hoped to tour the *Familias* project nationally to continue incorporating elements from the lives of other Latino families across the country into the work (Riera 1995). After the premiere in December 1995 at Hostos Center for the Arts & Culture, and the work-in-progress showing at Columbia College (Chicago, Illinois; January 1995), *Familias* was presented at: the Newark Museum (New Jersey; 1995), Rutgers University (New Jersey; 1997) with the original cast and was later remounted at Temple University’s Conwell Dance Theater (Philadelphia, Pennsylvania; 2001).

The residency and performances at Rutgers University in particular benefited from extensive meetings and rehearsals. As New Jersey is near to the Bronx, Soto was able to visit often for multiple meetings in advance of the residency. This time investment helped create a more organic community with a more full integration of local families. *Familias* had premiered as a full-length and finished work, and the artists had more of a sense of what the piece required. The work revealed its knowledge about its relevance after the artists had more experience with it and how the people involved would work together.

During our conversation, Soto told me that she ran into a family member recently who said his mother still talks about being in the piece. Donovan, Tonito Arroyo's son, had also reached out to Pepón Osorio for advice years after the project was completed. The work had a transformational impact and still connects. As Kathy Westwater suggested, if this piece were to be remounted, it would probably have a strong impact today with immigrant families in the United States (11 Aug 2014).

Although the plan to tour nationally was not realized, the project left traces of its impact after its performances in both the South Bronx and in Chicago. In Chicago, Pepón Osorio worked with the residents to build an altar that was to be placed in various homes over the course of several months after the residency was completed. During the course of developing *Familias* in the South Bronx, Osorio had met with local cab drivers, and realized that there was more material that could be further developed. In response, Pepón Osorio created *El Cab*, a series of mobile interactive micro-installations that circulated throughout the South Bronx. Launched in February 1997, *El Cab* extended the community spirit of *Familias* (Soto "Final report").

Familias suggested and provoked further events in the local communities. Its impact did not end when the performances were over. Osorio and Soto's art-making practices continued to create communities with the public. As a curatorial proposition, *Familias*' depth of collaboration was "event-full." The relationships it helped initiate further supported other projects.

Interlude: Legacy

You are an artist making performance work in the South Bronx. Isolated, you don't feel that you are getting beyond the Bronx. You make your work, it's produced locally, and there are no reviews. The presenter you were hoping would attend found something else to see closer to home in Manhattan or Brooklyn. You feel outside the conversation, you have the drive to push your work forward, but without visibility to help you move into other venues and realms with your artistic visions. You look for every step forward you can, every piece of support to get beyond only where you are.

These are the moments to remember that you are also part of a specific local legacy. Artists before you, operating in different structures and time periods, found ways to make their connection with audiences to be the center of their art making practices in the South Bronx. They found partnerships for collaborations that supported the work. Another example of this approach is the work of Arthur Aviles, a choreographer who began his dance company, Arthur Aviles Typical Theatre with local dancers fully integrated and contributing to the work as part of a formalized dance company.

You might only want to make your work, to have it shown in venues, without focusing on work with community members as part of your process and product. There is room for that too, but the openness and inclusion of local community is still part of the legacies that exist for you, to whatever extent you might imagine.

In fact, the inclusion is probably already happening in your work; influences of the South Bronx have a way of getting under the skin of an artist making work in its borough. The energy and impact of the South Bronx is transversal by nature; it likes to dance and speak up. You create the hybridity you need from its conversations. You provide and become part of the local ecology. Time is important to connect and establish the relationships needed to infuse the work with trust. It's up to you. Which of course means that you need to keep pushing. The rest of the world is still catching up to the extent of possibilities in the borough. And remember that there are others in

the South Bronx who are waiting for your invitation. You can create the invitation. You are your own resource. Your artworks can help create the community you seek.

HOW DOES *FAMILIAS* SPEAK ?

Familias speaks in an immediacy of polyphonous voices: the collaborating artists, families, local and grant-making organizations that supported the project.

Familias speaks through the concept of “inreach” that underlies and supports the creation and development of its choreographic material, spoken text, and the logistics of making the work.

Inreach

The artists used the word “inreach” to better express their ties with the local community. Similar to many residents in the Afro-Caribbean-Latino neighborhoods of the South Bronx, Merián Soto and Pepón Osorio were born elsewhere, in Puerto Rico. By 1995, the couple had two sons, and described the South Bronx as their “adopted community” (Soto 1999: 1). Part of the artists’ drive to create *Familias* was to connect and collaborate with other parents raising families in the neighborhood (Soto 1999: 1).

Instead of naming their desire to connect with local residents by the often-used descriptive term of conducting “outreach,” referring to reaching out to new communities as an “other,” Soto and Osorio described their work as “inreach” into the community of which they were also a part. Conceived by the artists as a conceptual approach, this term was also based on the need, as the artists described, for inclusion of often-marginalized Latino artists and community in the contemporary arts (Soto, “MAP Fund”). “Inreach” implies that the reach is not an action that requires great mobilization; one does not have to reach out far to connect with others. The term relates to the artists’ personal connection with their surrounding South Bronx community, and foregrounds the relationship between their personal response and initiation of the work with their neighborhood residents. It was more than a neutral or distant connection; they were part of the community participating.

In the South Bronx, hip-hop speaks loudly as a powerful source of art and art making. *Familias* shared its multi-disciplinary creative drive but used other configurations, like activating trust and collaboration, in its processes. Hip-hop is more fundamentally aligned with and sourced from competition and rebellion (an example: dance “battles”). Trust and collaboration can signify weakness or a loss of power. Clyde Valentin, Producing Executive Director of the Hip-Hop Theater Festival, in conversation with other performing artists, writers and scholars at Culturebot’s *Long Table* on “Performance and Place: The Politics of Cultural Production” explained how “artists working in the hip-hop vernacular are often very product oriented, that’s the culture” (Horowitz). In a later discussion about trust in collaborations, Clyde explained that,

with his artists the idea of walking into a room with someone they don’t know, without a determined outcome, can be unfamiliar and off-putting in and of itself. But the kind of trust that is implicit and assumed in that situation by artists with shared experiences of privilege is very likely unfamiliar to many hip-hop artists and can, in fact, be threatening. Artists from disadvantaged backgrounds or working in the hip-hop idiom may, in all likelihood, be coming from a place (both geographically, socially and psychologically) where blind trust is not an asset but a weakness. Unlearning that wariness is not only a significant undertaking but also demands a fundamental, ongoing change in their circumstances. Either that or they somehow must balance being trusting in the creative process with wariness in more hostile environs” (Horowitz).

Hip-hop is a vital and popular force in the borough, and the artists who work outside of its legacies are also challenged to find other equally powerful concepts and support for their work. *Familias* was the result and activation of other forms of art making that were also interconnected with the South Bronx.

Concepts like “inreach” can help lead to particular ways of thinking about how creative work is made in this borough and who is involved in creating the work, as well as pushing ideas for new kinds of words and writings that describe future possibilities to feedback into potential. It also signals how artists can take an existing descriptive term often in arts and community work and alter it to better suit their specific projects. In doing so, the artist is also supporting their work by further revealing to others the complexities of how they create in the borough. Artists are free to use existing terms and develop their conceptual impact or remake, reinvent, reconfigure these definitions as needed to support their work.

Choreographic Material

Relationships, rhythm, flow of timing, and structure are part of the choreographic material of *Familias*.

To create the work with the community and the five dance company members, Soto and Osorio first contacted poet, shaman and theater activist Maria Mar to facilitate their group process and cultivate shared material for the work (Soto 1999: 2).

Born in Puerto Rico, Maria Mar's mission is to be a "transformation shamanness through the medium of the arts" (Mar, *Puro Tetro* 429). She developed her mission through a three-year shamanic initiation. In her essay in *Puro Tetro*, Mar describes how her ancestors called her to become a shaman, and were her teachers and guides. Through them, she learned that "the ancient ones possessed advanced knowledge that found no place within the culture that western civilization had built" (Mar, *Puro Tetro* 305). As a contemporary shaman, her approach works with the ritual qualities of shamanic trainings beyond their strict, traditional functions. She developed "Theatre of Transformation" to "rescue the shamanic nature of art in a contemporary, non-traditional context" (Mar, *Puro Tetro* 309). Westwater described the workshops as an investigation using specific approaches derived from shamanic practices based in part on Afro-Puerto Rican practices in the environment of the body (11 Aug. 2014).

Soto described that Mar offered exercises to free the voice and the body (email 15 Aug. 2014). Through her use of Caribbean iconography, honoring the ancestors, and dreams, Mar offered blueprints into the collective unconscious, helping participants generate archetypal movements, forms, sounds, and energies to gain deeper insights into transformation (Mar, *Puro Tetro* 310). The work, as Westwater described, included many group discussions (11 Aug. 2014). The dancers and artistic collaborators worked with objects, and moved on their own and/or with partners to further explore the material that was emerging individually and as a group.

In particular, Mar developed "Testimonial Theatre" to help prevent family violence through consciousness raising and empowerment thorough the arts. This work was especially relevant to

the artists in *Familias* (Mar “About Us”). As a first step into the material, Mar worked only with the dance company members in preparation for their entrance into the project. Dancer Kathy Westwater described that Soto and Osorio probably felt that the content of this work would bring up emotional and psychological issues, especially in the context of interpersonal dynamics with the families. Mar was introduced to help give them tools for their work and to process personal issues as a group (Westwater email 11 Aug. 2014).

Mar’s incorporated Brazilian theatre maker and political activist Augusto Boal’s “Theater of the Oppressed” techniques into her work. Created by Brazilian theatre maker and political activist Augusto Boal, “Theatre of the Oppressed” was influenced by Paulo Freire’s *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (1970). Freire stated that the distinctive feature of oppression is passivity and an unreflective acceptance of one’s world (Haedicke 2001: 270). For Freire, empowerment is the process by which people take more control over their lives; first, by understanding systemic and institutional injustices and then, learning how to utilize their existing contradictions to wrest some power for their lives. Sharing this knowledge with others is part of the empowerment process (Haedicke 2001: 270). In his theater works, Boal encouraged audience members to actively become “spect-actors” and demonstrate their ideas for altering narratives. This approach became a tool of empowerment to generate personal changes and social action (Schutzman and Cohen-Cruz 1994: 1).

The artists’ choice to include shamanic work was fruitful for the participants and the project. Westwater stated that the work was an opening that created dialogue and a shared foundation (11 Aug. 2014), and Soto described: “the outcome was deeply personal and sometimes cathartic” (Soto 1999: 2). Mar inspired the dancers, and Westwater and Adlesic continued working with her after the project.

To begin *Familias*, instability then was proposed as a creative force, and the project’s stability was the unity of this discomfort. Working with a shaman brought more variable possibilities, as individuals and as a collective exploring the material together. It also created its own stability as everyone developing the project was guided beyond usual patterns. The work explored subject material close to the heart, under habits and daily patterns, which provide a kind of stability, and

by working through movement and relationships, its approach encouraged and provoked a kind of instability. In this instability, everyone involved in the work was also going through experiences of some sort of upheaval, which was unifying, and at the same time, everyone was also being guided towards a deeper truth at their core, which offered another kind of personal stability. Somewhere along this route of destabilization, and the re-stabilization were possibilities for transformation and the development of self-awareness and presence. The development of these qualities helped underscore the work the dancers would develop with Soto, Osorio and the local families.

Later in the creative process, community participants shared intense stories about their individual struggles to survive, but the artists found that they were more private with stories about their feelings with family relationships (Soto 1999: 2). This reticence influenced the project's direction. Soto:

being hugely interested in the deeper psychic workings of family, Pepón and I soon realized that a way to approach the work might be to change our focus from the individual stories to an exploration of the delicate inner workings of families. Each family's internal dynamics and each individual's issues of family were immensely rich and provocative. Everyone's experiences echoed another's experience. In choosing to work on a more abstract level we were able to honor participants' privacy (Soto 1999: 2).

Privacy of the individual family was a creative constraint. The work was anchored in the experiences of its family of participants, and developed with the improvisational nature and extension of "echoes;" as mentioned in Soto's description. Something else was being created in the timing of these parallel experiences; some material was left out while other material was included in that chain of reverberation present in the work. From this push-pull of material, the artists worked with local participants to create archetypes of their family dynamics (Soto 1999: 2). Specific family dynamics gleaned from experiences with the shaman moved artists and community participants into a shared unknown to retrieve, re-find, re-imagine. In this distancing and re-interpretation of personal materials, the artists, family members and other participants created new possibilities; a community regeneration. By expanding the story of the individual into archetypes, Soto and Osorio did not lock the dancers or all of the family members into any one consistent and scripted relationship. Thus, they were able to broaden the reach of their work.

The family members dressed in school uniforms and playing like children in one scene are, in the next, adults in a two-generation household and then later, part of a larger scope of neighborhood imagery.

In this use of performers for different purposes, time itself became a constraint. It was elongated or compressed in certain moments, and there were skips, leaps, sudden drops in between sections as needed to serve the crafting of the work's expression. As Soto states: "The result was a complex mosaic of images that affirms a community's humanity, reflecting our drive to surmount an environment overwrought by poverty, racism, and violence, and a spirit of hope for transformation" (Soto 1999: 2). Creating a mosaic of images rather than attempting to construct and follow one story's logical development enabled the artists to jumpstart transformative developments. As Manning states, "losing balance is the quickest way to get moving" (Manning 2009: 47). By moving audiences through a mixture of imagery and textures, the aim was that new patterns could emerge that might offer other creative pathways and that these insights could help change negative perceptions of a borough by revealing a wealth of interconnections that make it a home.

These various qualities of time also found its reflection in other aspects of the work. For instance, the character of dancer James Adlesic, who has a drinking problem, proposed other improvised interactions with the dancers and community members. His timing was individual. He bumped into people and then was frustrated when they pushed him to sit down, he made a young man quit his chair so he could sit there, he played with a dancers' dress, he picked up one of the children (Soto and Osorio's son Marcelo) and then roughhoused a little too hard, he snuck drinks with one of the local participants in the kitchen. Most of his momentary interactions were confrontational. To be confrontational, he did not flow with the timing of the group around him. His timing choices supported and freed his characters' behavior. His ability to cause disruptions throughout the party annoyed all the performers equally, and for this, he was also a unifying force in the work.

In other moments, there was a blurring of the separation between the dancers and local groups. A family participant entered and embraced one of the dancers (Kathy Westwater). He turned to

leave. She implored him to stay, her hands and arms outstretched as he began to separate himself from her embrace. He left, walking away casually; her arms still stretching into the space. She was still holding him in her embrace after he was gone. Her urgency was the counter-point to his quieter and quick presence. She was the one who stayed.

Other moments show timing on a more concentrated time frame. An earlier scene that developed from the opening section of the border crossing showed how families who have moved through so much turmoil together, can later disband without a look back. Here, the mother was left alone.

In other group scenes there was a clear separation in space and timing between the dancers and community participants. This was made palpable in the beginning scenes, where the dancers were foregrounded as they introduced themselves as a family. In these early scenes, the local participants were ironing and folding clothes, mopping the kitchen floor, watching TV, talking on the telephone. The two groups did not interact. It seemed the dancers had an urgent feeling of momentum as they moved in the work while the local participants were performing tasks that could continue indefinitely, pacing their bodies in slower and quieter rhythms. The dancers mimed washing dishes in the space while the other family members were taking boxes of cereal out of the cupboards in the kitchen. The two groups are in differing realities, like neighbors in an apartment building who are sort of always aware of each other's presence through the walls.

In other scenes, the dancers and family participants met and connected with each other in a shared timing, sharing a worlding. In the birthday party scene, the dance company members and participants danced together. Dancer Kathy Westwater was paired with local family member Tonito Arroyo, participant (and professional dancer brought in as an extra) Noemi Segarra danced with a woman from one of the local families, and a few couples from the family participants danced in pairs. They are not always in direct contact but they performed the same dance movements with hands on hips and turns, grasping hands and waists to lead each other through the space. As his character searched for another drink, dancer James Adlesic provoked improvisational moments as he walked through and interrupted these choreographed dances.

One of the techniques Soto used in *Familias* to support co-composing of choreographic materials was to ensure that non-professional and professional artists worked with everyday movements. It really was a party for everyone on stage, experiencing together the choreographed and unscripted movements and fun that happen with a large mix of people moving together. In this elasticity of multiplicities, a constellation of specific family relationships were introduced and accentuated between the dancers before blending with community participants. Once this was established, the dancers returned to family roles and their own timing separate from the local participants. Toward the end, the two groups re-joined and become another family on stage, a community family. Soto and Osorio were aiming for a larger canvas that tells what it means to be part of a family from and of their adopted South Bronx community (Soto 1999: 1). The elasticity of integration and re-integration of the different kinds of performers throughout the work provided anchoring as the work spun further into experimental directions. That fluidity became a new form of stability, a mobile system of support.

In addition to the creation of family and home environments, *Familias* also worked to include wide swaths of an entire neighborhood in its scenography. Dancers changed their relationships to the building narrative, flowing from part of an established family to more abstract characters that propelled the scenes. These moments can be sudden drops into completely different parameters.

For instance, in a scene Soto described as the “dream sequence,” the stage was no longer one home. It was a wide-open unknown, a field of multiple baby dolls lying in the space, and an ongoing sound track of babies incessantly crying. Time flowed slowly as the music looped steady, continual tones that stretched out into the work, giving a sense of elongation.

The surreal feeling of this nighttime scene was amplified in the shifting identities of the dancers’ characters. They could still be their characters, dressed in silky bedclothes, but they were also more than only these identities. The father figure (Niles Ford) and Kathy Westwater (daughter and also mother) care for the babies, they watched over and picked up the dolls to try to bring comfort and quiet to the discord and energy of the moment. As the parents, they were struggling beyond and through their exhaustion to try to create calm and soothe the environment.

The mother figure (Patricia Dávila) and James Adlesic (identified as the gay son) simulated having sex together, and in this scene, the particular family relations previously set up are dropped. While this scene was ambiguous enough that this relationship could be a comment on incest, I think it was more of an open sense of shifting identities of couples, of life events that happen in the dream of night. The daughter Merceditas Mañago remained mostly on her fold out bed, frustratingly tossing and turning with the ongoing disruptions.

Video images placed the viewer looking down. We see a contented baby (Soto and Osorio's son Gabriel) held securely above a bathtub of water. A freshly washed happy baby seems comforting, and yet the water behind is disconcerting, suggesting vulnerabilities, is there a hint of possible danger? What if someone slips? In a separate image, our perspective is placed behind a woman and focused on her naked back. There is a feeling of vulnerability, as if we are catching someone in an unguarded moment. Later a group of children rushed near the camera and we see them engaging with each other with an effervescent energy. The images included scenes from everyday living, and there was often an ambiguous nature to their reflection on stage. The loop of babies crying seemed to unsettle the images, even when superficially mundane.

This dream sequence brought the dancers out of their established dynamics to act like a family to multiple babies, caring for the entire neighborhood, going through this exhaustion together, nurturing the future, trying to keep with so much need. Then an alarm sounds and the work snaps out of its dream-like velocity.

Spoken Word

On stage, we hear a measured speaking voice reading words precisely, letting each thought fall into and through the space towards us. We see a line of young women who move together with each task showing an economy of motion. Their uniform unison speaks of many rehearsals in order to move through these motions in unison. Each movement holds an importance in their economy.

The voice belongs to the acclaimed Bronx-based poet Sandra Maria Esteves, one of the founders of the Nuyorican poetry movement, who reads her work “Coming out of darkness” from behind the half-raised slats of the venetian blinds. She is standing alone at the back of the stage, just visible with her profile lit with a single light.

At first the lights complete the narrative of the preceding scenes by revealing dancer Merceditas Mañago, who has left her family home, and is tending plants set in a wood frame that resembles a plot in an urban community garden. The lights shift from her to reveal a group of eight young women who purposefully enter and walk to the front of the stage nearest the audience, each carrying a tray of materials.

This choir accompanies Esteves’ reading. In unison, they sit on the floor in a horizontal line facing the audience, carefully put on gloves, pour dirt into small pots and nest a small plant inside. While they perform each action, the young women sing refrains in Spanish to the poem Esteves is speaking in English.

Spoken texts are seekers. They are also something like shamanic exercises that seek to destabilize to then re-stabilize and rebuild a possible world from words, rhythms and intentions. We listen to Sandra Maria Esteves: “Coming out of darkness, and into myself / The shadow in the space I leave / follows me everywhere / We talk sometimes, but our words are no longer the same / I step out from under that space I was in / break free from the strangle-hold / of sickness, of betrayal, of abuse / Step out of this well studied past / perfectly preserved pictures / silence never listens.” The young women moving in unison, sang a refrain in Spanish: “Rio de felicidad, te vi correr, te vi saltar, te vi volando (meaning: river of happiness, I saw you run, I saw you jump, I saw you flying).” These spoken texts speak to more than survival, they go towards the dream, propelling a stronger future, cultivating possibilities that strengthen potential. They are spoken in a garden, sculpted out of an urban space, to nurture their listeners and for their speakers to also be further nurtured.

The spaces in between the call and response of languages, the spaces in between the quiet unity of movements in watering each plant creates possibilities for more thoughts to enter. We have time in this section to take in the relationship between words and movement, between the differing solo and group voices and how they register in the theater, between the other pieces of large group works that take over the entire stage with their energy and movements. The restraint in the movement of this section stands out in its contrast to the other group moments on stage. It is both a quieter and louder counterpoint; quieter because it is more subdued energetically and louder because of all the voices singing, and also quiet because the singing and speaking voices together are thin threads meeting; nothing is jarring or aggressive.

Language stands without translation in the performance. The concept of bilingualism is expected from their audience, just as it exists in the daily lives of most who are from the Spanish speaking countries living in New York City. If words are lost in their speaking, or misunderstood, that is also part of the experience. Words can be understood, missed altogether, fall away; there is more to communication than only words, even in a scene constructed of words.

Languages

Familias comfortably used two languages, English and Spanish, and the interplay of these languages is often the local language; the urban accent attached to both is also part of “Bronx-speak.” Spanish spoken in the Bronx is often not the Spanish heard in Spanish-speaking countries; the Bronx influences speech to fit its speed. *Familias* listened and reflected the particularities of the Bronx multi-lingualism and its varieties of Spanish, English, Spanglish.

All the family members and local participants were given opportunities to use both languages, even when they were not native speakers. This suggests that for the artists, it was not about getting the pronunciation “right,” it was about communicating. Pepón Osorio explained, when he first came to New York City, “I only spoke in present tense. No future, no past for me” (Osorio, *Portraits*). Learning languages is part of the rhythm of entering the Bronx. Just as Osorio learned

English as an adult, the dancers who were native English-speakers also had the experiences of communicating in Spanish. Dancer James Adlesic said that he learned Spanish to feel less alienated from the creative process. The project provided small but significant suggestions of cross-fertilization. For Nuyorican poet Sandra Maria Esteves who did not write her poem for this performance in Spanish, the project also honored her dual identity as a primarily English speaker from a Latina cultural background. This contemporary project supports the South Bronx as a multi-lingual borough, and the work shown at Hostos, a bilingual institution.

Performances were covered and reviewed by newspapers with distinct readerships in Spanish and in English. The distinction reveals the separation between the language communities with their different conversation about the work. *El Diario/La Prensa* titled their article “when the ‘star’ is our community” (1995), and *The New York Times* dance critic found it full of “ghetto clichés” (Dunning 1995).

HOW DOES *FAMILIAS* LISTEN ?

Familias listens through its activation of the concept of “inreach” which places participants in proximity via platforms of engagement; through its reflection of how families and reviewers do not always listen well; through living choreographies that highlight transversal movements between dancers, family and community participants in moments of crisis.

In this context, listening is a form of embodiment. Rather than an abstract verb, it’s deeply linked to other parts of how *Familias* also dances and speaks. In other words, to really listen is to avoid those grids, or habits that are stereotypical, that limit. To listen well is to hear things that are erased or hidden by habits - habits of thinking, of presentation, of hearing.

Platforms of Engagement: Family partnerships as “inreach”

Listening requires presence, a “showing up.” To create this work and amplify its community, the artists committed to supporting the organic building of trust through partnering dancers and artistic collaborators with local families.

To give further context for this kind of deep listening, Pepón Osorio stated:

My principal commitment as an artist is to return art to community. My creative process is one of observation, listening to stories, uncovering histories, channeling collective experiences, and transforming these into works that can serve as reflectors to the group. I see myself as standing in the center of my installations speaking into a giant microphone, while, at the same time, holding up a monumental mirror that reflects the community. I see my studio as a riverbank where dreams, fears, aspirations, disillusion, anger, frustration, humor, and vulnerability -- both spoken and unspoken -- can settle and become transformed into works of art (Osorio “Artist Statement”).

To support the creation of these riverbanks, partnerships of artists with local families were set-up as immersive experiences. Listening in this case was not about relaying specific family stories to be enacted by the group, but rather the partnering relationships were sites of knowledge

gathering that influenced the creation of the project, cultivating local experiences to be foregrounded or as background material informing the project.

Dancers brought their experiences with embodied listening in previous residencies to their interactions with local family members. Previously, from 1992-95, three of the principal company dancers (James Adlesic, Niles Ford, Kathy Westwater) integrated local participants into the performances of *Historias*. This work, created in 1992 by Soto and Osorio, focused on Puerto Rico's unofficial history, linking colonialism to contemporary Latino life (Soto "Pepatián Tour description"). During its three years of national touring (including a three-week residency in Puerto Rico), *Historias* was performed two or three times per year with a different community in which local artists and participants were incorporated into each performance. (Soto email 19 Aug. 2014).

In the development of *Familias*, dancer Kathy Westwater stated in our conversation that her work with local family member Nieves Ayres, a survivor of political torture in Chile, made her feel "very proud to have met someone like this and to have her stories filtered through her work as a performer" (15 Aug. 2014). As a participating artist in the work, Westwater told me that she was informed by attending political events at Ayres invitation, being introduced by Ayres to a community of activists, and participating in her work at *Vamos a la peña*, the organization she co-founded (15 Aug. 2014). Westwater was influenced by Ayres' life-long commitment to supporting human rights, and her work "filtered" through Westwater's solo performance.

In her performance in *Familias*, Westwater was not telling Ayres' particular story as much as sharing an embodied sense of her life and work. Westwater said in *Making of a Family* that she asked Soto to work with her to create a "passionate dance with a very strong female character who had a big, big heart and who sometimes got overwhelmed by that part and found a strength there that could take on all that she met." Ayres' personal involvement in the South Bronx seemed to act as a source for her solo in the way that it shared a kind of empowered sense of possibility, "to take on all that she met," with a depth of purpose. The work focused on creating a movement pattern and repeating it until it began to listen to its own pattern, unfolding to show its variations in the dancing, in Westwater's impulses and how she felt herself transcend, surrender,

move within and push through the solo. Her dancing showed visceral qualities, an emotional dignity in its transitions between different states and movements of vulnerability and strength. This impulse was part of the deep listening that Westwater had experienced in the South Bronx. Soto described that they made that solo just before the premiere, it seemed to pour from Westwater (email 19 Aug 2014).

Additionally, in the family of dancers on stage, Westwater was not only one character; she is a mother, daughter and sister. Similarly James Adlesic was a brother, uncle and son. These choices suggested that the artists were listening closely, and found that one “character” was not enough to impact this work about the South Bronx familial experience. Individuals held multiple roles and relationships in community and family.

Platforms of Engagement: Workshops as “inreach”

In addition to the intensive individual partnering work between the dancers and local families, the public was invited to attend workshops led by the dance company in the Hostos Center for the Arts & Culture dance studio.¹⁰ By opening up the project to the community, beyond only the family members, the public could also sense that the artists were making strong efforts to listen to the larger community and their issues.

In the workshop entitled “Mothers and teenage daughters: supporting ourselves and each other,” family members participated in a weight sharing practice with one person leaning into the lap of the other who cradled and supported them, and then each individual in the pair alternated roles. This exercise is a physical embodiment of listening, as participants listen to how each body would like to be supported and nurtured in that moment. The hand might rest along the back of the daughter’s head and then shift to the back of the neck as she moves her shoulder out of the way. The daughter might balance her hand on her mother’s hip and then move to her foot to better support her mother in a curled position. In this way, the listening is automatic and profound. In other words, one listens with the body to hear where the support is needed. Westwater said that she noticed it was significant for the mothers to realize they could feel the

support of their daughters, and for the daughters to experience that too. The mothers also felt like it was meaningful to have a close physical contact with their teenage daughters which they hadn't known since their daughters were much younger (Westwater email 23 Aug. 2014).

Similarly, in the "Father and Son workshop," Kathy Westwater remembers (twenty years later) how one of the parents said: "I don't touch my son anymore, since he was a child" (15 Aug. 2014). In our conversation, Westwater said how these comments led her to realize that the touch that is so common between parents and young children can become removed or distanced as everyone gets older in family. The workshops brought the love and tenderness that can become less tangible for family members back into the relationship to be re-experienced in a new way (Westwater 15 Aug. 2014).

In these studio workshops, the dancers were listening with their physical bodies in close proximity to the community participants to show different touch and contact movement patterns. They were using the body as a foundation for the work.

These workshops re-connected local families with each other and provided a platform for listening to the community as well as providing a place for them to listen to each other. The dance company members were able to draw from those elements in the final production. They allowed these experiences with community members to "filter through" their performances in ways that were not perhaps overtly stated yet still present. One example is during the cha-cha line at the conclusion of the birthday party section. Everyone on stage was touching at least one other person. Listening and responding to the moving body in front of them, engaging through this movement and one by one the touch then reaching the full community moving together on stage. Another example is the conclusion in the garden scene where a large group of dancers and family members hold hands and move in a large circle with each other, keeping in touch with the group. These moments in the work show a community involved with listening and building itself.

Listening: Partnering scenes in *Familias*

In the family sections, specific partnering movements in the final production showed physical listening and support. An example from the work: a moment of tension between the maternal figure (Patricia Dávila) and her granddaughter (Merceditas Mañago) broke when she leaned on her grandmother's chest, and the grandmother character stood there for her, waiting for her, and they breathed together. These bodies were as sturdy as the furniture, as stable, as resilient, as powerful. The rhythm of their breathing became like the movement score that held them in balance. This moment seemed to create, perhaps not a sense of total peace, but of two generations closely weathering a moment together, which seems another sort of peace. In other words, whatever the granddaughter was going through had been previously experienced by other generations. This understanding, this inter-generational strength was passed on through a physical experience of togetherness, of a physical touch that passed on formative material.

Listening: Group scene in *Familias*

The first scene of *Familias* reflected experiences of many immigrant families who band together to leave their home country only to slowly face its rupture upon arrival (Soto email 15 Aug. 2014). Here we see dancer Kathy Westwater start to walk away slowly towards something, until Niles Ford (father) lifts her up into a tender embrace. The family comes together again and Kathy hugs Patricia Dávila (mother) as Niles looks on. Kathy and Merceditas Mañago (her daughter) hug. Kathy tries to leave again but they hold her, hug her, but she leaves, and she is leaving them, but they pull her back to stay. Kathy wants Merceditas to come with her. The family doesn't want her to go, but Kathy does go. Merceditas tries to run after to join her. The family pulls her back again and again.

There was a continued sense of the pain in these leavings, feeling the break that seemed to only repeat. In the movements, the family members showed how they seem to almost feel who will try to leave next and to anticipate them. In other words, they seemed to listen organically to who was next getting ready to leave.

Back on stage: when James Adlesic (son) wants to go, they all pull him back. The father catches him, and brings him back to the mother. He pulls away to escape their embrace. The ironing board and the red chair are introduced and settled on the stage. James leaves. The mother holds the father. They hold each other. He reassures her. She holds him to her to stay. He says he's coming back. She implores him not to go. He looks over his shoulder, and still says he's coming back as he leaves. The mother is left alone. The red chair is lit. More furniture is lit behind the mother. There is a video image of small children running, of children running in circles. Then the stage is full of children running, playing, turning cartwheels, running around the mother in circles. With the presence of these children, we sense how her house used to be full of her own. She ushers them into the kitchen. She is alone, and losing it, turning around herself, sensing the echoes of her abandonment.

Here the artists and dancers have listened to a specific pain that can be often masked by families who want to celebrate how they survived challenges together, but not always the specific stories of how they might later unravel. Crossing a border, however, does not always end at this happy moment of achievement. The artists listened, and on stage, they revealed private sorrows of individual families as common experiences.

Not listening: *Familias*

In another scene with the family of dancers, a confrontation shows how the family is into the habit of not listening to each other. By addressing this absence, the artists show the cost it takes on the individuals in the family. This confrontation takes place during the preparations for a large birthday party.

The scene: dancer Kathy Westwater disagrees with her mother, and the father hears her and states: "I know, you are not arguing with your mother in my house. You know, you are not the daughter that I wanted." He verbally strikes out rather than listen to the disagreement. In a way his statement both states what is better left unsaid, even if felt, and his role in the

family means that he can be heard in a way that no matter what is said in return, he will not hear. In other words, he acts as the father and “the man” of the house. He is at liberty to say a hurtful remark and even when his daughter says to him, “I’m not the daughter that you wanted? You’re not the father that I wanted. You’re not the family...” he does not have to hear his daughter in the same way. Her reactions are not treated as seriously as his remarks in this family/gendered dynamic.

Continuing this scene: when the family members continue to demand attention from Kathy, she finally throws the plates on the table, pushes it back at them, and screams: “It’s my birthday!” We see how the family needs her to support them and their wishes. They do not wish to see her as an individual but more as the role she inhabits in the family and how they view and demand from her its related responsibilities. In this sense, family roles can be restrictive to the point where there is no space for individual growth. Kathy talks back, one by one, to each of them:

“Mother, he’s my boyfriend, if I want to invite him I will. It’s my life;”

To her daughter: “ please, please try to understand;”

To her brother: “You’re such a jerk. You only think of yourself, always;”

To her father: “How dare you criticize how I raise my daughter.”

Keeping Kathy in her role as caretaker means that they can also remain as they are, dependent on her, and not listening to her. In other words, rather than working to solve these challenges in the family, they are instead ignored. *Familias* shows how the family itself enables problems within it.

Near the end of the scene, her brother lifts her up, she says: “no, what are you doing...?” but he only sits her on a chair. The family gathers around, and her mother tells her: “*Nena* (baby), calm down.” Her challenges to them are then further shut down as they pose for a photograph and smile together to project family happiness. The theater audience laughs at this moment. The seriousness, and in turns, absurdity of the family dynamic is broken. The kind of sensitive awareness that took place in the workshops with weight sharing exercises that guide participants to physically support another family member is not present in this

family scene. Here it is understood that family disagreements are not to be recorded for public viewing in a photograph. In other words, the artists have listened well enough to show moments that are most often erased from public viewing, and how that kind of listening awareness can become hidden by habits of familial and gendered roles and relationships until its absence is no longer noticed.

Not listening: Press

The Chicago Reader reviewed and briskly dismissed the work-in-progress showing of *Familias* in May 1995 and stated:

...choreographer Merian Soto and sculptor Pepon Osorio haven't listened well enough, creatively enough, to the eight Bronx Latino families who provided the raw material of *Familias*: it offers little but clichés and often in a mimed form that underlines the stereotypes (Molzahn and Obejas).

Seven months later, after the December 1995 premiere, *The New York Times* dance critic Jennifer Dunning wrote:

But blessedly, the piece moves for the most part beyond what have now become clichés about ghetto life. At its best, *Familias* explodes with everyday life lived by individuals, often most tellingly portrayed by performers recruited from the community" (Dunning "Life and Art").

These reviews contrast sharply to the embodied listening that the artists and family members practiced in their development of the work. Obviously, professional dance and performance critics use a different lens to view and critique the work than most members of the South Bronx community, which might have perhaps been more interested to see their worlds represented on stage in certain ways. The critics judge what they see in one performance, and these writers found the work to include clichés of Bronx Latino families. They are not developing a relationship with the artist's process. They are writing for their newspaper and its readership, which may or may not include readers from the communities represented in *Familias*.

The Chicago Reader again:

the images and stories are frequently so obvious as to need no decoding whatsoever. In the opening section the five dancers clasp hands, crouch low, and scurry along with fearful looks. Clearly they're a family crossing some border, which requires absolute unity and trust among them – a closeness that persists and “explains” the violent trauma when the children grow up and want to leave the family. True, there's a visceral response when the mother grips her daughter and throws all her strength into holding her back, but the obviousness and straightforwardness of the story undercuts our emotional response (Molzahn and Obejas).

These reviewers want to experience more of an emotional journey, yet at the same time, they do not seem to have listened creatively to what it might mean for families to reveal the difficulties of separation after their sacrifices to successfully reach the States. In their remarks, they seem to already know the story, even though the work is drawn directly from Latino families who have first-hand experience.

On a related note, the three original artists I spoke to (Merián Soto, James Adlesic, Kathy Westwater) all stated that certainly *Familias* could have evolved into something stronger if they had had more opportunities to tour and develop the essence of the work. As dancer James Adlesic stated to me in conversation, “perhaps the piece itself was not groundbreaking but the process was.” Partly, this groundbreaking model to create the work made it challenging for reviewers. They were unsure how to listen to it, what lens to use.

One voice was missing in the critiques. Outside of BronxNet TV, there was no local Bronx based newspaper writing about the work. Local print media were not listening to Bronx-based artists creating work within their own community.

Transversal Loops and Rhythms

Other ways of listening to community participants and the dancers include the creation of sites for transversal loops and rhythms that make connections across the ways dancers and non-dancers move to create open systems of choreography.

Loops

On stage, small groups gather around photographs of loved ones, with candle-lamps, flowers and alcohol is poured in a moment of honoring. The family and community participants hug, hold hands, and move to stand in a circle together; these once separate islands now in a collective mourning. The stage lights fade and the lights from the candle-lamps shine into the darkness. Here these separate groups are remembering their loved ones in one concentrated location and not through single memorials with candles, flowers and cards in different streets around the borough. *Familias* created a community vigil of their family vigils. The audience applauds slowly and strongly. This is a community moment that brings the theater together.

This scene for the memorials was concerned with listening to and reflecting a community's need for public remembrance, as a created site where a family and a neighborhood can share their grief collectively and together find ways to survive the experience of its pain. The audience's respectful response signaled their acknowledgement and support. By designating a shared space for a family and community to gather, grieve and remember, memorials can serve to re-empower a community.

Young people are killed, often young men, young people of color, and young women, victims of crime, killed by other young people, by family, by police. These sudden and violent deaths cause suffering in a community. These vigils are a loop of community listening to each other and rebuilding itself in crisis. The replications in *Familias* offer a transversal move that brings this community support back to itself, and on an even larger public stage in the South Bronx, to provide an amplified and observed reflection.

Rhythms

To establish a living choreography between dancers and non-dancers, *Familias* also created sites for transversal rhythms – rhythms that move across ways of moving, opening both participants and dancers to the potentials of structured improvisation. For example, in the scene that

immediately precedes the memorial section, the late Niles Ford shared the stage with a group of six young people. The trust developed in this section supported the young people as they felt and find their timing and rhythm together. The structure of the scene developed moment-by-moment. You could feel its adjustments and jolts forward as the work progresses. The movement improvisation was often orchestrated by shouts from Niles. Using these choreographed vocal interruptions as guidelines, the teenagers responded and then recovered to reveal the movement material.

To begin: a group of young men enter the stage and mime like they are playing handball and basketball. Niles continuously runs, jogging in place. Young women enter and pretend to turn jump ropes for double-dutch. The young people wear t-shirts, plaid and striped shirts in dark colors, jeans, sneakers; they dress in regular clothing. We see long arms gracefully moving in the air as the teens pretend to hit a ball, take a shot at the hoop, we see the quick sharp percussive steps of the double-dutch jumpers as they move their feet deftly above pretend ropes swinging together rhythmically. We see movements that these bodies know well and are comfortable performing on the stage. They are so clearly articulated that we almost have to look twice to make sure that there are no actual ropes turning in the girl's hands.

Video projections of street scenes from the South Bronx appear against a screen. Niles runs below them. On the stage, this visually sets him apart, along with his movement. The images help to set and support the scene.

The first black and white image is of the "El," the elevated outdoor subway tracks above Bronx streets, a common sight in the borough. Images follow of street scenes that seem to be shot from a camera in a moving car, captured guerilla style, on the fly, direct from the street and into the theater. Images follow of young people at the basketball court, families walking along the street with children in strollers, police cars and vans (which historically in the Bronx does not always immediately equal safety), more families walking together on the street, another image of a policeman getting out of his patrol car as another police car pulls up. These images flow together to reveal how moments of family togetherness and visible police presence are part of everyday life in the borough.

On stage, we see Niles dancing on his heels with his hands spiraling open, African-inspired movements, we see him miming shoveling with his arms while balancing on his heels. We see him moving his feet forward and backward pushing off his heels and holding his hands together with the edges of palms meeting like there is a small book balanced between them. He repeats these movements with precision before returning to running in place. The complexity and detail in his movement patterns contrast with the generalized wash of large movements made by the young people as they play games together on the stage. Niles pushes himself off the floor with his hands, his whole body in air before landing back on his feet. He jumps high into the air, and then pauses to collect this energy. He returns to jogging. Later he walks forward pretending to dribble a basketball around his legs and shoots into the hoop, watching to see where the ball lands. His blending of the vernacular with more dance-like movements creates a physical bridge with the young people and their movements.

On stage, Niles yells and a young man playing basketball falls. Niles walks in a half-circle, his face registering the loss. The video of street images does not stop. The young people gather around to support the teen and walk with him. Niles crouches and with his arms open seems to beckons the fallen young man: come, come. An outline of a body (a design projected in lights like those tracings made by police around a dead body) appears on the floor. The young man motions that he is okay. In the streets of the South Bronx, risk can be nearby and so can the community that shares the burden of possible violence and the joy of basketball games. The artists show how these contrasts co-exist.

The young people move from the group to stand separately in a line facing the audience. The six of them stand and strike different poses, or “attitudes.” Soto described that the young people were free to create this material as they wanted (Soto email 15 Aug 2014). One young man pushes up his shirtsleeves, a young woman puts her hands on her hip and lets you know that she is in the room before turning away with a flip of her wrist, a young man stands with his arms folded, a woman rubs her eyes and then pushes the palm of her hand into the air, stomps her foot and seems fed up with the whole situation, another teenage man gestures out to the audience. They are each following their own timing, they each have their own physical “voice.” They

return and blend back into playing as a group, throwing dice or shooting crap together. Here, there is a foregrounding and backgrounding of the individual. Teens are seen as distinct and then they seemingly “disappear” back into their own group.

In the 1996 documentary film *Making of a Family*, Niles Fords said:

My jogging [in the piece] is like a synopsis of what men go through in their life to survive in a city. Ducking things, obstacles, like gangs, drive by shootings, and how tiring it is to do the right thing. Some of us don't make it. We all start with same energy, but some of us don't make it. It's a message to let people know that its not because young people are just messing up because they want to. Life is hard.

Familias offered a place to explore these specific generational stories. It allowed others to listen to this generation's pain, their worries about possible violence and uncertainties about their future.

In the performance, behind the young people, large venetian blinds open on the raised stage behind the set to show community participants filing by. We see them walk, stop in profile, we see a flash of light as if from a camera, they turn to face the audience and we see a flash of light as if from a camera. Each man files by in regular order, there is no joking or casual movement. The scene suggests bookings at a police station. This suggestion shows again the proximity of police in the daily life of the South Bronx. While shootings might not be prevented, punishment can happen. Whether arrests are later found to be accurate or not, those detained will still be made to consider the rigidity of the police and court system.

Returning to the video collage, there are images of a group of kids playing on the basketball court, an image of the housing projects as their height peers out far above the surrounding city buildings, ribbons of people moving through the streets and waiting to cross the boulevard. Other images of empty streets follow, with broken windows of abandoned buildings, then brownstone buildings lined up in a silent row, shuttered gates over entrances to local businesses painted with graffiti tags, a close up of a family with two strollers crossing the street. In the video, the streets themselves feel like works of art and the images feel like direct documentation. In this collage, the video artist Irene Sosa showed multiple street scenes that show some of the diversity in the

South Bronx and how, for example, it's not all abandoned buildings devoid of habitation. The video blurs the distinctions between these different locations, and supports this scene with Niles and the young people new to the stage.

Returning to the piece: Niles is dancing. He is dressed all in white, he jumps in the air, performs barrel turns until his body seems to remain held in the air and following the suspended curve of each turn, he pushes off from his toes into strong straddle jumps in air. There is something otherworldly about his presence. He is in connection with the others in this neighborhood scene, full of life and yet somehow beyond life. He is separated and also seems to be part of its story, and reaches to the young people from a place of isolation and observation. As Niles states in *Making of a Family*, he is “the spirit, the affectation of that society pressure.”

In this scene, Niles was the elder. He showed his knowledge and experiences to the teenagers and the audiences through his dancing, his pauses to reveal the grief, his recovery, the exhaustion and his ability find ways to continue moving. Niles also seemed to understand their experiences and, on behalf of them or because of their presence close to him on stage, he expressed what the teens might not be able to access or share. His listening to their pain came from an embodied place of understanding.

As a performer, Niles' generous, concentrated vitality pulled the viewers attention. His presence made it almost possible to disregard the young people on stage. He was lit strongly throughout the work and we also see how experienced he was as a performer, how much he knew how to express the energy of his emotionality and physicality on stage. It also seemed like there was something at stake for him in this performance. He was not just dancing “choreographed moves.” From his statement in the documentary, it seemed like he was there as a storyteller for others; he held their stories close enough to be able to share them publicly. They were stories that he heard and that he wanted tell, these signals of understanding, of death and the pause in life for each death, and survival.

On stage, another young man is shot, he falls, another chalk outline is projected onto the floor. Niles is bent over double. Another life is taken. His hands cradle the back of his head. His face is

heartbroken. The five young people gather around to support the teenager who fell. They try to lift him to help him to stand. Niles is kneeling low, motioning to welcome someone who is not coming back. The group support the young man offstage, we hear a woman scream. Niles stands up, exhausted, and returns to jogging, carrying the heartbreak.

The six young people on stage often seem focused closely around each other and their performance tasks. Their group collaboration becomes more physical and sensorial as the young people group together to hold up the fallen young men, supporting each other and sensing each other's movements as they collectively walk around the stage. Their efforts to support each other echo some of the earlier moments when the dancers gathered together as a family to carry each other. Here the teens hold the young man's shoulders and upper body up as he leans into them. When he begins to walk on his own away from their support, they keep their hands on his arm, his back, guiding and walking with him. As the teens walk around the stage together, Niles' solo presence seems to help center and re-focus the scene.

On stage, the young people return together, very somber. They look behind themselves, crouching, walking and looking over their shoulders for whatever danger might come next. Another teenager cowers low to the ground, and Niles leaps into the air. Niles remains moving continuously, following one dance impulse into another. Slowly all of the young people spread out on the stage and start to jog in place, joining Niles.

This group running together seems to change the weight of body mass and shapes on stage. Together they offer their own collective rhythm and heft in the choreographic material of this scene. They are not in competition with each other. They run together and as individuals to try to keep up with something, to outrun it, or after something that they never quite reach.

What inspired or caused them to run? Running in place was a choice, but it was also not a choice; what did it mean to run but then only in place? How can change happen if someone is kept and keeps themselves in one place? There was a lot of energy in that moment; was it about change, or to show an energetic momentum without an engaged possibility of direction? They seemed to jog together because they could. It was a way to keep moving.

But it's hard to run in place, to exert that energy and go nowhere. One teenager nearly falls as he runs; his fall and quick recovery show that he is used to movement that can take him somewhere else. These young people that run near Niles are not slender dance bodies, they are dense and present and fully running, sometimes with their heads down, arms pumping air. Their jogging takes up space in this movement pattern, they are not quickly switching into another movement, they have the opportunity to fill their running with their full intention of their weight dropping into the floor to push off into continuing to run. As they run, it is possible to see the images of body tracings still on the floor. They run despite and with this company of reminders of the dead.

On stage Niles shouts, the young people kneel and take cover, Niles lies flat on his back. The lights go out on the stage, and he is alone in the spotlight. Niles then arches his back to balance on his feet and top of his head, with his arms extended towards the audience. The energy stops moving for a moment. Niles and the body tracings are visible in the light. Other community and family participants begin to enter the space. They help him to stand. He covers his face with his hands as they pull him up. A mural in memory of Willie is shown on the back wall. We move to the scene of the community memorials.

This flow between indoor and outdoor moments in this piece shows the porousness of lives in the borough, how private moments relate to pressures faced by the larger community, and also the permeable qualities of this performance project. *Familias* covered more than only one family's drama; it expanded to translate a variety of situations that related to the family participants on stage and the communities in the audience.

The scene found its rhythms in its collage of movement patterns and content, where both the soloist Niles Ford and the group of six teenagers were in each other's presence without showing their direct connection. Their relationship was conceptual. It was as if Niles and the teens had heard each other shouting and crying even before they were on stage together. They were visions in each other's minds. They had listened to their community, they knew of these difficult experiences and were ready to reveal them on stage to share what they knew about the pain and about the recovery. To honor all those who had died early, to all who had lost friends and family

members on the streets. To also acknowledge the comfort and support that helps each other through crisis, and the everyday.

HOW IS *FAMILIAS* UNDERSTOOD, AND HOW IS IT MISUNDERSTOOD?

Familias was understood by artists, family and community members as a site of possible healing and transformation; as a project which treated the South Bronx as a home and not a stereotype; as a provocation on a national level to include and empower Latino families and artists in creative process and presentation.

Familias was understood and misunderstood by the press in multiple ways: as a contemporary arts project with enough community involvement as to make it nearly impossible to review; as an American story; or more precisely a common story of first-generation American families, and; as a sure window into a specifically Latino landscape.

Familias is understood now as a contributing author to the non-profit organization Pepatián, and Pepatián understands *Familias* as foundational inspiration for its ongoing legacy of impact in the South Bronx (see appendix 1: Artist bios and appendix 2: *Familias* program).

Artistic Practice: *Familias* as site of empowered healing and transformation

Familias was understood and defined by Soto and Osorio as a “tribute to the struggle and resourcefulness of a community overcoming poverty, racism and violence. Through the work we wanted to counter the negative stereotyping of the Bronx in the media” (Soto 1999: 1).

In this statement, Soto spoke to how the South Bronx was publicly understood more as a stereotype than an actual home. As previously noted, *The Chicago Reader* and *The New York Times* also made references to stereotypes and clichés that they found in the work, showing the pervasive depths of these terms.

In contrast, for the artists, the South Bronx was understood as a conceptual site of empowerment. Osorio stated: “The South Bronx was where the source was. The Bronx had to be there. It was the re-affirmation of my existence” (*Portraits 2010*).

Particularly in *Familias*, Osorio also stated how participants and audiences can “see their lives onstage and reflect to see how they can contribute. We are bringing an answer that is different, that is other than what we have been told by the media for years” (*The Making of a Family 1996*). Soto said that it was “important who we make it for and with...and to let people who have a voice in this work to have ownership of it” (*The Making of a Family 1996*).

It seems for every time the press shouted at the work: cliché, artists and participants could reply: my experiences, my choices. The artists and local participants were endeavoring to show moments from their lives. In fact a few of the teen participants mentioned in *The Making of a Family* how “realistic” the work was to their lives at home, and how they were also participating to show that, as another teen said, “good things can also happen in the Bronx, that its not only the bad things.” This mention of realism seemed to show an understanding that the work was closely tailored to their home lives, and for the community participants, they didn’t have to stretch into “acting.” As the participants mentioned in *The Making of a Family*, they felt that they could be themselves on stage. They understood the work to be an art project that was very tied to the world they knew well. The process of creating *Familias* offered accessibility in the creation of a performing arts project crafted by established artists, and their voices were part of its development to show the best of the community as well as its challenges. For the Bronx, this effort to show a more balanced perspective could also be understood to support healing and transformation of negative clichés held by those often from outside the borough.

Dancer James Adlesic told me that he found that Soto was interested in the healing potential of the body and what that could mean in the work. She would ask: “when you ‘re dancing, even in a mode, how does that heal your body in that specific rehearsal? Merián was interested in the emotional component and psychological concept to ultimately heal the trauma from the past.” In a way, *Familias* was part of this healing on a community level, and offered a process of empowerment to practice this transformation. As an example, one of the mothers interviewed in *The Making of a Family* stated that she wanted her children to participate so “that they can see that there are other things in life other than problems. I want to break the cycle of abuse in my family. Constructive, positive things like theater is a good way to start.”

For another of the dancers, Kathy Westwater, *Familias* provided a place for her to break through a particular gendered stereotype. In the documentary film, Westwater stated that she sought to delve so deeply into the stereotypes of woman-as-care-taker until it “shattered and fell,” and the care-taking came from a real source of strength, and not because it is expected from a woman (*The Making of a Family 1996*). Westwater’s articulation of the development of her character gave a perspective on inner strength from the inside out. On stage, in the section near the end of the piece entitled “Sunday Morning,” Westwater calmly lifts moments of tension, not battling to make her point, but breaking in between her mother and daughter gently, then picking them both up to carry their weight for a moment. Later she also breaks apart the struggle between her brother and father. She lifts her mother and daughter again separately. She helps to bring support and peace into the house out of her own volition, not because of another’s demands. *Familias* gave her a site to practice this nuanced, personal work and blast through limitations to reveal an inner strength and insights that serve the entire community on stage. This perspective was partly influenced by her connection with the activist and survivor Nieves Ayres as well as how her own personal family dynamics in addition to rehearsals and workshop experiences with community members that filtered through in her performances.

Soto offered ways to find and re-discover this sense of empowerment in their bodies. In another instance, in the final garden scene, the family participants are supported to fall. In other words, they are allowed to fall, not in a situation of failure or success, but allowed to fall, softly and with support. In every fall there is also a possible and supported recovery to standing.

Familias: Garden Scene

Familias concludes with the artists and all the local participants in a community garden. We arrive at this scene after Merceditas leaves home. All of the scenes following her departure take place in the urban world of the South Bronx. From the section with Niles Ford and the teenagers that then blurs into the community memorial scene, to the duet between Sandra Maria Esteves and a local choir of young women. As a concluding site for the work, the garden is a well-chosen

place of growth, and a place of empowerment as it is often local residents who create these community gardens by clearing out land from abandoned lots. The inclusion of a community garden is its own site of transformation.

On stage, this section begins with small groups of dancers and family participants working together in a trust exercise of being guided into a fall, and then being helped back up to standing. In this scene, the dancers do not interact with each other in specific family constellations, and the sense of playing different characters is dissipated. Here, all the dancers and family members are dancing, listening, speaking and supporting each other.

Among the several groups of partners, one is comprised of three women, dancers Kathy Westwater and Merceditas Mañago, and a family member. Merceditas falls and turns as she engages with the floor. It seems as if the floor is a place of comfort that she relates to as a partner. In her relationship to the floor, its smoothness is foregrounded, its “knowness” is highlighted.

The family participant falls into her feet, into the ground. Kathy and Merceditas carry her trajectory as it seems to plummet. The floor catches her. They help her to find herself back up to standing. The floor regains its distance. For the family participant, the fall seems more of a pitch into the unknown, and the other dancers seem more fully present in helping this fall to happen with support, and then they are there again to raise her up as there is more effort for her to move from the floor all the long way back to standing upright again. In this partnering relationship, the floor seems like a difficult magnet; once engaged, it's hard to break away from.

There is the physical confidence of the dancers whose bodies are flexible; when they fall, they help themselves to fall and when they are stand, they also help themselves to return to standing. Kathy folds into the floor, with her feet softly falling inwards to each other. The floor seems like a welcoming hammock. She raises herself up with hands only touching her back. Merceditas then eases herself again into the floor, where she lingers, making the floor seem like a place of warmth and ease.

In the circle of three women, they each stand and remain ready for the next person to begin their fall towards the floor. It happens again and again, each one of them physically and energetically hinting that they will go next, then being guided towards the floor and standing again, until all come together into a hug. They hold hands and spin in circles. Then there is a slow filtering out to participate with everyone on stage.

Another duet happening at the same time as this trio includes dancer James Adlesic and family participant Tonito Arroyo. James falls, arching his back to meet the floor, Tonito supports him back up to stand. James supports Tonito to the ground, the floor like a sturdy raft, James leaving his hand on Tonito's chest. Both stand and embrace, then turn underneath each other and let their hands go before coming together. James speeds up the pace and Tonito moves around him. The other pairings of duets and trios with dance and family members also start to hold hands and turn in quick circles. James then lets go of all contact to spin on his feet with his arms outstretched, this freedom, contained and the room full of it. The room follows his lead and all move from their partners to connect with everyone on stage.

These six groupings of trios and duets then hold hands and move in a large circle, coming together into the center and moving back out to re-form the circle, running with their legs moving side-to-side and their heads down. They let go and spin out into the space. They come together again in the center, then hold hands and turn in a great circle, and let go again. There are partners holding hands to dance together. Kathy spins on the ground and Tonito lifts to carry her sitting on his shoulder. Other lifts and turns are happening between the other couples. Lights reveal the stage with suddenly many large containers full of plants. Children are included and playing in the downstage corner. There are family portraits shown on the wings. The space is full of *Familias*.

This scene is worth noting in detail because it concludes the work with everyone either as participants and/or witnesses. Audiences can see the dedication of the performers who attended rehearsals to make the work happen in, for and about the community in their borough. There were strong experiences of joy and connection evident between the participants and the

audience's reaction to this concluding scene. The work speaks to the transformative effects of inter-connection and possibilities of collective positivity.

Bronx Residents & Artists' Understanding of *Familias*

Familias invigorated the imaginary as the project advocated for artists and community members to reclaim ground from only an economic dialogue and negative perceptions to bring other values—like creativity, inclusiveness—further into the public realm. *Familias* created platforms for new experiences with creative expressions and supported further dialogue among participants about their lives and dreams. One teen participant understood the project as something beneficial both individually and collectively. She became involved as she said in *The Making of a Family* to “do something new, something exciting. It’s a good experience for our future, so that we can do something better.”

Local arts leaders like Bill Aguado and Hostos Director Wally Edgecombe understood the need to create and incubate local works like *Familias* to further publicly support experiences of their Bronx community and help highlight their participation in the national cultures. Bill Aguado, then—Executive Director of the Bronx Council on the Arts, referenced the creation of *Familias* when he said: “It’s important that Pepon Osorio and the Hostos Center continue to produce works about the Latino experience. We’re as American as apple pie and rice and beans” (Wachter). In pairing this statement with the article in *El Diario/La Prensa*, both seem to speak to the separation that many residents of the South Bronx felt towards mainstream American cultures and to the need for greater inclusion of Latino experiences.

Familias also related to local economies by supporting participating family and community members. The artists paid stipends (approximate sum total \$10,000) to the local participants and in addition, one family member worked with Pepón Osorio as his assistant and another was paid to cook and feed everyone at group rehearsals. Additionally, in some small but significant ways, *Familias* offered youth and children, who often had had limited access to arts education in public schools, accessibility to be part of creating a contemporary performing arts project. *Familias* and

by extension its funders helped to fill some gaps in the community.

Familias also revealed other gaps between the artists understanding of their work and others. Osorio stated that as “our work became more culturally specific... and the more specific we got with our work, the more abstract it become for outsiders of our culture. For friends and contemporaries who were Latino and/or from Puerto Rico, they understood that we were experimenting with our own reaffirmation” (Osorio, *Portraits*). In other words, while the artists understood that they were making work that spoke to and from a community, they also were crafting and developing that work into multi-disciplinary, experimental, contemporary – not just folk art – performing arts projects that related to current issues. As Osorio stated: “We were never our own audience. We were always on the side of the makers” (Osorio, *Portraits*). And in that making of new works, collaborating video artist Irene Sosa stated to me in conversation that Osorio and Soto “never dumbed down their work, never compromised on their integrity as artists.” They were inventing hybrids that spoke directly to their experiences.

Familias was part of that experimentation and through its intensive creative process and transversal relationships between local participants and dance members, *Familias* built up its own internal knowledge that helped re-empower the creative strengths of the South Bronx. As local family member, Tonito Arroyo stated in *The Making of a Family*: “It seems like they want to knock us down, us Latino people in the Bronx. There are lots of beautiful people who have struggled and really made it...and we don’t get credit for it.” *Familias* helped bring this strength to surface and develop publicly and between the performers. In the interview with dancer Merceditas Mañago in *The Making of a Family*, she said: “It’s very admirable, people here - what they’ve gone through and what they have to deal with – makes them so strong.” Collaborating artists experienced the strength of Bronx residents and could bring this into their performances and filter into their lives. *Familias* endeavored to make the positive transversality of its process felt by all involved in its creation and also those witnessing its final productions on the Hostos stage.

***Familias* Press: Transversal Limitations**

In a review entitled “Art Therapy,” *The Chicago Reader* understood *Familias* as being nearly impossible to review because of its community references in an artistic context.

In particular the review stated:

On the one hand, it presents itself as art – it’s produced by Dance Center, it invites arts critics to performances. But on the other, it’s a social service with a political sensibility, inviting families from “the community” to contribute. And in a way, each half protects the other from criticism. If the piece falls artistically, it can be rescued by its intention, its mission – it seems almost obscene to apply artistic criteria to a work so qualified by its non-artistic origins. And if it fails as social work, it’s because it’s nontraditional, artistic - its effects aren’t measurable by conventional standards (Molzahn and Obejas).

Here the art critics keenly understand that *Familias* was beyond the usual kind of performance they review. In other words, the community that the artists were endeavoring to build on stage was not met with a similar understanding by community-minded art critics. Their criticism seemed to be directed towards the overall relation of art and community, as well as a comment on the specific community involved. After all, what art is not in some way shaped by a community? Their comments seemed to suggest that even if the artists had created a project that was completely “art-for-art’s-sake,” it probably would have “come off as disingenuous” to these reviewers because it was still from the South Bronx (Molzahn and Obejas). It might easily continue to be seen as originating from “a community.”

In contrast, the review of the premiere in *El Diario/La Prensa* seemed to have understood the same complexity in the work and stated, “the content of this performance cannot be analyzed in the traditional manner we are accustomed to when we go to see a theatrical production. *Familias* is a totality” (*El Diario*). In other words, whereas the art critics at *The Chicago Reader* found that including the art and the community aspects of the work made it impossible to review as art, the writers at *El Diario/La Prensa* found this relationship offered a total experience. Echoing Osorio’s artistic statement, *Familias* also seemed to “hold up a monumental mirror” to a wide community and showed how its’ complex articulation of multiple voices was received differently by art critics writing for their readerships in different cities, in different languages.

The extensive review in *The Chicago Reader* began: “For several years now funders have been handing out money to dance and other arts groups that actively involved ‘the community’ in ‘the process’”(Molzahn and Obejas). Using economics as a hook, *The Chicago Reader* review aligned Soto and Osorio’s *Familias* with other strong artists who worked with the Chicago community in the mid-90s. This alignment was created to demean their community-based arts practice in performance as less valuable on the artistic national landscape. Placing community and process in quotation marks also seemed to frame their understanding of these terms as ways in which artists seemed to “work the system” to get funding.

Securing a number of grants from significant cultural foundations, in addition to many other government and corporate sources, had raised *Familias* visibility. As Soto stated in 1995, the National Endowment for the Arts grants were crucial to her work: "No one else in New York City is supporting the work of Latino dance and performing artists doing innovative work," she said. "Even the Latino art institutions aren't supporting it" (Wachter). Where the funders seemed to understand and support the project’s innovative reach on the national and local landscape, these reviewers remained skeptical.

In this review, *The Chicago Reader* seemed to address something other than an individual reader. The article continued: “The underlying assumption is that with all the poverty, ignorance and just plain suffering in our country we can’t afford the merely beautiful. If art’s going to be funded, it must serve some social and political purpose” (Molzahn and Obejas). In a way, the reviewers understood that their readership would be more interested in thinking of the work as sub-par with a possible misuse of funds. In receiving, as described by the review “hand outs,” the article suggested that the project was unworthy of national funding. They decided that taxpayers in the South Bronx as well as those in Chicago, along with others in the country, were somehow duped into supporting *Familias*. For the artists, receiving this kind of support and funding was understood as a signal that there was national interest in hearing from Latino voices. Even in the rebuttal to the published response to their review from the artists, one of the reviewers wrote: “Our review identified *Familias* as typical of a trend but by no means singled it out as the "season's worst offender" (Molzahn and Obejas). That backhanded acknowledgement suggests

that the writers understood their review to have included *Familias* into a larger point against the national funding system and its selection of artistic projects.

Referring to the artists as “a small group from New York headed by a Puerto Rican husband-and-wife team” suggests, in some polite way, that there was a lack of artistic professionalism. By the mid-90s, when this review referred to their background as “husband-and-wife team,” Osorio had received significant fellowships and awards (New York Foundation for the Arts, New York Dance and Performance Bessie Award, National Endowment of the Arts Sculpture Fellowship, Rockefeller Foundation, etc) with critically acclaimed solo works in individual exhibitions in New York, Philadelphia, Connecticut, Ohio. Merián Soto was actively involved in supporting and promoting new Latino dance and performance expressions, often in collaboration with Manhattan’s Dance Theater Workshop, in addition to the substantial annual multi-disciplinary performing artist series *Rompeforma: Maratón de Baile, Performance & Visuales*, the international Latino artists’ festival in Puerto Rico which Soto co-directed with Viveca Vazquez (1989-1996). Soto was the recipient of several Choreographers Fellowships from the National Endowment for the Arts, an Artist Fellowship from New York Foundation for the Arts and had received numerous project grants from institutions such as the Rockefeller Foundation, The Lila Wallace Arts Partners Program, among others. Both artists were invested in creating platforms for other Latino artists to share their work, as well as creating contemporary, experimental work that spoke to the hybrid of Caribbean and Bronx/New York City cultures. Whereas *The Chicago Reader* understood the artists as a team of individuals, Soto and Osorio understood their envisioning and creative work as foundational, community-driven, something that could support other Latino artists.

In response, Osorio and Soto, along with Kate Ramsey, the Managing Director of Pepatían, wrote the following letter (the participating host venue does not seem to have publicly replied to the criticism):

We write not to defend a piece which speaks for itself, but to protest the ways in which Molzahn and Obejas have distorted *Familias* in the service of a broader attack on art which engages community in the process of its creation.

There is a Puerto Rican saying that goes “El pillo juzga por su condicion” – the thief judges by his own condition. Molzahn and Obejas’s review of *Familias*

would be suspect on the grounds of its internal contradiction and misrepresentation alone. These critics complain that *Familias* is both unclear and too straightforward; that it 'tends to underscore the most tragic images of Latinos,' yet is also too idealized and hopeful. They charge that the piece neglects the reality of single motherhood in the Latino community when two sections of *Familias* are devoted precisely to that experience.

Such inconsistency and error are by no means the only signs that Molzahn and Obejas are pursuing an underlying agenda at the expense of an accurate and constructive review of the work. Much like Arlene Croce's polemic in the *New Yorker* against what she calls "victim art," Molzahn and Obejas have used the space of their review of *Familias* to launch a defensive attack against art that, as they say, "actively involve[s] 'the community' in 'the process.'" Characterizing such work as "art therapy," they trivialize recent productions by Bill T. Jones, Liz Lerman, Donald Byrd, and Jane Comfort, and single out Pepatián's *Familias* as the season's worst offender. We find it significant that Molzahn and Obejas have chosen to make their case against community-based art on the back of *Familias*, a work that speaks to Latino experience. Their disrespect is palpable and pervasive. They characterize our organization as "a small group from New York headed by a Puerto Rican husband-and-wife team"; charge that we don't know the Latino community; and insinuate that in creating *Familias* we have been motivated by funding opportunism.

After over a decade of creating, presenting, and supporting art that emerges from and speaks to Latino experience, we find such suggestions to be as laughable as they are offensive. What might be considered truly cynical is the way that Molzahn and Obejas have used the critical space of their column to polemicize against art that doesn't attempt to divorce itself from social contexts and relevance. Molzahn and Obejas's art-for-art's sake rhetoric never seems more derivative or empty than when, following Croce's lead, they charge that *Familias* renders itself critically unassailable by its "nonartistic origins." Would Molzahn and Obejas really want to disqualify contemporary family and community life, personal history, and human experience in general from the realm of potential 'artistic origins'? (Soto, Ramsey and Osorio "Letter").

The article's reference to Arlene Croce's polemic refers to a review written about choreographer Bill T. Jones work *Still/Here* which was at the center of a national debate of "victim art" during the AIDS crisis in 1994 (Croce 1994: 54).

Interlude: Donald Byrd, *The Beast* (1996)

The negative review of *Familias* in *The Chicago Reader* included choreographers Donald Byrd, Jane Comfort, Bill T. Jones and Liz Lerman as part of a growing trend in the mid-1990s art world to include “the community” in “the process” and stated how “if art’s going to be funded, it must serve some social and often political purpose” (Molzahn and Obejas). This description implies that the artists are making work in an effort to gain money from funders, rather than national funders and presenters supporting their work for the significance of its artistic content.

In thinking about *Familias* in comparison to Jane Comfort’s *S/He*, Bill T. Jones *Still/Here* Liz Lerman’s work with her multigenerational dance company, and Donald Byrd’s *The Beast*, there are significant differences that help to clarify how *Familias* can be further situated within this group of artists and ways of working.

Jane Comfort *S/He* (1995) uses “gender and race reversals to take a new look at current events and social attitudes in America” (Comfort, “Repertory”). The work integrates text and movement. *Familias* focuses on the Latino experience and works with a multi-ethnic group of professional dancers, but does not reverse distinct roles along cultural and/or gender divisions. While the dancers act in some parts of the work and the text of poet Sandra Maria Esteves is included along with a song in one scene, *Familias* is predominantly movement based and more focused on incorporating Osorio’s visual gestures and set.

Liz Lerman’s company, Dance Exchange, believes that “every body can and should dance” (Traiger, “Writer”). This inclusive perspective is built right into the company with contemporary performers whose ages span six decades. Soto and Osorio are also interested in inclusivity of diverse physical abilities and *Familias* also incorporated a range of ages in the project. The mission of Dance Exchange is to work with the body and movement across disciplines to create community through dance (Lerman, “About: Mission”). *Familias* also featured work across disciplines with its central collaborations between dance and visual arts, including video material by Irene Sosa and Osorio’s material gestures, and live music by composer Carl Royce. The work

also combined trained and untrained dancers and bodies to break through ideas of “high- and low-art.” *Familias* is about creating community and it’s also about theatricalized staging.

Bill T. Jones’s *Still/Here* was a significant moment in the “culture wars” of the 1990s. To summarize this public discussion briefly: this work concerns survival in the face of life-threatening illnesses. At this time, Bill T. Jones was publicly known, via a leak from a gay magazine, to be HIV+. In the mid-1990s, HIV+ was considered more life threatening than treatable. A review by Arlene Croce, dance critic for *The New Yorker*, defined the work mostly as an “AIDS epic” about dying (Daly 2002: 2), and for that reason, refused to see it. Her “review” was about her reaction to the ideas supporting the work. *Still/Here*, as feminist and cultural critic Ann Daly said, “ became a rallying cry of neoconservatives against avant-garde artists, who see art as a site for social and political dialogue, if not change” (Daly 2002: 61).

To create *Still/Here* (1994), Bill T. Jones conducted workshops and interviews with terminally ill people across the country in a lengthy (and highly visible, with a Bill Moyers PBS special) creative process. He then “housed” the movement gestures of his workshop and interview participants in his body and later reworked and abstracted technically challenging dances from this material for his company. In *Still/Here*, participants were incorporated into the work via video projections of their interviews talking about their battles with illness. The interviewee said his first name, and Jones said the participant’s last name. These interviews were also used as soundscape for the choreography. Jones was the central bridge between the participants, his dance company and the stage. His dancers were not part of the research. He was also recovering from the loss of his lover, Arnie Zane and had recently found out his own HIV+ status. Perhaps including his company would have diluted the experience he needed for himself.

In contrast, *Familias* strove to ease some of the creative hierarchies by pairing dance company members directly with family participants. Their gathering of material was through a range of relationships beyond themselves as the lead artists, and those relationships were brought onto the public stage. Soto and Osorio gave all the participants opportunities to have new experiences with the project by getting to know each other in its creative process. With *Familias*, Soto and

Osorio's collaboration as well as their artistic collaborations with the dancers, video artist, and composer created a different web of "inreach" and relationships for the work.

To think through the reception of *Still/Here*, Ariel Nereson's illuminating "Embodying the Undiscussable: Documentary Methodology in Bill T. Jones's *Still/Here* and the Culture Wars" proposes thinking about *Still/Here* as a contemporary, documentary theater piece. Nereson argues that this two-part process of theorizing allows an exploration of the process of collecting of materials (and the materials themselves) and also reveals how they are then reconfigured for stage. This analysis helps slow down some of Arlene Croce's criticisms of *Still/Here* as "victim art." For example, Nereson states that the audio-visual interviews of the participants that are projected provide some presence in their own bodies onstage. This critical presence also creates relationships with the dancers bodies and the projections. Their presence is engaged. By including the participants in some way in the work, she argues, this lends authenticity to Jones's process, and by keeping their presence available, it diminishes their possible fetishization (Nereson 300). Croce missed seeing these vital choices that the artist made to construct the work by not viewing the performance herself. In fact, Nereson charges that Croce created a double standard and,

in theory, commits the crime of which she accuses Jones – putting oneself beyond criticism. Her inability to view 'victim art', in her opinion, is the fault of the victims who cannot avoid presenting themselves as such, rather than a fault in her own critical perception, an acknowledgement of the types of bodies she prefers to view (Nereson 300)

Similar to Molzahn and Obejas' underinformed, decontextualized press review of *Familias* for *The Chicago Reader*, here is another example of the complicated relationship for socially engaged, community-based artists' and the critical interpreters of their efforts.

Donald Byrd's *The Beast* premiered one year after the completion of *Familias* and was created as a direct result of his 1995 *The Minstrel Show*, a controversial dance that explored racial stereotypes and earned a Bessie Award in 1992 (Martini). Byrd's method of generating material over three years of research drew me to look at *The Beast*. The work also received a dance review of the project that seemed to directly answer back to Molzahn and Obejas' review of *Familias* and also spoke to the themes presented in Arlene Croce's review of *Still/Here*.

As a result of *The Minstrel Show*, Byrd wanted to explore the origins of violence, and whether “is it learned in the streets and taken into the home or learned in the home and taken into the streets?” (Martini). His next work *The Beast* focused on domestic violence and was originally co-commissioned by Dance Umbrella in Austin, TX, and the University of Washington’s World Series in Seattle, WA. The base for the work’s creation was in Austin. As a non-profit, Dance Umbrella’s mission is to share the power, culture and history of dance with a broad and diverse audience, and it brings this mission to the entire community (Dance Umbrella). This organization fully supported Byrd’s project. The staff built the extensive connections necessary to ground the work with local law enforcement agencies, the District Attorney’s office, a center for battered women, and a rape crisis center.

In addition to Byrd’s three years of fieldwork within this local network, members of his 12-member dance company, to a lesser extent, also participated in the work’s research by meeting and talking with survivors of violence and counselors. These participants however are not present in the work, through video or in performance. The work was also not about domestic violence in Austin. In his research, Byrd was not mining movements from the community of survivors, their support system or abusers, but looking for conversations with people closely involved in domestic violence that he could use with his highly trained dancers (Martini).

Artistically, Donald Byrd brought several frames to the creation of *The Beast*. His long association with legendary choreographer Alvin Ailey and his school during the 1980s and 1990s (DeFrantz 2004: 133) meant that Byrd’s work carries the Ailey legacy with abstracted movements and social commentary that showcase the technical abilities of his dancers. Byrd’s dancers are particularly known for their daring speed and near acrobatic adeptness (Gottschild 2003: 303).

In this work, Byrd was also influenced by Bertolt Brecht, and he used Brechtian theatrical devices of montage like fragmentation, simplified scenic elements with a selective realism in costuming and props, as well as announcements by the dancers who summarize the actions as they occur (Byrd, *Spectrumdance.org*). These theatrical devices kept the audience aware of the

work's staged presentation, and "in Byrd's opinion, this distancing from the events keeps the piece from being 'victim art' (Martini).

In the case of Jones, Nereson argues that his inclusion of the participants via technology does not make them victims, and here it is the exclusion of the community members that does not make them victims. In the work of Bill T. Jones, his documentary approach to the material led him to include the people he met at his workshops via technology and his "housing" and staging of their gestures. Byrd's work used a Brechtian frame, a theatricalized sourcing for the creation of an abstracted work from conversations. The stories were sourced from his conversations during three years of research with police, lawyers, counselors, and talks with the survivors and abusers (Martini). Constructing documentary elements were not part of his staging. Similar to *Familias* Byrd's work does not tell the story of a specific individual but its characters tell the difficult story of a couple through a composite of many people. "We simply invented another story," he says (Martini).

Multiple reviews focused on the intense physicality of this demanding work and the content. One example: "this pounding kinesthesia can be overwhelming; the hour-long show threatens to devolve into chaos. Yet Byrd keeps our attention focused on the developing domestic tragedy" (Kurtz). This performing arts piece received strong reviews and had a significant longevity. After Byrd disbanded the company in 2002, he became Artistic Director of Seattle's Spectrum Dance Theater and was able to remount the work for performance in 2011, fifteen years after its premiere. To raise awareness of the issue, a reviewer of the 2011 remount of the work included statistics from the Domestic Violence Resource Center (Seattle Magazine), which further looped the artistic work back to the local community.

Adrienne Martini at *The Austin Chronicle* does not review the artistic work but in her preview, she presents arguments readers might have with the work to then dismantle them. Her perspective is instructive for its pre-emptive understandings of a variety of negative responses. She describes how *The Beast* was the culmination of three years work for both the artist and administrators, that the project included networks with a range of people including survivors and people who serve them, and that neither the amount of money nor publicity were great enough to

cover the amount of energy and time invested by Dance Umbrella and Donald Byrd into the project. She builds up the legitimacy of Donald Byrd/The Group by giving facts on how many works Byrd has created, his awards, the national tours, and concludes “clearly, he is not a fly-by-night artist, looking to make a quick buck from his projects” (Martini). She explains how neither the artist nor the organization is exploiting an issue for notoriety. Most of all she explains how this is not “victim art.” By tackling a relevant social problem, Byrd and his dancers “most significantly, approached this issue as artists doing their jobs as responsible community members” (Martini). She describes how the Byrd and his local host venue were strongly involved in the community over a lengthy amount of time, and how the artist “gave back” through experiential workshops for local social service providers. Nereson described Jones’ documentation practices to further understand the specificity of its movement origins and choices of presentation. Martini writes about Byrd’s engagement with a pervasive social problem through meetings and conversations with local people intimately involved with the issue. This investment in conversation from multiple perspectives fueled his already-existing artistic framing.

The overall effect of Croce’s article, one that also influenced Molzahn and Obejas’ review of *Familias*, is palpable. Adrienne Martini’s review and the work of scholar Ariel Nereson both bring much of their focus to the process of making the work and accompany the artist (and with Byrd, the local organization) to better understand and explain their choices and later translation to the stage.

Returning to *Familias*: unlike Croce, these reviewers did attend the work-in-progress performance of *Familias*. Yet the transversal work that the project created between the artistic collaborators with the family and community members seem to not have been fully understood in this early showing. Soto suggested that their choice to perform the work pre-premiere and outside the borough with new community members had been, in hindsight, too soon in the process of their understanding the work itself and its possibilities (Soto 9 Aug 2014). Perhaps it was unfair of the venue to invite critics to the showing (which can be problematic), and yet the theater probably also understood this residency and performance as a way to raise the visibility for both the venue and the out-of-town artists who had flown from New York City to Chicago to

show their work. With limited time to cultivate their relationships with the local families and create transversal possibilities, as the review stated, “the family members literally walk through, from one side of the stage to the other” (Molzahn and Obejas).

The Chicago Tribune also gently criticized the limited use of the community members in the work but also made a generous effort to understand how the artists had created the work, “*Familias* succeeds evocatively as dance, as interpretive, sometimes humorous, movement. But in their walk-across stage roles, the young community members were simply extras in the script, flushing out the scenes. (Soto and Osorio explained that they have only been here for two weeks, insufficient time to fully engage and train families)” (Preston). This reviewer did not create a block between the dancers and the content, but was able to discover the work’s transversality: “At once raw and gentle, the movers themselves were commanding and immediate as they sketched the vicissitudes of families trying to hold it together....and a good deal of empathetic understanding” (Preston).

Additionally, *The Chicago Tribune* understood *Familias* as “...an otherwise thoroughly original and enjoyable drama of American life” (Preston). Instead of focusing on the national drama of the project’s funding and what that could mean to the landscape and caliber of American art, this review found *Familias* an insightful glimpse into the inner workings of national experience. *The Chicago Reader* and *Chicago Tribune* reviews were speaking to a national level, but from a different place of understanding.

In further contrast, the arts and entertainment writer Alejandro Riera for *¡Exito!*, Chicago’s Spanish language newspaper, attended a rehearsal which suggests a specific interest in understanding a performance work so focused on process, to interview the artists. In this rehearsal, the artists were meeting with the local Chicago families to decide their level of participation at the culmination of their two weeks of meetings. Osorio led children in an exercise that was being recorded for presentation. Families built an altar that was to be placed in various homes over the course of several months after the project left Chicago. Osorio said: “Es bonito ver a la familia entera participar en el ensayo. Todavía se siente que, aparte de todas las dificultades que enfrentan nuestras familias, hay unidad. Ese ha sido otro de los paralelos

importantes en el trabajo.” It's nice to see the whole family participate in the rehearsals. We do feel that, apart from all difficulties facing our families, there is unity. This has been another important parallel at work” (Riera). Here the artists spoke about their ideas to take the project on a tour to keep incorporating elements from the lives of other Latino families across the country (Riera). Their understanding of the relation of their project to the national stage was clearly focused on other Latino families.

These three articles in Chicago seemed to understand *Familias* and “nation-building” in different ways: *The Chicago Reader* understood through *Familias* how the national government selects suitable art to fund and thereby influences the kind of art creation, *The Chicago Tribune* says that *Familias* successfully shared a slice of American life, and the interview in *¡Exito!* revealed how the artists concerns included the integration of Latino families into the national fabric. The artists understand that this integration was a work in progress, something they needed to continue to make happen to help spark these experiences of inclusion on the national stage.

Months later at the premiere in the Bronx, the work was reviewed by Jennifer Dunning at *The New York Times* and a writer (that was not specified) in the oldest Spanish-language daily newspaper in New York City, *El Diario/La Prensa*. In *The New York Times* review entitled “Life and Art in the Worlds of Families,” *Familias* was understood, fittingly by Dunning, a dance critic, through a dance lens. *El Diario/La Prensa* claimed the work more closely and titled their review (as previously stated): “When the ‘star’ is our community.” The understandings that these two reviews offered point to the differing worlds straddled by Soto and Osorio in *Familias* and their larger bodies of work.

More specifically, *The New York Times* understood the project not as a multi-disciplinary work, but as dance that incorporated social and political themes (Dunning “Life and Art”). With that focus, Dunning was not impressed with the dance company and found the dancers “far less believable” as performers, and how little was revealed about “the characters in their extended pure-movement passages.” Through an understanding of the dance family as “characters,” Dunning kept their roles static and fairly one-dimensional in her review. She was more enamored

with the participation of the community performers, and the two groups are separated in her review.

Of the same performance, *El Diario/La Prensa's* review understood that there was a “constant interrelation... And it is precisely in this clear combination of the individual and the group that lies the magnificent strength of this performance.” This review does not keep the dancers as static characters, but was able to view them as part of a larger fabric of choreographic materials.

Two scenes that both Dunning and *El Diario/La Prensa* highlighted included, as Dunning describes the: “hurly-burly of ... a crowded birthday party and an afternoon in a community garden” (Dunning “Life and Art”). In a further comment, *El Diario/La Prensa* understood the birthday party scene as vital to dance-making: “the birthday party dances... should be *required viewing* for all the choreographers who – especially on Broadway or in Hollywood – try to recreate, in totally stereotyped fashion, the Latin spirit in the dance.” This specific scene was understood as a performance that was deeply informative about their community and not often seen in public presentations.

Dunning also understood the exploration of “single motherhood, absentee fathers, substance abuse and the kind of intergenerational conflict that can erupt in first-generation American families” as “what have now become cliches about ghetto life.” Here Dunning’s understanding of the work’s focus on first-generation American families seemed to negate that the lead artists and many of the community participants involved in the project were born in Puerto Rico and were already United States citizens. This distinction is important because often Puerto Ricans are misunderstood to be immigrants to the United States. Puerto Ricans have a complicated relationship with the mainland to be sure, but their families are, according to the United States government, also American families. Her comment perpetuated the separation of Puerto Rico from the mainland, suggesting that moves to NYC were further rites of passage towards becoming American. The point here might be for mainland Americans to further understand and recognize that Puerto Rico is already part of a shared American story.

Similar to Dunning’s understanding of inclusiveness, but with a slightly more nuanced

expression of the distance still be traveled to reach that easy acceptance as an American family, *El Diario/La Prensa* states: “I assure you that, when you leave the theater, you will feel that you’re taking home part of another, much more important gift; the knowledge that we aren’t alone – as you can see for yourself from what transpires on the stage.” This writer folds *Familias* into a larger understanding of public inclusiveness, as a source of (needed) empowerment within the Latino community to help break the isolation and segregation of their experiences.

Additionally, issues of single motherhood, absentee fathers, substance abuse are certainly not problems that only happen in the ghetto. Dunning understood that the piece moved past popular, negative viewpoints to offer a “rich synthesis of life and art... in large part due to Mr. Osorio's genius at creating intimate, colorful microcosms,” and an insiders glimpse into everyday life, “most often most tellingly portrayed by performers recruited from the community” (Dunning “Life and Art”). *El Diario/La Prensa* seemed to understand more easily the transversal qualities of the work and remarked on the communication that existed between artists and community members, as well as the range of inter-connections between the individual and the collective that the work presented, and stated, “*Familias* is a totality... of the Latino family.” *El Diario/La Prensa* embraced *Familias* as part of its mission to share Latino experiences with a wide audience.

As part of an insight into the national media landscape, the art and cultural critics of these mediums reached towards different communities without many transversal readers. While *Familias* created community that helped to further site this community primarily in the South Bronx, the readers of these newspapers (and viewers of BronxNet TV), while they might have some overlaps, were often different groups.

The South Bronx: what comes to mind?

“No one wants to hear good stories about one of the poorest congressional district in the U.S.” – choreographer Christal Brown.

“It is very important for me to show my work in the Bronx since so many people feel you will never make it and that the borough is like a black hole. People get lost here in drama or health issues, so it is important to show that someone is still surviving and creating their destiny through art here” – pioneer break dancer, Ana “Rokafella” Garcia.

“Ever since Iris had come out pregnant, Richie had been warning Coco to guard herself and aim for a better life. Exactly how she was supposed to do this was unclear, but Coco might have instinctively understood that success was less about climbing than about not falling down. Since there were few real options for mobility, people in Coco’s world measured improvement in microscopic increments of better-than-whatever-was-worse. Whenever Richie asked Coco about her plans for the future – whenever he asked her even a simple question – she’d say ‘I don’t know,’ and he’d say, “‘I don’t know’ is gonna be your middle name.” Richie wanted Coco to think ahead, but his advice was vague” – *Random Family: Love, Drugs, Trouble, and Coming of Age in the Bronx* (LeBlanc 2003: 32-33).

“We are trying to empower ourselves with the total energy of our bodies and sharing that with the audience” - Merián Soto (Banes 1994: 13).

"We don't need to build consumerism; we need to build economic sustainability in our community"– Rev. Que English, senior pastor at Bronx Christian Fellowship, with regard to the 2017 opening of the Kingsbridge National Ice Center (KNIC) scheduled to occupy the Kingsbridge Armory space in the Bronx, making it the world’s largest indoor ice center (Harper).

Chapter Five: *HOW I BECAME A BOOGIE DOWN RICAN*

My experiences with writing and thinking creatively about the making of *Familias*, along with my sustained participation and leadership of alternative art making circuits in the South Bronx, led to the creation of *How I Became a Boogie-Down Rican*. This performance work emerged from experientially informed, socially engaged, community-based practices. Initiating and developing art projects with the artists created a community and these artworks helped to further build this community in the South Bronx. *How I Became a Boogie-Down Rican* rose from this community building through art, and is my conversation via performance with the South Bronx. Creating this work was a way for me to understand the work the artists and I had created and to build a context for my experiences outside of writing. As a creative grappling of experiences, this performance project also speaks to others outside the borough for who these experiences are new. This work could be seen as a “next-level” community-based practice based on over 15 years of creating and helping to sustain art practices and works in the borough.

***How I Became a Boogie-Down Rican* at BAAD! May 3, 2014**

I am waiting off stage for my turn to begin. And I am thinking, how am I going to move you (the audience, the reader) to know what I am working from?

At BAAD!’s Boogie Down Dance Series, I follow a fiercely energetic group of Voguers. This is not easy and I also take it as a compliment that the curators believe that my performance will contrast and match that much energy.

I begin standing behind the curtain and sing. If they hear my voice first, that will help settle and turn the room to re-open to me. I sing where I cannot be seen, it allows me to dig into the notes, and let the voice trail off. I get under the words and breath to let them move into the space before me.

Like waiting for the moment to jump into the turning ropes of jump rope, I do the best thing, which is not to think and I step into the stage. The lights catch me walking slowly, my hips

unbalanced between flip-flop and heel. In the Bronx, that immediately gets a laugh. They can read the short hand signals in my choice of dress. I start naming “Juan, Miguel, ...” and I can feel the names sink in with a few people; they know exactly where I am pulling from, pulling names out from behind the curtain, out of the book, bringing them back into public light with me.

At the chair, I take off the sneakers and blue wrap. In my mind, I let that moment sit ritually. In my mind, I wipe sand off my feet and as I step into the chair, I give my weight into it slowly, as if I am stepping into the Bronx for the first time at the 161 St/Yankee Stadium stop. I sing Rokafella’s song, I turn on the chair (the image in my mind of a ballerina in a music box even though I don’t move like it) and take on a couple of hip-hop inspired street poses. The arms crossed with the torso spiraling and leaning into one side, the arms open with the body coming out of the spiral.

I feel what it is to feel people not with you, not reading you the way you are aiming to be read, and its disturbance. I step off the chair and open my arms and think that yeah, I will take it all on, but in my mind, the support isn’t there, and it’s overwhelming. I struggle with my own sense of energetic drive that “I can do this,” I can make it all happen, and the collective push back that I cannot, not on my own. I move back and shove myself away into that upstage corner. I am down and I count how long I stay down. I turn to find the soft place of water, of nostalgia, of dream.

When I am on the floor, moving from the fallen boxer image to balancing, I feel that I am underwater, I am in waves and gently curling with them as they flow around me. My physical memory quotes from a section of Hetty King’s 1996 work in which I reclined fully draped over a chair. I remember in that work there were sounds of water that grew in duration and volume. I was thrown about by them and moving against their current to keep my head above water. I am also thinking of migration, of all the ocean crossings, of how I hear of people in the Bronx missing their island, their wandering star in the Caribbean, almost dreaming it into a place that now with its severe economic and near-colonial situation, might not totally exist.

I wake up out of this state with memories of the phone ringing.

The phone rings, because there is always interruption in the Bronx, in NYC, starting with one thought and quickly sidetracked by someone else, an action, a word, a glance. I tell you about Jessie, I recite and tell you about the *Puerto Rican Obituary*, I tell you about Violeta Galagarza. I don't tell you the name of the downtown Manhattan dance journal. I don't tell you that Rokafella helped connect me with Ivan Sanchez and we co-wrote the article for publication in *Latino Rebels* online journal. There's not enough time to give you the whole story, I've got to get to the next thing, I have only seven minutes for this excerpt. The phone rings.

When I performed this part about the media in the Bronx, I felt that I slipped into conversation very easily and somehow that made me question myself -- who am I to claim this material? There are people like the 91 year-old Mrs. Ross (Aviles' landlord) in the audience who lived it. I realize that that sensation is also part of the territory of making work in the South Bronx. Many of us are outsiders here to a certain extent. Even if you are born in the Bronx and are an artist, you often feel like an outsider. As Charles Rice-Gonzalez told me in conversation, "if we had asked the community if they wanted a theater run by two gay, bald men, I don't think we'd be standing at BAAD! right now." After this show, Arthur Aviles tells me to take it on more fully and speak the experience of other people who are not there, to take on the anger, their anger, and express the frustration for them. In other words, express what you are able to say for others. Not to hold back. I realize that they wouldn't want me to.

I move from the chair to the upstage corner. This time the shoes become gestures towards a doorway. Originally I had been inspired by a story that Charles Rice-Gonzalez had told me about their visit to Tonito Arroyo's apartment. How he lived in the projects and once you got through the hallways that weren't every nice, and entered his place, you were in another world, with sparkle stickers from the dollar store laid out in designs around the mirrors on the wall, and just a general feeling of an imagination turned inside out to nurture the self. I used to imagine in this section of the piece that I had walked into this apartment in the piece, now I just use the shoes as a gesture towards this earlier image.

I like connecting directly inside the work out. When I sing Arthur Aviles song and move my hands and arms in an approximation of his style of "swift flow," I call out before I begin "Ready

Arthur?” and he answers, “Yup!” I start singing his song. Later, when I burst through the doors with Caridad De La Luz’s work like a showman, I ask, “is Nuyorico a utopian vision of possibility?” I can hear Arthur Aviles again yelling out “Yup!” There are moments of big laughter when I walk forward to say “If you have been in the NYC for more than six months, you should know what Boricua means” with a snap of my fingers. The biggest laugh is when I say how, in a strong Bronx accent, I get asked questions when I’m in the borough like: “so, you’re from Argentina right?” These moments of direct connection where separations blur and then re-emerge is my Bronx. I get the most reaction I’ve ever had when I mention the “ameRican” and wave to the ceiling to acknowledge the poet Tato Laviera (who died November 2013). This audience knows who he is.

There is sometimes an uncomfortable sensation in the air when I talk about “the good hair Ricans, the bad hair Ricans, (and the part I left out in this piece during performance) the ‘I speak Spanish-only-Ricans,’ the ‘I-hope-my-Spanish-is-good-enough-Ricans’.” It’s a little sensitive for me to say this (and references the earlier statement: “we really need to talk about the political implications of you saying this as a white woman”) and yet, it’s also part of my observations, things I’ve heard. It feels like I am exposing the internal strife that maybe people don’t want to talk about? Or they specifically don’t want me to talk about. It’s too close. Later in the piece, I move from feeling all the good in this role as an “adopted Rican” to getting pushed around because I am not Puerto Rican or Bronx enough and who do I think I am? Stay on your own side of the fence.

When I move to the upstage right, it is a specific place that I visit only once in the piece (this is more pronounced when the stage is larger), I begin with imagining that I can remove skin, history, patterns of thinking away and off of my body. I move to take off my skin. To start over. To move obstacles out of the way. To blur the separation until the next one re-emerges. I start with outlining my jaw line and then take off my face, I make a cut into my leg and pull skin on either side. I remove all the skin and put it on the floor out of the way. Its’ history, the past, moved aside. And I step out of this and walk forward. Into another kind of skin, a Bronx worlding. A body forming/unforming.

This section and the ending at BAAD! are part of my physical memory expanded from a collaboration with Nami Yamamoto in 1998. I originated these movements and they called to me. They were not done yet. They had something else to say. And here, they continue to move and talk.

The poem about 149th St/Grand Concourse sister is material I wrote in 2004. I can still see her, and I exaggerate her to bring her to spirit to life for this audience.

At BAAD! I end the excerpt by jumping repeatedly into the air as if I was collecting stars. I am trying to move into some other place that if I can just envision enough, I'll be there. If, as Whitehead says, "each movement of experience confesses itself to be a transition between two worlds, the immediate past and the immediate future"(Whitehead 1933: 192), then underneath this thought is a determined perseverance that there will be a future - for myself and this adopted and adoptive South Bronx community of artists and residents.

I created and developed this piece off and on over years, 2006-2014. Its become more of an open source that I chose excerpts from or consider expanding further, a platform for engagement and a place to begin other conversations, a place of embodied research as I try to figure out what the body remembers and wants to also speak, a source where I can plug in other experiences as they arise. It's outside of the performing arts production model of presenting finished works and more of a personal resource of public expression, reflection, refuge, activation, much like my experience of the borough itself.

SCRIPT

How I Became a Boogie-Down Rican

by Jane Gabriels

Dance theater/spoken word performance (solo)

Setting: open space, with one chair
(chair must be stable enough to stand on)

Clothing: one flip-flop (chancelta), one heel (taco); blue tshirt, blue shawl, blue jeans, blue ocean necklace. Thick rope tied around waist. Sea-green plastic bracelet.

No sound recording, all live --- songs and talking.

The *three sections in italics* are parts that are optional in the performance.

Begins upstage in one corner, with a chair downstage on a diagonal.

Pushing off into walking, and song:

“When you cry, you break your own heart. When you cry you break your own heart.”

“Juan, Miguel, Milagros, Olga, Manuel.”

Arrive at chair. Dress chair - as place of memory, as altar, as place to pause and reflect.

Stand on chair, sing Rokafella’s song: “Can we just get down tonight? Can we just get down tonight? Cause what I really want is for you to feel free”

Two poses. Step off chair and walk towards people arms open, taking up space, having conversation between acceptance and rejection. Moving back in the space, later falling into the ground. Moving into a dream of water, flailing in the water.

(Performance notes: Working and playing with an uncomfortableness in the skin. Seeing the people who are there, taking in their gaze. Push-pull between body and words, push-pull that makes incisions and then smooths them over)

An interruption: “ this is usually when Jessie calls. Doesn’t matter if its rehearsal, performance, this is when she calls.

And its not: hey, how are you? it’s w’happened? Because whey you live and work in a community that is vulnerable, that is often in crisis, there is always someone in need.

(sometimes its omg (laughter) no! and other times, its omg omg omg omg ... trailing off in a voice overwhelmed)

“Juan, Migel, Milagros, Olga, Manuel. They worked, they worked 10 days a week and were paid only 5. They worked, they worked, and they died. They died broke, they died owing, they died never knowing what the entrance to the first national bank looks like”

Why is she saying this now?

This poem was written by Pedro Pietri. He first spoke it at a Young Lords meeting in El Barrio in 1969. This poem, *Puerto Rican Obituary*, helped begin the Nuyorican Poetry movement in NYC. This poem was published in 1973. This book is now out. of. print.

How’d that happen?

People here want to help bring that back? We could.

Let me tell you something.
(stands on chair)

Violeta Galagarza won a Bessie, a New York Dance and Performance award, in 2011 for Special Achievement in Dance. Two other artists won Special Achievement Awards that year: Trisha Brown and Frederic Franklin. *The New York Times* published two articles about the Bessies – both mentioned Frederic and Trisha. Neither one included Violeta Galagarza.

What? They forget about her or something? “

Sit on chair, gestures. (Arthur Aviles – and you are so right, Ramon Rivera-Servera, he choreographs community, so right – got 200 of Violeta’s friends and supporters to pitch in \$10 or \$20 each to be able to fly her back from France where she was teaching to accept her award in person in front of all those people and get back in time to continue teaching. What a backstory their readers missed hearing about.)

Shoes are moved in the space to create something of a boundary, a gateway.

Song: ”Somewhere over the Bruckner Boulevard, Arthur Aviles sang, there’s a place that I know of, its called *Nuyorico* (with accompanying gestures and movements that attempt swift flow).

And La Bruja agreed (bursting through the space): “Bienvenido todo el mundo! Welcome everybody to the most beautiful place in all the world – *Nuyorico*.”

Gestures with questions:

What is Nuyorico? A utopian vision of possibility? A state of mind? Nuyorico was created, founded and established by: The Puerto Ricans, the Nuyoricans, the Porto Ricans, the kindaricans, the sorta-ricans, the I’m not feel so Rican today Rican.

(interrupt: you know we really need to talk about the political implications of you saying this as a white woman (with gesture of counting each word on a different finger). Interrupt: Yes.)

the sorta-Rican, the kinda-Rican, the Boogie-down Rican, the Taino, Boricua

(interrupt: if you have lived in NYC for more than 6 months, you should know what Boricua means already)

the Afro-Ricans

(interrupt: You know, I once walked into a venue and I overheard an artist say about me: oh look now, she's dressing Puerto Rican. Ummm, the wrap I had on was a gift, the hat too... maybe it was because I had on a skirt, for once?)

the Boomer-ricans, the AmeRicans, the diaspoRicans.

(interrupt: I found out last year that my great Uncle fought with Teddy Roosevelt in Cuba and....Puerto Rico. I told my friend in California, and he thought my work in the Bronx might be tied to this ancestral healing....funny right? You never know...)

the good hair Rican, the bad hair Rican, the I hope my Spanish is good enough Rican, the I only speak Spanish Rican (espero que si!)

(interrupt: when some people find out that I direct Pepatián, an organization founded by Patti Bradshaw and two other prominent artists – Pepón Osorio and Merián Soto from Puerto Rico – and have been working there since 1999- and when they find out that I am NOT Latina, they get disappointed, yes.)

the I don't get out much Ricans; the sassy, sassy tropical flavor Ricans
the Adopted Rican.

Interrupt: when I am in the Bronx, I get asked questions like: You're from Argentina, right? Cuba? And my friend Leenda was like: *Nena*, Juana, you could pass. You look just like mi tia in

Puerto Rico (voice goes up at the end of sentence; gesture with hands and face like come on, come on, come on)

Because even if you are not Puerto Rican at all, you spend time in Nuyorico, and the culture *will* find a way to embrace you, and claim you,

(and feed you, and tell you when you've done good, and when you've messed up with a push to try again and do it better; gesture with a watchful eye)

and whisper to you of oceans, and an island with sunlight that pulllllllls you up and out into the morning...buen dia! ... “

Dancing forward and getting knocked off feet, get back up, dance forward then breaking out, moving backwards, cracking up the skin to peel it back.

“There was this girl, standing in the middle of 149th Street, right off the Grand Concourse. I mean two sneakers on the yellow lines in the middle. I was out there with her. I was pulling-in-my-kneecaps scared. It was rush hour. She was giving attitude to each and every car, as if they were just going to get *out* her way. ‘So busy, so important, so V.I.P. - you can’t stop? I’m standing right here. You don’t see me? I’m. standing. right. here. Why won’t you stop, you’re going bumper-to-bumper anyway. Stop and let me finish crossing the road.’ She showed me, one hand on her hip, this annoyed flip of wrist in the air. It doesn’t matter where you are, they still have to deal with you.”

(the gesture of strength dissolving into awareness of its futility, but still not entirely giving up.)

Move to another spot:

There is this mural off Bruckner Blvd, painted by Wanda Ortiz. With full-figured powerful women, like Violeta Galagarza. When Violeta sees dance she likes she yells out ‘ahhhhaz – she wants the dancers to give more.’

(Taking a strong pose, that also falls into a self-consciousness. I am physically not that big powerfully built woman.)

Move to another spot:

Circling the ground with arm, calling out names from the Bronx: Mrs. Ross, Charles Rice-Gonzalez, etc. Then stepping inside this circle, a gesture with hand high in the air: “pride of place. Because there’s always something going on up in the boogie-down.”

Moving forward, another quote from Pedro Petri’s poem to interrupt the space: “‘Mira, mira, you just won the lottery ticket for \$100 thousand dollars’ – finally.” (say it loud like you on the street, calling to somebody)

Moving to the chair:

I was talking to a corporate sponsor for possible support (gestures of upbeat positivity; we can do this!)

And he said, ‘its really not a good time to ask for support in the current recession’ (either very controlled manner with a forced and kept smile, or very relaxed and look at your fingernails when you speak)

And Bill Aguado, then the Executive Director of the Bronx Council on the Arts, said: the South Bronx has been a recession for 30 years, you tell me when it’s a good time.’ (spoken very declaratively, punctuating the air and holding the last phrase).

Up from chair, and pose near the ground:

“The only time my dog will attack a person is when I tell him to attack a person.”

Pose, gestures and end with a face that says “come on, get with it”:

“And Roka said, ‘Jane you know how we do things here. We improvissssse. You want a car -- you start a little here, you call your cousin over there, get a little bit from here, add a little bit from other there, and you got yourself a car’”

Move to another spot:

I was the Burger King off 161 St. (because sometimes you *need* fries). A man came in, seemed to know everyone, saying hello to the guy behind the counter, waving hi to the couple seated at the table, and then he sees me: “Is there a Yankee game going on?” because white people don’t come here. (he/me looks me up and down) You work *in the arts*? What does that even mean?! That just sounds suspicious.”

Whisper: Its difficult to get presenters to come to the Bronx.

A presenter of a major festival in downtown Manhattan told me that the last time he was in the Bronx was the mid-90’s: ‘ its just so farrrrrrr.’

Interrupt: “Yeah, I know. Sooo how was that festival you went to in Seattle last week?”

And how presenters say that there’s “no point traveling to hear marginalized voices who are telling the same story – one with which we empathize *already*.”

And another prominent artist said both these things to me in the same conversation:

“I don’t want to say the wrong thing, but.....when I see you perform, I see a highly educated white girl.” (I have a physical reaction, the comment splits atmosphere in two; and coming up to face audience easily)

But that’s so interesting -- the Latino culture with skinny jeans and heels and all that make-up -- I really don’t get it” (make fun of last line, and another physical reaction, swept back – in same gesture as other phrase: that’s all you got to offer?)

Ending with different gestures of shoulder and arm dances (in my head thinking: held separate but in trying to live the same in dance and the arts.....) and say: When do we get to be in the same community?

#

How I Became a Boogie-Down Rican and Familias

An exploration of *Familias* and its creative process offer ways to think about the relationship of the work, the artists, community, performing arts critics and publics with the South Bronx.

Familias, along with the founding of Pepatián and the use of “inreach” as a conceptual descriptive term to define the work, is part of an “alternative narrative” that responds to the often negative public perspectives of the borough. These materials provided a collective response that also inspired other Bronx-based artistic works and helped highlight a community through its hybrid of “families.”

How I Became a Boogie-Down Rican is a dance theater solo I created that became an open platform where I could add or subtract material as it developed. Like *Familias*, this solo is also based on immersive experiences in the borough, my own experiences with “inreach.” I re-learned how the South Bronx dances, speaks, listens and is understood / misunderstood through the creative process of making this work.

Like other projects I produced for artists via Pepatián, I developed this work (originally entitled “City Markings”) and my conversation with it through multiple showings at a variety of settings (bars, dance studios, classrooms, theaters) with different audiences (scholars attending academic conferences, presenters attending the APAP/Association of Performing Arts Presenters conference, artists, general audiences) in the Bronx, Manhattan, Brooklyn and other national and international sites as a research source during my doctoral studies¹¹.

How does this work dance?

How I Became a Boogie Down Rican dances through a “mash-up” of gestures, movement patterns learned from other dancers, previous performances, teachers, and other observations.

The piece is a solo but I am not alone out there; many artists and moments from conversations and impressions from my work in the South Bronx join me. At the beginning, I quote movement

gestures taught to me by Rokafella. Later in the piece, I gesture towards “modes” of elasticity in the movements between upstage and downstage. The floor work contains a quote from popular culture as I gesture as both referee and fallen boxer. When I sing “Somewhere over the Bruckner Boulevard,” I briefly attempt Arthur Aviles’ “swift flow” movement technique, and use theatrical showmanship suggested in a workshop with Susana Cook for Caridad De La Luz’s material. Echoes of influences from Merián Soto are present in the percussive arm gestures. In the vignettes, I used many movement and gestures inspired by everyday moments. The closing of shoulder movements, somewhat trapped and also moving out of their compressions, is a culmination of various arm and shoulder movements scattered throughout the work. There is also movement material from earlier work I created for performance collaborations with choreographers Hetty King and Nami Yamamoto (performances at Manhattan’s Danspace Project in 1996, 1998 respectively).

The work contains objects that I dance with only slightly; they are more as visual gestures. I wear one *chancleta* (flip-flop) and one *taco* (high heel) and hanging from my elbow are a pair of sneakers with their laces tied together as a collective reference to the Afro-Caribbean-Latino hybridity unique to the South Bronx. The blue color of the t-shirt, necklace, jeans and wrap is a nod to *Yemeya*, the Orisha of the Sea. I had wanted to invite her nurturing and protective energy to be with me (Vega 2000: 23). The rope belt is from a larger cloak, made of bleached fishing net with intertwined shells, coral, and plastic that I asked inter-disciplinary artist Leenda Bonilla to make for an earlier performance at Manhattan’s well-known dance site, Judson Church.

With these visual suggestions, I wanted to think about myself at the beginning of the piece as a figure coming from the sea, from islands, from a long journey, somewhat otherworldly. At the chair, which for me represented the Bronx, there is a gesture towards a memorial with the sneakers thrown over the top like those seen flung over power lines (sometimes to honor the dead), the rope that binds to earth laid over top, the bracelet used as a cleansing of spirit. I had wanted to feel what it could be like to start from these sources, and then to part with them. Moving the past into the present. I wanted to ready myself to step into the Bronx, the chair, thoughtfully.

It's worth noting these dance influences and use of objects because of how they show the work's connection with the Bronx and also with concepts gleaned from conversations with Bronx-based artists and my observations from traveling and working in the borough. The work speaks to the world I was part of there and also includes and expands materials I created earlier to create a meeting, an environment of influences. This result is my Bronx, transversal moves that dance the street, the train platform, conversations to stage.

Some of the underlying foundation for the work was also developed in tandem with a movement and writing workshop I'd developed: "Urban Meditation: The Lost, The Found, The Fantasy." I offered workshop participants in Montreal, San Juan (Puerto Rico), New Orleans (Louisiana, Ithaca (New York), and in Europe (Ireland and England) and New York City (Manhattan) interdisciplinary ways to engage with their cities. Their insights into the work showed me how to expand my relationship with the South Bronx. The participants in these workshops revealed multiple stories of migration and immigration, and the inspiration that lies in cultivating creativity wherever you are and letting these multiple influences filter through your work. This work pushed me back into my experiences with the South Bronx to move me further along their paths. In connecting with the more-than of the participants in these different places, I was pulled further into the more-than of my work and its possibilities in the borough.

How does this work speak?

This work is hardly quiet, and speaks in song, story, poem, conversation. The work also speaks of "nuyorico" and through other choreographic materials: the feel of song in the theater, the distance between the chair and the dreaming corner that transforms from a boxing ring into a pool of water and waves, the rhythm of a poem written in 1969 that marks a beat for me to follow when I recite its lines.

How I Became a Boogie-Down Rican: Songs

The songs are excerpts from my original work, and songs by Rokafella (“Can we just get down...”) and Arthur Aviles (“Somewhere...”). I did have music created for the work, but found it overly restricting and unnecessary; for the music to support the piece, I would need someone familiar with the work to control the audio live. I found it easier to work without it.

My song accompanies this leaving someplace known to arrive someplace new, its company on the journey, something hummed to keep moving forward. In the performance spaces, which were often shared nights of performances, singing helped set up another vibrational charge in the room and signaled my presence ahead of my movements. Judson Church was a huge, echoing hall to fill. For every note I sang in performance there, I felt a further grounding of my feet into the floor which helped me to land and move through that large field of space. The song provided pathways for the body to accompany and move out of.

Rokafella’s song is an introduction to the Bronx, an invitation to “get down.” Aviles developed this technique at his theater, located just past the Bruckner Boulevard (a twelve-lane two-story highway) in Hunts Point. His song about the Bruckner Boulevard accompanies his swift-flow movements and brought his major influences together to create an “inside-joke.” The artists’ songs in my embodied presence signal a transversal of influences. Their work is more-than only work that they themselves can perform. Here the more-thanness of these songs spark other combinations to support a confluence of Bronx stories.

The songs, their rhythm and my voice change the emotional and audio register to shift the environments in the work. We move from the ocean to land, to the Bronx, and then to the conceptual place of “nuyorico.”

Interlude: *Nuyorico*

Nuyorico is another term created by visionary artists, in this case choreographer and dancer Arthur Aviles and poet and singer Caridad De La Luz/La Bruja. Creating a conceptual approach that underscores and expands their approaches helps strengthen their artistic practices. As often facilitators for the unvoiced, these Bronx-based artists help further create and evolve community through their art practices.

Nuyorico suggests a few different meanings. The word plays on New-York-Rico or “land of the rich at heart” (La Fountain-Stokes 2009: 132). “Rico” can also mean both “wealthy, delightful” (*que rico!*) in reference to the heart or love.

Nuyorico also originates from the descriptive “Nuyorican,” a term that originated in Puerto Rico and announced a separate reality between the island and mainland Puerto Ricans. This word begins in poetry, in the performance of spoken word. In 1973, Miguel Algarin, writer, poet and Rutgers University professor, organized a gathering of poets in his East Village apartment, and the following year, he and Miguel Pinero, whose play “Short Eyes” had won two awards as Best Play of the 1974 season, traveled to Puerto Rico to express a common national “spiritual identity” (Maleve 7). They were not accorded a warm welcome on the island. Instead, they were greeted by the term “nuyorican.” This description, a word not previously heard by either artist, “defined them, fixing them at a (safe) distance-in their place” in urban America (Maleve 7). Algarin and Pinero returned to New York City and moved from this dis-identification from Puerto Rico to create other landing sites that moved themselves and their expressions forward. This rejection from the island became part of the spark of the Nuyorican Poetry Movement, and the literary history of U.S. Puerto Ricans. This “circular migration” of experiences and influences between island and mainland, even when negative, was a creative force.

By 1975, the number of poets attending the gatherings at Algarin’s apartment outgrew the size of his space, and Algarín rented the Sunshine Café (an Irish pub on East 6th Street) because “poetry, the vital sign of a new culture, needed to be heard live” (Nuyorican Poets Café “History”). In response to their experiences in Puerto Rico, the founding poets called the site for

their work "The Nuyorican Poets Café." At this point, Algarin's anthology *Nuyorican Poetry: An Anthology of Puerto Rican Words and Feelings* (1975) had been published by William Morrow and Miguel Piñero's award winning play gave the poets more than enough cultural and social capital to make the café a meaningful success. By 1980, poets Miguel Algarin, Miguel Piñero and Lucky Cienfuegos bought the current site of the Nuyorican Poets Café (236 East 3rd Street). Ownership of this site was vital to ensure the continuation of the café and its works.

Instead of approaching the term negatively, as it was originally meant, the poet's choice of title for the café was a signal that the term "nuyorican" could be appropriated and transformed into an expression of liberation (Aparicio 1993: 19). As Miguel Algarin defined it: "the Nuyorican poets fights with words" (Algarin 1975: 24). In the earlier 1960s and throughout the 1970s, marked differences of class and urban experience continued to separate the poets of Puerto Rico from those on the mainland (Flores and Santos-Febres 2004: xviii). Writers on the island were considered "elite." Nuyorican writers were mostly working class and writing of racial identity and discrimination from an urban setting (Flores and Santos-Febres 2004: vxii).

One of the essential Nuyorican poets is Pedro Pietri. He first publicly recited his landmark poem, "Puerto Rican Obituary" at a 1969 meeting of the Young Lords at a church in El Barrio. In this writing and in his poetry performance of "Puerto Rican Obituary," he gives dignity to a situation that was anything but. This poem talks about five Puerto Ricans who travel to New York for a better life only to suffer hardships, disillusionment and heartbreak: "Always broke/Always owing/Never knowing/that they are beautiful people/Never knowing/the geography of their complexion" (Santiago 1995: 124). In a video of his spoken word performance in the late 1960s, Pietri doesn't stop moving when he speaks. His presentation is non-theatrical, conversational style, in a punctuated rhythm and with an energetic "mira, mira" said loudly, just as you would hear it on the street (Pietri "perf"). Algarin described Pietri as an "outlaw poet" (Algarin 1975: 23), and together they helped launch the Nuyorican Poetry Movement with other artists in New York City.

Pietri's family, like many families from Puerto Rico, had moved to New York City during "Operation Bootstrap." In 1948, the U.S. government invested millions of dollars into the Puerto

Rican economy to transform its rural agricultural society into an industrial center. This led to high rates of unemployment on the island, and at the same time, post-World War II seemed to offer more possibility of employment. A massive migration of people from Puerto Rico came to live in New York City's El Barrio/East or Spanish Harlem, the South Bronx, Lower East Side/East Village, and Brooklyn's Williamsburg/Bushwick in the 1940s and 50s. Many worked in the manufacturing industries, until they collapsed in the early 1970's. In their South Bronx, El Barrio, and central Brooklyn homes, these families were subject to truly awful living conditions against which they had little power to protest. The children, like Pietri (his family had moved to New York City when he was three years old), were part of the artistic emergence of the late 1960s and early 1970s were already steeped in migration issues, and from this family experience, coupled with the growing sense of liberation in the 1960s, came the Young Lords Party, Nuyorican poetry and the self-empowerment of Puerto Rican identity in New York City.

By the 1980's, Nuyorican poets were moving towards the "construction, through literature, of Boricua cultural citizenship as an organic- and organically resistant – North American formation" (Gonzalez L. 2001:45). "Boricua" here signals a connection to a uniquely Puerto Rican word and history, and is derived from the original name given to the island by its indigenous Indians, the Taino. Perhaps this development was influenced by President Carter's grant of clemency in October 1977 to political prisoner Andres Figueroa Cordero. He had been one of the five, including Lolita LeBron, who had fired shots in the House Chambers at the U.S. Capitol in support of independence for Puerto Rico in 1954. Five persons were hit and Cordero along with LeBron, Rafael Cancel Miranda, Irving Flores and Oscar Collazo were arrested. In response to this one grant of clemency, a group of Puerto Rican nationalists drove out hundreds of tourists from Liberty Island and fastened the flag of Puerto Rico to the forehead of the Statute of Liberty on October 25, 1977 to demand the release of the other four political prisoners (Landa). Known as the second wave or "post Nuyorican poets" Tato Laviera and Sandra Maria Esteves, were also part of this resistance to accepting existing arrangements (Aparicio 1993: 28).

Tato Laviera's work is significant to the Nuyorican poetry canon because of its complete bilingualism, which helped "affirm the existence of a culturally and psychologically whole people strong enough to bring together two languages, two experiences, two worlds. To be

Nuyorican is to be universal” (Kanellos 1979: 7). His work speaks to the hybridity of the Puerto Rican experience and a refusal to let go of “being Puerto Rican” in mainland U.S. society. As an Afro-Puerto Rican he worked with African rhythms and spoke against racial prejudice amongst Puerto Ricans. Unlike previous poets, his focus was on the positive possibilities in the Nuyorican experience. *AmeRican* begins: “we gave birth to a new generation. / AmeRican, broader than lost gold / never touched, hidden inside the / puerto rican mountains./we gave birth to a new generation,/ AmeRican includes everything / imaginable you-name-it-we-got-it/society” (Laviera 1985: 94). In a live reading of his famous work “AmeRican,” he worked the rhythms in the repetition of the word “AmeRican” and moved his voice into a slow fade and then reached out again. He used his body to emphasize and act out some of the words, and signs the spelling of the word AmeRican, with the capital R and the accent on the “i.” It is a poem. It’s a speech. He used his right hand occasionally to accentuate a phrase, then folded his arm behind his back. He only needed it for that one moment. His performance was his presence with the words. In this live reading from 2007, he added a sentence to this poem (“*but for now I can’t*”) that does not appear in the 1985 printed version: AmeRican, yes, for now, for I love this, my second / land, and I dream to take the accent from /the altercation, and be proud to call /myself American, in the “u.s.” sense of the/ word --*but for now I can’t*-- AmeRican, AmeRica!” (Laviera “perf”). Twenty-two years later, he adds “for now” in his live reading to show both the lack of change and his belief that things will still evolve.

Another Nuyorican poet, Sandra Maria Esteves, of Puerto Rican and Dominican heritage, was born and raised in the Bronx. In her poem, “Here,” published in her first book of poems, *Yerba Buena* (1981), she writes about the multiplicities of herself: ‘I am two parts / a person / Boricua / spic / past and present / alive and oppressed” (Santiago 1995: xiii). In her second book of poems, *Tropical Rain: A Bilingual Downpour*(1984), her work “Not Neither” also explores her multi-sidedness as a Puerto Rican in New York: ‘Being Puertorriquena Americana Born in the Bronx, not really jibara Not really hablando bien But yet, not gringa either, Pero ni portorra, pero si portorra too Pero ni que what am I?” (Flores 1993: 202). Scholar Juan Flores, author of numerous key texts in the Latino diaspora, writes: “Latino affirmation is first of all a fending off of schizophrenia, of that pathological duality born of contending cultural worlds and, perhaps more significantly, of the conflicting pressures towards both exclusion and forced incorporation

“ (Flores 1993: 202). In this overload of language, identity and feeling, Esteves finds resilience in being all of those things at once.

By the mid-1990s, the nearly “unbridgeable divide” between Nuyorican and island based poets had eased (*Flores and Santos-Febres* 2004: xviii). Juan Flores argued that in 1996, a new generation of voices in poetry began, “there exists but one ‘Nuyor-Puerto Rican literature,’ whether in English or Spanish, from more varied points of geographic origin than Puerto Rico and New York” (Flores and Santos-Febres 2004: xiii). Flores and Santos-Febres argue that some of this had to do with the successful opposition to continuing military presence in Vieques, and the release of Puerto Rican political prisoners under President Clinton.

The United States Navy base occupied fifty-one-square miles on Puerto Rico’s neighboring Vieques Island and used it as a bombing range. Protests to close the base down were sparked by botched bombing exercises in 1993 that came close to civilian housing, as well as the April 1999 death of a civilian employee when two off-target bombs destroyed an observation post (Becker). The navy’s refusal to investigate the incident or punish those who killed the employee David Sanes Rodriguez led to thousands of people participating in civil disobedience to force an end to the bombing, one of those protestors included Lolita LeBron who was arrested in 2001 at age 81 and sentenced to 60 days in jail for trespassing (Brown, E.). With increased pressure from activists who camped on the bombing range to stop military exercises for over a year until 2000 and from thousands who protested San Juan’s streets in the largest protest in Puerto Rico’s history to call for peace for Vieques that same year, the Navy agreed to leave Vieques on May 1, 2003 and the base was closed (Becker).

In August 1999, President Clinton commuted the sentences of sixteen members of FALN/ Fuerzas Armadas de Liberacion Nacional (or Armed Forces of National Liberation). In 1974, this group set off bombs that killed six people in New York City and Chicago in the name of Puerto Rican independence (McFadden). Clinton offered clemency on the condition that they renounce violence (Martin 2013: 399).

The artists’ writings by the 1990s had shifted. Their work did not center as much on national identity, but “rather, that complex and engaging matter of ‘being Puerto Rican’ was now associated with a higher, porous territory riddled with contradictions and diverse, clashing social

and personal experiences” (Flores and Santos-Febres 2004: vxiii). At the same time, the 1990s marked the beginning of the “Latin Boom” or “Latin Explosion.” From 1990-2002, this twelve-year period marked the “largest gain in mainstream market share for Latina/o pop culture in commercial media in the United States” (Rivera-Servera 2012: 10). Among other gains in population, there were also electoral shifts and a growing niche in goods and services.

In the mid-1990s, poet Caridad De La Luz, along with New York City based poet Emmanuel Xavier and California-based Aurora Levins Morales, were designated part of the “neo-Nuyorican” movement.¹² Like the poet Sandra Maria Esteves, spoken word poet, singer and actor Caridad De La Luz/La Bruja was also born in the South Bronx. She is part of the poetic heritage, the next generation to emerge from the Nuyorican Poets Café.

Poet and singer Caridad De La Luz defines Nuyorico almost as a mythical land: “that place somewhere between The Empire State and El Morro,” referencing a New York City landmark and the historic citadel in San Juan (De La Luz 2011: 60). She continues her poem, dedicated to Pedro Pietri “El Reverendo,” poet laureate of the Nuyorican Poetry movement, and writes of Nuyorico as a state of mind/heart in a hip-hop beat: “Coming in the form of /“El Reverendo” Pedro Pietri / Who fought a war of no good and plenty / Still he speaks to our people / Forcing us out from behind / Tenement peepholes / To find a place where we can all feel equal / And realize all along/Your heart knew you were so Rico/When you realize that/That’s when you’re there/ Welcome to Nuyorico” (De La Luz 2011: 61). And in her 2005 song “Nuyorico,” she begins with almost a benediction, “Bienvenido todo el mundo – Welcome everybody to the most beautiful place in the world, Nuyorico” (De La Luz 2005). In a performance of her poem “Nuyorico,” she presents her work with a hip-hop beat set to Salsa musical rhythms. She offers a collection of movement material; this is a dance piece, this is a party. She brings her audience to meet and go with her, into the poem and where it originates and pulls towards. Her poem and performance create and inspire community.

To complicate labels of identification, dancer, choreographer and co-founder of BAAD!/Bronx Academy of Arts and Dance, Arthur Aviles describes himself as a “New York Rican.” His parents, like many families migrating from the island, had been eager to assimilate in mainland

U.S. society and did not maintain strong bonds with Puerto Rican culture in their household. Aviles does not speak Spanish with any fluency and mainstream American culture was privileged when he was growing up (La Fountain-Stokes 2009: 136). Nuyorican was not the only term to reflect U.S. Puerto Rican experiences.

In his 1998 choreographic work, 'Maeva de Oz,' Aviles locates "Nuyorico" located "somewhere beyond the Bruckner Expressway," which at the time, relates to the location of his then-theater venue on Barretto Street and home of his dance company in the Hunts Point section of the South Bronx.¹³ In the context of Aviles and his work to support and raise the visibilities for "artists who are women, people of color and/or from the lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender community" (Hadaway), Nuyorico suggests a place of freedom, acceptance, and social justice, with queer visibility and fulfillment; a ghetto utopia (La Fountain-Stokes 2009: 133). As a conceptual term, it brings support and empowerment, a present and future foundation for the work.

In 2005, I attended a book launch with a night of readings, performance and music with artists from New York City and Puerto Rico in April 2, 2005 at Hostos Center for the Arts & Culture in the Bronx. Noted scholars Juan Flores and Mayra Santos-Febres had co-edited a bilingual anthology entitled: *Hostos Review/Revista hostrosiana, An International Journal of Culture/Revista Internacional de Cultura, Open Mix/Microfono Abierto, Nuevas Literaturas Puerto/ Neorriquenas, New Puerto/ Nuyo Rican Literatures*. During that three-hour presentation of works at Hostos, "something happened." The atmosphere was charged and it felt like things were shifting in people's minds and perceptions about being from New York City, about being from Puerto Rico, about being in the same theater together sharing their words and performances.

Aviles and De La Luz used this definition of their Bronx to focus on experiences of abundance and affirmation in the borough. Nuyorico seems to be part of a legacy that includes Soto and Osorio's "inreach" in *Familias* and the utopian imaginary of Eugenio María de Hostos' Antillean Confederation ("Confederación Antillana"). These are conceptual sites of inspired activation that express the more-than of the actual. These ideas are expansive, transversal moves of empowerment in the virtual, in the listening to community and its dreams. As Osorio states: "I

know more than those who colonized me. I create a sense of reality with fantasy” (Coussonnet). These movements with descriptive concepts are reflections that activate other imagined states of possibilities. They seek to create spaces that activate the more-than of the already-thinkable to nudge potential. They speak and claim possibilities for the communities of artists and families in the Bronx.

Nuyorico here seems more of an imaginative space, an “embodied mindscape,” a mobile concept that can change to accommodate multiplicities (La Fountain Stokes 2009: 133). Like *inreach*, it’s a utopian image, state of mind, a porous reflection of support between inspiration and action that inspires greater inclusiveness and empowerment. It almost feels close by, within reach. The community is invited, tended to, and new terms arise from this conversation that relate and create relationships to build upon. Artists conceptualize what they see and listen to around them. These innovative terms send signals that changes have happened and are happening, and inspire more. As part of a South Bronx artistic biography, this vision of Nuyorico is a place to build on and from. It focuses on the Bronx as creative source, a place to experiment and be with inherent Afro-Caribbean-Latino multiplicities. A “landing site” that imagines itself to be made more real.

How I Became a Boogie-Down Rican: Poems

I begin speaking a quote from Pedro Pietri’s poem *Puerto Rican Obituary*: “Juan, Miguel, Milagros, Olga, Manuel” and later recite more of the lines that follow this opening sentence. This poem, central to the Nuyorican Poetry movement, talks about five Puerto Ricans who travel to New York for a better life only to suffer hardships, disillusionment and heartbreak: “Always broke/Always owing/Never knowing/that they are beautiful people/Never knowing/the geography of their complexion...” (Santiago 1995: 124). Later I yell out another quote from the work: “Mira Mira...” (look, look); an excerpt from the poetic line: “All died dreaming about America waking them up in the middle of the night screaming: Mira Mira your name is on the winning lottery ticket for one hundred thousand dollars” (Pietri 1973). I was inspired by video documentation of a late 1960’s reading by Pedro Pietri of his work where he didn’t stop moving, spoke in a non-theatrical, conversational style, with a punctuated rhythm. When he

shouted out “mira, mira” with a sudden claiming energy, it was just as you would hear it on the street, bold and urgent.

Having come up the ranks of the Nuyorican Poets Café slams in the mid-90s, I was inspired by my research into the origins of that performance and community space. Speaking Pietri’s poems was also a window into experiences that some Bronx audiences had with their families who had come to New York City as part of “Operation Bootstrap.” Speaking some of Pietri’s words, finding his vocal range and rhythm in the work, brought connection to a sense of his urgency. He felt the insistent need for action, and his poems and performances of his work helped create and inspire a community that could find ways to respond.

How I Became a Boogie-Down Rican: history, press, the performance space

Some choreographic material in my work was inspired by ideas linking sadness with aggression. I was thinking of this connection in terms of the physical loudness of that first large movement with the arms open on either side of the body, there is a suggestion of aggression in the pose, the way it takes up space. I was thinking about the words of Pedro Pietri and other difficulties in the Bronx, and how that physical stance might connect to sadness. I found a physical conversation between these emotions, the feeling of compression and the lifting out of that. When I talked with Charles Rice-Gonzalez about these ideas, he said,

The Bronx is my home. I grew up in the projects. It was fun with lots of kids to play. Then the drugs came in. There was this joy and sadness. You don’t know what to do with it. That bravado that is in the Bronx can be partly how the sadness manifests itself in anger. It’s more like protecting ourselves and not wanting to be vulnerable (Rice-Gonzalez, “Interview”).

In the work, I touch these emotional shifts briefly when I move forward and backward in the space before retreating, overwhelmed, to the far corner. This corner is many things: an island, a nostalgic tug towards an island that “could have been” if it had been allowed to develop organically without outside interference, a place to safely fall into it and escape the need for aggression, a pool of water, a place to recover and rejuvenate. A place that also struggles, as the water begins to rise too high, too quickly, with strong ocean waves.

I also talk about relationships with the media (*The New York Times*, confusions with an article written for a downtown dance and performance journal), specifically with regard to Bessie-award winning choreographer Violeta Galagarza, in the work. How she was selected to win the award in 2011 but was not recognized by the media along with the other award-winners, and our community efforts to support Galagarza at the award ceremony.

Part of the choreographic material was the performance space itself. Far upstage left was a more internal place of ocean and island, a dream place, also with struggle. The chair was alternately the Bronx itself, a seat of authority, a soapbox to deliver news. In larger spaces, upstage right, a place I visit only once in the work, is where I take off my skin, my layers to reveal ideas of the spirit within the body, of a person not read by skin. Later in the vignettes, each “character” has a place where they are met and activated. The stage becomes peopled with Bronx moments, artists, residents. They are around and with me in the work, and I bring something of these streets and my conversations onto the stage to introduce them to audiences.

How does this work listen?

In performance, the work interrupts me and I interrupt it. It listens to itself, to its previous incarnations as a performing arts piece, and uses the past experience inform the current work. The piece is also in conversation with audiences. I listen to their reactions for fuel. I push against them at times to keep their attention.

Elasticity is where different qualities of experience shift into another and the shift is what you feel. In the work, there is a pulling out of the past-present (the past is also there with me) as the present is passing into the past. The present and past are folding into and flowing out of the present and towards an almost-here future. The point is to keep going, the point is to keep up. It’s about listening and working to understand as fast as possible. The South Bronx demands layering. As a place only of multiplicities, it encourages transformation.

To detail one series of movements: The motion of both arms out to either side is a riff off the pose that Rokafella taught me and one that is used often as a vernacular expression in New York City. What I found in its pose was that it offers an individual space by blocking out others, it's an assertive positioning or stance, its direct, and what I discovered was how it exposes the heart and almost pushes it out in front of the body; in other words, it felt very much like an answer to a question: "what do you want? Because I am right here." It is both listening and speaking. Its fearless and straightforward bravado feels very Bronx to me.

The piece also listens to itself – I take things out or expand them in performance or in studio as the work develops. I started working on the piece working spatially with restricted spaces by imagining myself within the narrow space of a subway car, or hall corridor, the congested space of a stairwell on a subway platform, and I kept the movements within this feeling of confinement. I also began with the phrase, "Oh the promises of Manhattan..." and let that idea hover in the air for a while...as a provocation, opportunity, disappointment, as suggestion, and continued: "I was standing on the platform of Burnside Avenue and I could see the Empire State Building, in the distance, could hold it between my thumb and forefinger, and I wondered was there anything there looking here to the South Bronx with a similar feeling of wonder?" I was often at this platform on my travels to a teaching internship in poetry for one year with a seventh grade class at M.S.279, just off Burnside Avenue in the Bronx.

Working on this piece over many years showed me more of what it was capable of doing. I could continue to weave in or fragment memories that appeared and experiences that happened in my continued work in the borough. At one point, I added video to the live performance to explore a relationship between arms and hands in conversation through space. I dropped it later because it didn't seem to add enough to the work. In my performance at BAAD! in May 2014, I was able to work with the rhythm of the #6 train passing just outside into the poem I was reciting, and let it filter through as I was speaking. I hope to keep this influence in future as an experienced memory to retain in the physicalized delivery of those lines. The work is an open platform that can shift as I process its materiality.

This work also listens to experiences I've had performing with artists whom I also produced. Being invited to perform and collaborate in their projects added experiential layers that were part of the "more-than" of our relationships, and the expansion of community building amongst artists. I danced in multiple projects with Antonio Ramos (at Manhattan venues PS 122, 100 Grand Street, Joyce SoHo, Movement Research at Judson Church, and other downtown bars, Galapagos Art Space in Brooklyn, Montreal's Theatre La Chappelle and the Philadelphia's Painted Bride), created an original song for Richard Rivera's choreography (performances at Tribeca Performing Arts Center), and original poetry for collaborations with dancer Jessie Flores. I performed in works created by Awilda Sterling, Merián Soto, Rokafella, in addition to performing with artists in multiple shared evenings that I produced on my own (without Pepatían support) at downtown venues. These experiences also filter through my work. More than transversal moves, performing in their projects was an expansion of our relationships through the work. Their influences are with me again and present here.

Rehearsing with Arthur Aviles for a project choreographed by Antonio Ramos gave me experience with Aviles' level of commitment in realizing a choreographer's ideas and expanding their possibilities in his body, and to Ramos' freedom and his need for freedom in performance. As an expressive mover without professional training in genres of modern or ballet, as a "non-dancer dancer" who did not audition let alone tour with dance legends like choreographers Stephen Petronio (Ramos) or Bill T. Jones (Aviles) dance companies, I was not the same person or performer after working with these artists. This solo also remembers their approaches from a place of embodied listening.

How is this piece understood/misunderstood?

The title *How I Became a Boogie-Down Rican* refers to the nickname for the Bronx as the birthplace of hip-hop, and references the dance parties where people gathered to "boogie down" in the early 1970s (*Beat of the Bronx*). "Boogie Down," as Aviles described in a *New York Times* article, also refers to movement that informs the borough; "you got to dance, you got to get down" (D. Gonzalez "In New Home"). "Rican" refers to the Puerto Rican diaspora, part of

identifiers like Puerto Rican and Nuyorican. “How I became...” also nods to Esmeralda Santiago’s novel *When I was Puerto Rican*. The title signals that the work is nested within a Bronx culture, one that includes hip-hop, dance movements, textual narratives and cultural ties.

The idea of becoming a Boogie-Down Rican also bases an identity founded in the South Bronx, and while it connects to traces of migrations to the Bronx and their impacts, this identity is not based in a “home country” located elsewhere. A Boogie-Down Rican also folds an individual into a larger collective identity that is also a shifting identity, between the island and the Bronx, the ethnic “melting pot” of New York City, and between Taino, African and Spanish cultures of Puerto Rico. As visual artist Adál Maldonado states: “We are multilayered because so many different cultures and races came through Puerto Rico with the slave trade. We became a sort of fusion of all those experiences and ideas. I was raised to feel that I had many different dimensions that I could choose from” (Estrin). A Boogie-Down Rican is part of these influences and layers of identities in New York City and the island of Puerto Rico.

In this piece, I describe myself as an “adopted Rican,” and in my research was interested to learn that Soto and Osorio talked about the South Bronx as their “adopted community” (Soto 1999: 1) and that Soto described the partnering of dance company member in *Making of a Family* with local family also as an adoption; “we adopted each other.” The South Bronx is more than a meeting place, there can be a folding in from a reaching out, there can be a mutual long-standing embrace in horizontal, transversal moves of families. Adál Maldonado’s stated: “Eventually everyone’s going to be Puerto Rican” (Estrin). This understanding is also part of the work, in that becoming a Boogie-Down Rican is part of a larger story. Like Maldonado who states how he feels comfortable shifting and choosing identities “because I’m a product of many different cultural identities” (Estrin), this title references a somewhat similar “adoption” of identities that for me, developed over nearly fifteen years of working intensely in the borough.

In the Bronx, I found a community and threaded another one together. I was so new to the borough and to the work that I was learning “on the job,” I needed the support, suggestions, brainstorming of dreams and also complaints that others in the borough shared with me. With Pepatián, I felt I was the conduit to funding and to organizational backup that could help make

ideas become actions. My work was in some ways similar to Soto and Osorio's approach with *Familias*; they brought their community of dancers and collaborating artists with them to reach into the local community. I also created opportunities for artists to connect with audiences and residents at venues throughout the borough. Soto and Osorio, however, foregrounded the contributions of the non-performing artists who participated in the creative process of *Familias*. My work concentrated on creating more of a connection with the artists (whose work might or might not have community involvement) and venue sites.

Osorio and Soto speak of "crossroads" and "intersections," and these are themes that developed as I became more immersed in my work in the Bronx. My place of crossroads became more when I traveled outside the Bronx. At venues downtown, I was defined by the Bronx. It's as if other presenters felt my work, as I've stated earlier, there was closer to social work than to the creation of art; the lack of recognition for the borough as a worthwhile and engaging site for incubating and supporting cutting edge, experimental works for the most part continues. While we work away in the borough to empower and transform, others in Manhattan see its offerings mostly as limited. During the APAP@HOME project (now renamed in 2015: Bronx Artists Now: showcases and conversation), several presenters, and one from a significant venue in downtown Manhattan that actively programs artists, expressed gratitude for the transportation to Bronx venues as they had never visited the Bronx before. A conversation with others in the field is not as easily present.

The performances of *How I Became a Boogie-Down Rican* and this written work are efforts to help bring more of the complexities and insights about the South Bronx into the public gaze. In these performances, I am also foregrounding my experiences as a collaborative part of an artistic community, more than curator/producer/administrator. As a solo, peopled with Bronx-based artists and experiences, this solo offers another point of accessibility to materials that I have been working with and researching as part of my doctoral studies.

The South Bronx: what comes to mind?

Eduardo García Conde's response to the South Bronx mural Banksy painted during his 2013 NYC residency: "If Banksy did something big in the South Bronx, it's that he opened up an important dialogue between the locals and the outsiders. Many, myself included, challenged a number of the visitors to come back for some truly local artwork and see what we've been doing for decades before Banksy was a household name. ...A few admitted that they were scared of coming up here having been brainwashed by the media and were pleasantly surprised to see that the Bronx was not this monster waiting to chew them up and spit them out."

"Hunts Point is one of New York City's largest industrial hubs, generating 15,000 truck trips every day over local streets in one of the city's poorest neighborhoods" (Miller) and is also home to over six non-profit community organizations working to create a better quality of life for its residents.

Choreographer, dancer, BAAD's co-founder Arthur Aviles who described how "we're all outsiders to a certain extent. We have distance within the community. We have both disconnectedness and connectedness and differences in perspective, sexuality, color, dynamics. [But] there is a difference between how it is to be there and how is it to do something there. Slowly and with great patience, we develop familiarity and relationships [with the community]" (Cheung).

Dancer Pedro Jiménez commenting on Pepatián's Jump It Up in the early 2000's who said "I remember pre-show, sharing the stage and warming up with an electric mix of artists at BAAD!/Bronx Academy of Arts and Dance. Jump it Up exposed me to community and new environments like The Bronx Museum of the Arts. I also made some cool friends with artists such as Rokafella and Antonio Ramos. Jump it Up helped me connect with a voice I never knew I had. I always felt at home. I always felt I was with family."

One of the first gestures I remember when I began working at Pepatián was when Merián Soto took a piece of paper and a pencil and wrote: “The poorest county in the U.S. produces some of the richest creative minds and bodies in the world!!!” and taped it to the wall. That was my introduction to arts in the South Bronx.

Or that statement written by poet Miguel Algarin in the mid-1970s that said “to stay free is not theoretical. It is to take over your immediate environment “ (Algarin 1975: 12).

Conclusion

Performance works and curatorial practices grounded in a depth of collaboration create strengthened community. *Familias* offers a foundational grounding, whether directly recognized or not, that has influenced the South Bronx and its artistic ecologies. This impact is a significant resource for other organizations, artists, and curators.

My artistic practice and curation projects have been deeply influenced by my sustained work in the South Bronx via Pepatián, as well as working with Soto, along with many other artists and organizations in the borough.

My participation in the Bronx and creation of a performance project is part of the fuel for this thesis. Writing this work is part of the ongoing impact of *Familias*.

My aim has been to make a contribution – to the Bronx, to the artists, the cultural and local organizations, and to create engagements beyond the borough that encourage a deeper look into its artistic legacies.

Notes

1. Groundswell is an organization whose mission is to “bring together artists, youth, and community organizations to use art as a tool for social change to create projects that beautify neighborhoods, engage youth in societal and personal transformation, and give expression to ideas and perspectives that are underrepresented in the public dialogue” (Groundswell “Who We Are”). In 2009 visual artist Crystal Bruno (aka Crystal Clarity) worked with Groundswell and led a group of residents and local youth to paint several murals in Hunts Point. One mural, sponsored by Majora Carter Group LLC, read: “Yes She Can!, !Ella Si Puede!: “*You don't have to move out of your neighborhood to live in a better one,*” in tribute to the work of Majora Carter (an internationally renowned urban revitalization strategy consultant, real estate developer, and Peabody Award winning broadcaster in the Hunts Point neighborhood (Majora Carter “Biography”); Lady Pink murals along Barretto Street refers to a mural project led by Cassandra (sculptor, artist-in-residence and part of BAAD!/Bronx Academy of Arts and Dance team) which brought a group of graffiti artists, all women, to paint a wall on Barretto Street from Garrison Street to the doors of the then-BAAD! at 841 Barretto Street, 2004-05. Lady Pink was one of the leading participants in this project, and is one of the first women working in the male dominated, graffiti-based art world (Lady Pink “Biography”); Tats-Cru is a group of four graffiti mural artists (Bio, Nicer, BG183, Totem2) who are available to make work for hire (Tats Cru “The Team”). They are based at The Point C.D.C.

2. Charles Rice-Gonzalez is a writer, long-time community and LGBT activist, a Distinguished Lecturer at Hostos Community College – CUNY and co-founder (with choreographer/dancer Arthur Aviles) and Executive Director of BAAD!/Bronx Academy of Arts and Dance. Born in Puerto Rico and raised in the Bronx, he is an award-winning playwright and author of the novel *Chulito* (2011), which has received awards and recognitions from American Library Association (ALA) and the National Book Critics Circle. He co-edited *From Macho to Mariposa: New Gay Latino Fiction* (2011) with poet, Charlie Vazquez. He serves on the boards of the Bronx Council on the Arts and the National Association of Latino Art and Cultures (Rice-Gonzalez “Bio”).

3. Born and raised in Havana, Cuba, Wally Edgecombe was Director of the Hostos Center for the Arts and Culture from 1982 until his retirement in 2013. He is also a cultural activist and noted ethnomusicologist. Under the stewardship of Edgecombe, the Hostos Center became one of the pre-eminent Latino arts centers in the northeast (Bronx Council on the Arts 2009). In addition to other dance festivals, plays and showcases, the Hostos stage has also presented and/or commissioned work from internationally recognized musicians like: Tito Puente, Celia Cruz, Orquesta Aragón, Rubén Blades, Marc Anthony, Fernandito Villalona, Los Van Van, and Dizzy Gillespie (Bronx Council on the Arts). In addition to presenting these well-known national and international artists, Hostos also serves as a creative incubator and presenter of emerging and established local artists (Hostos Center for the Arts & Culture 2011). Edgecombe in conversation told me that one of the main demographics for Hostos Arts and Culture events include a majority of Latino and African-American audience members as well as cross over followers of Latin-Jazz and Salsa who are happy not to have to travel downtown to hear their favorite music (2011).
4. The name Pepatían was created from the names of the three artists Patti Bradshaw, Pepón Osorio, Merián Soto who first founded the organization in 1983; “pep” for Pepón, “pat” for Patti, and “ián” for Merián).
5. This quote: “making something from nothing” has many sources, but I first heard it used to describe artists in the South Bronx from Kwikstep (aka Gabriel Dioniso), co-founder (along with his wife Rokafella, aka Ana Garcia) of Full Circle Productions, a hip-hop dance theater and entertainment non-profit company, in 1999 when I first started working at Pepatían. Merián Soto is also quoted in an interview with Arthur Aviles in *Bronx Dance Magazine* in 2004: “I was moved by the spirit of creativity and resourcefulness in the Bronx, the making of something out of nothing” (Soto “Interview”).
6. In our conversations, Soto stated that choreographer Beti Garcia’s “influence is direct in *Puerto Rican Trivia*,” and specifically in Soto’s solo entitled *¿Cómo nos ven? ¿Vemos?/*

How are we seeing? Do we see ourselves? (1987). Beti Garcia was a choreographer from Puerto Rico who had moved to NYC and founded a dance company, Barrunto Dancers (“barrunto” is defined as: “inklings” or “to have a hunch”) with Myrna Renaud in the early 1970s. Barrunto Dancers was a multi-ethnic dance group that believed dance could be used to make political statements and help broaden the scope of the dance community (Renaud). Garcia taught Soto *plena* when they were both in New York City (Soto email 15 Sept. 2012). Working with *plena* and other movement forms, Garcia nurtured and collaborated with many artists, including Renaud who was another significant dancer from Puerto Rico. Garcia created a dance solo entitled: “*Luisa Capetillo - Un Ejemplo/An Example*” as a homage to one of Puerto Rico’s most famous labor organizers and first suffragists. Both Renaud and Soto danced this solo at different times. In our conversation, Soto described the piece: “The whole thing was *plena* with various gestures. A master work.” Soto’s connection to Garcia in New York City was an important artistic relationship for her. For this solo, Soto explained that the “*plena* that Beti taught me focused on footwork, and she built her whole dance on this rhythmic movement of the ball and heel making a sharp sound along the floor (Soto email 28 Sept. 2012). We’re fortunate Soto learned these movements so well and could pass them on in her work; video recordings of Garcia’s solo for Luisa Capetillo are not readily available.

7. While they are often pronounced as one word, *bomba y plena* are two different folkloric genres of Afro-Rican traditions indigenous to Puerto Rico that share common history in West African musical traditions. Both include singing, dancing and percussion-focused music, but the forms began nearly 200 years apart. *Plena* “was the music of the sugarcane workers, the music they played after work...and focus more on the narrative song or ‘el periodico cantado’” (Junco). The call and response in *plena* is located between the vocal soloist and the chorus. In comparison to *bomba*, the music is more structured and compositional, and there is not the same emphasis between musician and dancer. The dancing is a mix of side-to-side movements with each foot reaching to the side and coming back to center, and then a mix of steps with crossing footwork to move forward and back, swiveling on the ball of the foot. It’s a rhythmic punctuation using the feet to articulate the body into more movement. Arms break at the elbow and the shoulders

accentuate the rhythms. *Bomba*, the older and more purely African based form, is based on improvisation, and the call-and-response interaction between the dancer with the drummer is central. Wally Edgecombe, Director of Hostos Center for the Arts and Culture and producer of *BomPlenazo*, biennial celebration of *bomba y plena*, stated, "*Bomba* goes back to the days of slavery [the 1700s] and hasn't changed much over the years" (Junco).

8. The New York Dance and Performance Awards or "The Bessies" were established in 1983 by David White (Executive Director and Producer at Dance Theater Workshop, 1975- 2003) in honor of dancer/teacher Bessie Schönberg. These awards recognize "outstanding creative work by independent artists in the fields of choreography, performance, music composition, visual design and others areas of dance and performance. The annual award recipients are chosen by The Bessie Selection Committee, which consists of artists, dance presenters, producers, journalists, critics and academics" (Young).
9. As explained by Luis Aponte-Parés, casitas are one- and two-room wood frame buildings, often with gardens and small animals (chickens, ducks, sometimes a goat, etc.), built in appropriated abandoned lots by Puerto Rican residents to transform their environment, which had been left neglected. Casitas were a way to use abandoned lots for positive things for the community. The government said they were illegal and wanted them demolished (Aponte-Parés 1997: 56).
10. The two movement workshops connected to *Familias* were designed for general audiences from beginners to experienced dancers: 1) *Mothers and teenage daughters: supporting ourselves and each other*. Conducted by Merián Soto with women from the dance company. Description: Following a slow and gentle warm-up consisting of exercises to enhance physical, movement, and sensory awareness participants perform different partnering techniques which explore various forms of contact, leading and following, and ways of supporting each other's weight. Workshops culminate in the creation and performance of mini-duets. Open to women of all ages. Bring a partner: 2)

Men's workshop/Fathers & Sons. Conducted by company members James Adlesic and Niles Ford. Description: Following a warm-up consisting of exercises to enhance physical, movement, and sensory awareness participants perform different movement techniques that explore ways of expressing masculinity and of supporting each other's weight. Open to men of all ages. Both workshops were two hours and the number of participants: 10-20 (Soto "movement workshops descriptions").

11. In the Bronx, *How I Became a Boogie-Down Rican* was developed through presentations at BAAD!/Bronx Academy of Arts and Dance in their Boogie Down Dance Series, studio showing at Casita Maria Center for Arts and Education, and an excerpt at Pregones Theater (during APAP showcases). In Manhattan and Brooklyn: Dixon Place (at the invitation of Arthur Aviles), Movement Research Judson Church, Movement Research Eden's Expressway and Dance Theater Workshop Studios, Chez Bushwick, as well as at Cornell University (Ithaca, NY), as well as academic conferences at the University of Limerick (Ireland) and Northwestern University (Chicago). In Montreal (Canada), I performed the work at: Studio 303, Casa del Popolo, mange mes pieds studio, La Elastica, and Sala Rossa. Note: I included two videos of my performance (the excerpt at BAAD! and full length work at Northwestern University) so the viewer could see the full work and also the moments of connection that the students and particularly the Bronx audiences had with the piece. The piece was originally called "City Markings." I am considering now whether to change the title to "Becoming Boogie-Down Rican" to further signal its ongoingness.

12. Host Aimee Herman read Emmanuel Xavier's biography before he read his work and introduced him as a "neo-nuyorican" (Herman "Emmanuel Xaiver").

13. Performance history of Arthur Aviles' *Maeva de Oz* :

June 2010: performed at Pregones Theater. Dancer/choreographer Arthur Aviles honored with a 2010 Pregones Master Artist Award. Concert of songs from *Super Maeva de OZ*;
February 2010: BAAD!/ Bronx Academy of Arts and Dance with guest artists: Elizabeth "Macha" Marrero, Yvette Martinez and Nancy Friedman;

May 2009: sneak preview with musical guests Mahina Movement at BAAD!;

May 2001: Riverbank State Park Theatre featured fractured stories of *Maeva*;

July 2000: HERE Arts Center;

April 2000: BAAD!

1998: BAAD! (premiere)

May 1997: The Point CDC (performance of the first section).

“Arthur Aviles is up to something special at his new uptown headquarters, the landmark former American Banknote building, where he creates and presents dance that could only have come from a New Yorker, from the South Bronx, to be specific. Mr. Aviles's choreography is like good folk art, but it is also funky, political and gaudily irrepressible (Dunning “Listings” 2000).

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Appendix One

Artist biographies: *Familias* lead and collaborating artists

Current biographies for *Familias* lead artists and co-founders of *Pepatián*:

Pepón Osorio

Best known for his large-scale baroque and polemically charged installations, Pepón Osorio merges conceptual art and community dynamics. Osorio's work emphasizes the exhibition space as an intermediary between the social architecture of communities and the mainstream art world. He has worked with well over 25 communities across the U.S. and internationally, creating installations based on real life experiences. For almost two decades Pepón Osorio has been presenting work in unconventional places prior to exhibiting in a museum setting, thus exploring the subjectivity of meaning in art and the multiple meanings that these installations achieve depending on their location. He is a MacArthur Fellow, and Professor of Art at Temple University's Tyler School of Art.

Merián Soto

As Artistic Director of Merián Soto Performance/Practice, Soto is the creator of Branch Dancing and Modal Practice. Her work has been presented across the US and internationally since the mid '80s.

Soto is one of the Founding Artistic Directors, along with Patti Bradshaw and Pepón Osorio, of *Pepatián*, the Bronx-based, multi-disciplinary Latino arts organization. In that capacity, she developed, curated and produced numerous projects featuring new works by emerging Latino dance and performance artists, including the celebrated Rompeforma Festival presented in Puerto Rico from 1989-1996.

Soto is known for her experiments with Salsa - the dance and music of Pan-Latino collective experiences - in critically acclaimed works such as *Así se baila un Son* (1999) *Prequel(a)*: *Deconstruction of a Passion for Salsa* (2002) and *La Máquina del Tiempo* (2004).

Since 2005 Soto has created an extensive series of dances with branches including two award winning works: SoMoS (2012) and the One Year Wissahickon Park Project (2007-08).

Soto is the recipient of numerous awards including a New York Dance and Performance Award "BESSIE" for sustained choreographic achievement in 2000, a Greater Philadelphia Dance and Physical Theater Award "ROCKY" for her One-Year Wissahickon Park Project in 2008, and in 2012 a Next Generation Award from the Philadelphia City Paper for SoMoS.

A renowned educator, Soto is Professor of Dance at the Esther Boyer College of Music and Dance at Temple University. meriansoto.com

Current biographies for several of the collaborating artists in *Familias*:

James Adlesic performed nationally and internationally from 1991-1999 in both *Historias* and *Familias* by choreographer Merián Soto & visual artist Pepón Osorio. He later worked as Company Manger for Merián Soto Dance & Performance, 2001-2003 before moving into film and television work.

Irene Sosa began working in film in 1982 and since then has made over 20 documentaries. She has also worked as camera person and editor in film and video, and collaborated with other artists in many multimedia installations and dance performances. Her work has been shown in many national and international venues. irenesosa.com

Kathy Westwater creates art that exists in the human body. Described by Dance Magazine as "bloodless and fascinating" and The Brooklyn Rail as "at the limits of the human," her work responds to contemporary experience and the societal landscape in which it manifests by reimagining the body's movement potential.

Westwater's major works have explored the built environments of landfills and parks ("PARK"); phenomena of war and pain ("Macho"); human and animal culture ("twisted, tack, broken"); psycho-physical states of fear ("Dark Matter"); and interactive virtual environments ("The Fortune Cookie Dance"). Developed in New York City, since 1996 her dances have been seen at New York Live Arts, Movement Research at Judson Church, Brooklyn Museum of Art, Franklin Furnace, Danspace Project, Joyce SoHo, 92nd Street Y, Dixon Place, Lower Manhattan Cultural Council, Performance Space 122, Brooklyn Arts Exchange, Pratt Institute, Reed College, and many parks and public spaces, among others.

Influenced by early studies with Simone Forti, Dana Reitz, and Sara Rudner, Westwater performed in Forti's seminal works "Slant Board" and "Huddle" at Lincoln Center and in Steve Paxton's influential "Satisfyin' Lover" and "State" at the Museum of Modern Art. She performed nationally and internationally from 1991-1999 in both "Historias" and "Familias" by choreographer Merián Soto & visual artist Pepón Osorio, as well as in works by Sally Silvers and K.J. Holmes. Westwater received an MFA from Sarah Lawrence where she was awarded the Bessie Schönberg Scholarship, and a BA from William and Mary. kathywestwater.org.

Appendix Two

Program: *Familias* (1995)

Hostos Center for the Arts & Culture and Pepatían present

FAMILIAS

Concept & Direction **Merián Soto & Pepón Osorio**

Choreography **Merián Soto** in collaboration with
James Adlesic, Patricia Dávila, Niles Ford, Merceditas Mañago, Kathy Westwater

Sets and Costumes **Pepón Osorio**

Film/Video **Irene Sosa**

Music **Carl Royce**

Lighting Design **Jack Jacobs**

Starring

James Adlesic, Patricia Dávila, Niles Ford, Merceditas Mañago, Kathy Westwater
and

**Vicky Argueta, Donovan Arroyo, Juan Antonio Arroyo, Lorena Balbuena, Natalie
Balbuena, Sara Balbuena, Michelle Boudreau, Yesenia Cecilio, Don Gellver, Belinda de
Jesús, Caleb de Jesús, Ana de Pagán, Alejandra Martorell, Nelson Orozco, Marcelo
Osorio-Soto, Darius Rusell, Noemí Segarra, Al Turner and Josefina Rodriguez**
with

Members of Pax Theater:

**Melanie Fernández, Raymond Mozón, Oswaldo Ramírez, Fernando Rosario, Laureana
Sierra**

and

Los Cumbancheros

Musicians

Brad Craig, Chris Deschert, Mark Epstein, Carl Royce, Jonathan (Yunito) Royce

“Coming Out of Darkness” written by **Sandra Maria Esteves**

The Families

Arroyo, Ayres-Toro, Balbuena, de León, García, Gómez, Grullón and Rodríguez

Community Outreach Coordinator **Sandra García**

Assistant Outreach Coordinator **Eduardo Alegría**

Set and Costume Coordinator **Lorena Figuerola**

Stage Manager **Susan Raidin**

Technical Director **Jonathan Belcher**

Production Assistant **Ana de León**

Stage Hands **Felícita Pedroso, Javier de Mulder**

Writer Corps **Sandra Maria Esteves, Don Gellver**

FAMILIAS

Border Crossing

Mom with the kids

Patricia Dávila

James and the Angels

James Adlesic solo

I won't be your angel anymore

Kathy Westwater solo

The Party

~ There will be a ten-minute intermission ~

The Dream

Sunday Morning

Adios

Merceditas Mañago leaves

La calle está dura / the street is hard

Niles Ford

Coming out of darkness

In the Garden

FAMILIAS is sponsored by Hostos Center for Arts and Culture and Pepatián in a unique residency project throughout 1994-95. **FAMILIAS** is being commissioned by The Hostos Center with support from The Lila Wallace Reader's Digest Arts Partners Program. It has received residency support from Jacob's Pillow Dance Festival/Winter Pillow Project in Philadelphia and The Dance Center of Columbia College in Chicago. It is also made possible with generous support of The Rockefeller Foundation, AT&T Foundation, The Greenwall Foundation, Joyce-Mertz Gillmore Foundation, New York Community Trust, Jerome Foundation, and Harkness Foundations for Dance; and public support from New York State Council on the Arts, Bronx Council on the Arts, and New York City Department of Cultural Affairs in cooperation with Bronx Borough President Fernando Ferrer and the Bronx delegation to the City Council.

Pepatián is a Bronx-based multidisciplinary arts organization, dedicated to creating, presenting, and supporting contemporary Latino performance work, and reaching out to Latino arts communities underserved by mainstream institutions. Founded in 1983 by visual artist Pepón Osorio and choreographers Merián Soto and Patti Bradshaw, Pepatián is now recognized as the foremost Latino new dance and performance organization in New York City. Pepatián's programs are supported with public funds from the National Endowment for the Arts, the New York State Council on the Arts, the New York City Department of Cultural Affairs, the Bronx Council on the Arts, as well as by Rockefeller Foundation, Greenwall Foundation, Joyce-Mertz Gillmore Foundation, AT&T Foundation, New York Community Trust, Puerto Rico Community

Foundation, Con Edison, Chemical Bank and individual donors.

For further information, please contact:
 Daniela Montana, Executive Director
 Pepatián
 1001 Grand Concourse, #10F
 Bronx, New York 10452
 (718) 588-1936 (phone and fax)

Kathy Westwater has been a member of Merián Soto and Pepón Osorio's Pepatián since 1992. Ms. Westwater collaborated and performed in Pepatián's "Historias" at venues including Jacob's Pillow dance Theater Workshop, Los Angeles Contemporary Exhibitions and Lincoln Center's Serious Fun, among others. Previously she performed with Lesa MacLaughlin & Dancers and the Louisville Ballet Company. Her solo work, based in improvisational methods, has been presented in NYC at Performance Space 122, and in Washington, DC and in Puerto Rico. Ms. Westwater received a BA in Economics from the College of William and Mary and is Managing Director of Doug Varone and Dancers.

Irene Sosa, New York-based independent film and video maker from Venezuela, has a Master's in Film and Television from New York University. Ms. Sosa produced and directed a documentary on domestic violence titled "Battered Women, Four Survivors." In the fall of 1994, she made a documentary about the retrospective of Nancy Spero and Leon Golub in Paris. In 1993 she finished "Woman as Protagonist The Art of Nancy Spero." Her short video documentaries since 1989 include "To Soar," "Minerva," "Sky Goddess," "Madrid," "Nancy Spero in Derry Northern Ireland," "Pepon Osorio Retrospective" and a series on adult literacy workshops in collaboration with Maritza Arrastia. her videos have been shown at Exit Art, Festival Du Films Sur L'Art (Montreal), the Chicago Art Institute, the University of Illinois, The American Center in Paris, The Museum of Modern Art (New York) WNYC Channel 31 N.Y.C. In 1992 Sosa worked with Merián Soto and Pepón Osorio on "Historias," a multimedia dance performance. She also in 1993 presented "When I Grow Up" a multimedia performance in San Juan, Puerto Rico and in PS 122 in 1995. She collaborated with photographer Susan Unterberg on "Close Ties" a photo/video installation presented at The New Museum of Contemporary Art, N.Y.C. She is currently working on her next documentary, "Sexual Exiles."

Housed in Middle School 137 in Community School District 10, **Los Cumbancheros** is a program that services more than 300 bilingual students in The Bronx. The purpose of this program is to reinforce English as a Second Language through music. Los Cumbancheros are Ruth Alcantares, Fleriser Bello, Isis Puente, Ramira Arias, Yohanny Perez, Renatta Silverio, Reyni Silverio, Austria Carvajal, Yahaira Montolio and Edith Flores.

La familia de León Ana de Leon arrived in The Bronx from Puerto Rico 12 years ago with her three children Malvin, Alvin, and Elba. Ana is taking courses at Hostos College and is an assistant to the set designer for FAMILIAS, Pepón Osorio.

La familia Toro Nieves Ayres, her husband Victor Toro and their daughter Rosita are from Chile. They have lived in the South Bronx since 1985. Nieves and Victor have been activists for many years and are founders of La Peña del Bronx. Rosita is a student who volunteers at La Peña.

TECHNICAL STAFF

Jonathan Belcher has worked as a Lighting Designer and Technical Director with many artists such as Sung Soo Ahn, Griesha Coleman, Ron Brown/Evidence, Urban Bush Woman, Art Bridgeman and Myrna Packer, Reggie Wilson, Phranc, Victoria Marks, Patrick Scully, Evelyn Velez Aguayo among others.

Lorena Figuerola from Valencia, Spain, studied Fine Arts and obtained a baccalaureate degree in sculpture. A resident of New York for the past five years, Ms. Balbuena has worked in costume and set design for several years here and in Europe. She has been Pepón Osorio's assistant since 1992.

Jack Jacobs is the production manager at Hostos Center for the Arts.

Susan Radin is a Production Manager and a Stage Manager for dance, music and festivals. Recent credits include the Lincoln Center Out-of-Doors festival, the JVC Jazz Festival New York and the Celebrate Plano Festival in Plano Texas.

PEPATIAN'S ARTISTIC DIRECTORS

Merián Soto

Choreographer Merián Soto has been presenting solo, group and collaborative pieces in New York City since 1983 in venues such as Dance Theater Workshop, Lincoln Center for the Performing Arts, Performance Space 122, Whitney Museum at Philip Morris, Lehman Center for the Performing Arts, Teatro Pregones, Festival Latino at the Public Theater and others. Her work has also been produced extensively in her native Puerto Rico, and across the United States and Latin America. Since 1985 she has collaborated with visual artist Pepón Osorio on critically acclaimed dance/performance works such as NO REGRETS, BROKEN HEARTS, and HISTORIAS which continues to tour since 1992. Soto is dedicated to supporting and promoting new Latino dance and performance expressions largely unrecognized by mainstream institutions both in her own work and in the work of others. She is a founding member of Pepatián, Inc., a New York-based organization involved primarily in the creation and production of new works and projects by Latino artists. In recent years she has become involved in developing and curating local and international projects featuring Latino new dance and performance, such as, ¡MUEVETE!, AQUI SE HABLA ESPANOL, and REVISIONES. In addition, she is co-director, with Viveca Vázquez of ROMPEFORMA: MARATON DE BAILE, PERFORMANCE Y VISUALES, an international Latino artists' project presented annually in Puerto Rico. She is the recipient of many grants and awards including National Endowment for the Arts

Choreographer's Fellowships for the years 1990 through 1996 and a 1993 Mexico-U.S. exchange fellowship to work in Mérida for two months.

Pepón Osorio

Originally from Puerto Rico, Pepón Osorio has made his home in the South Bronx since 1975. Since 1985 his work has focused primarily on the experience of his adopted community. Osorio is an installation artist committed to creating and supporting contemporary Latino art across disciplines. Since 1983, Osorio has collaborated with choreographer Merián Soto. He has created a body of work that explores Latino popular expressions, exposes cultural stereotypes and affirms Puerto Rican cultural identity. Mr. Osorio has received several grants, commissions and awards from the National Endowment for the Arts, New York State Council on the Arts, New York Foundation for the Arts, a 1985 New York Dance and Performance BESSIE Award, and a TCG Designer's Fellowship in 1990. In 1991, his work was the subject of a major retrospective at El Museo del Barrio in New York. In 1993, the Cleveland Institute of Art and the Whitney Museum of American Art commissioned a major installation entitled THE SCENE OF THE CRIME (WHOSE CRIME?), which was exhibited at the 1993 Whitney Biennial. EN LA BARBERIA NO SE LLORA (NO CRYING IN THE BARBER SHOP), a large installation exploring machismo in Latino culture, was commissioned by Real Art Ways and opened in Hartford in July 1994. Osorio was awarded a media fellowship from Rockefeller Foundation as well as a Louis Comfort Tiffany Biennial Award. Osorio's most recent work includes BADGE OF HONOR, a major video installation on view until 1996, commissioned by the Newark Museum about a young man growing up in the absence of his father. Osorio is also working on two major video installations one commissioned by the Fabric Workshop in Philadelphia about the disruption of family lives and home privacy by social institutions and the other commissioned by Sculpture Chicago is entitled EL GRAN SALON DE LA FAMA. All new installations reflect Osorio's commitment to showing his new work in the community before it is exhibited in a museum. His work is represented in major collections across the US including the Whitney Museum, El Museo del Barrio, The National Gallery and Wadsworth Atheneum

PEPATIAN

Pepatián has been hailed as one of the most exciting and innovative arts organizations in the United States today. Founded in 1983, by choreographers Merián Soto and Patti Bradshaw together with visual artist Pepón Osorio, Pepatián has dedicated itself to the creation and presentation of multi-disciplinary Latino Art. Reaching well beyond the boundaries of traditional theatre, Pepatián's lively and inspired touring programs of dance and performance, residencies and community workshops have successfully encouraged greater appreciation for the diversity of contemporary Latino Arts. For over a decade, the company has nurtured contemporary Latino artists whose unique theatrical visions have regularly won over audiences of all backgrounds.

Since its inception, this extraordinary organization has skillfully utilized the abilities of talented choreographers, visual artists, dancers, musicians, filmmakers and writers who produce provocative and unprecedented works of tremendous energy and imagination. The company's highly inventive performances resonate with history and popular culture, social and spiritual issues resulting in visually resplendent social theatre. Pepatián's emphasis on the artistic process and community outreach inevitably lead to artistic excellence.

PEPATIAN'S NEWEST PRODUCTION

FAMILIAS --created by Pepatián's artistic directors Merián Soto and Pepón Osorio-- is a remarkable production of epic scale. It is a theatrical monument to the familial experience in the South Bronx. Dance, film, slide projection, music and oral histories are masterfully blended to create an exciting presentation of image and performance. The Chicago Tribune described *FAMILIAS* as "poignant and resonant.... gripping theatre....a thoroughly original and enjoyable drama of American life."

Begun in 1994, this multi-disciplinary work has been developed in collaboration with composer Carl Royce, filmmaker Irene Sosa, a company of five performers, eight local families and art partners in residence at Hostos Center for the Arts and Culture in the Bronx. As with previous Pepatián productions, artistic process is paramount: the work itself is inseparable from the process. Groundbreaking in their approach, Soto and Osorio in collaboration with their

company, have redefined the notion of community involvement. FAMILIAS is the result of two years of creative workshops, meetings and field trips. Each artist was assigned to a specific family, establishing an atmosphere of trust and mutual respect. Involved in every aspect of the creation and production, family participants actively contributed to this richly layered work which recounts the untold stories of urban Latino families through their own eyes. The artists have literally merged art with life. FAMILIAS has received recognition as a precedent-setting model for future creative endeavors involving communities. The FAMILIAS tour will stimulate contemporary theatre and new dance on local, national and international levels.

HISTORY

Pepatián was founded as an artists' collaborative dedicated to performance work that crosses traditional artistic boundaries and experiments with interdisciplinary connections. Pepatián promotes the work of Pepón Osorio and Merián Soto as they develop a fresh approach to performance, incorporating popular expressions such as the decorative arts and salsa dancing. Pepatián has sought to promote audience understanding of the diversity of contemporary Latino Arts and champion the work of Latino artists. New strategies to extend outreach are developing.

In its twelve-year history, Pepatián has presented over 200 performances in both traditional and non-traditional spaces throughout the United States, the Caribbean and Latin America. Venues include Serious Fun at Lincoln Center, Dance Theatre Workshop, The Public Theatre, Pregones Theatre, Carver Cultural Center, Central Park Summerstage and Jacob's Pillow Dance Festival. Pepatián has initiated celebrated international touring and residency projects including: TOUR DE FUERZA: NUEVO LATINO DANCE & PERFORMANCE and REVISIONES.

ROMPEFORMA: MARATON DE BAILE, PERFORMANCE Y VISUALES has become an eagerly anticipated annual event in San Juan, Puerto Rico. ROMPEFORMA serves as a vehicle by which Pepatián presents both internationally renown masters working at the vanguard of contemporary art movements and emerging artists --soon to be leading forces themselves-- at critical junctures in the development of their careers. The high artistic quality of Pepatián's rich repertoire has been critically and popularly acclaimed.

Appendix Three

Context: South Bronx-based art and non-profit organizations (1940-2014)

This timeline provides a glimpse into the landscape of the South Bronx non-profit ecology. Included are arts and culture organizations, grassroots social and environmental justice organizations, as well as key moments in the history of the Puerto Rican diaspora. This chronological timeline is part of the alternative narrative created by borough residents and artists that counteract the negative imagery most often presented by popular media. After one artistic look over the shoulder to the nineteenth century, this timeline begins in the 1940's with the steady arrival of Puerto Ricans to New York City and the Bronx, and explores the development of the borough from an arts and organizational perspective. This timeline is a quick survey that offers a contextualized view of the amount and variety of non-profits working in the South Bronx. Mission statements of each organization are included to give added context.

Some general themes: in the 1980's more non-profits are begun in the South Bronx than in the two previous decades combined. There is a marked increase in environmental and social justice groups in the mid-1990s. The number of venues for incubation of artists' works reaches a plateau in the mid-1990s, and two subsequent spaces closed due to rent increases in the mid-2000s. Two titans of the arts in the Bronx - Bill Aguado at Bronx Council on the Arts and Wally Edgecombe at Hostos Center for the Arts & Culture – retired after over 25 years leading their respective organizations. By 2014, several of the main performance venues successfully weathered changes: the Hostos Center for the Arts & Culture hired new staff (three staff members in fact, were hired to replace Edgecombe), BAAD! successfully moved to a new location in Westchester Square. Bronx Council on the Arts is due to move into a new location near BAAD! in 2016. In 2013, Pregones Theater successfully merged with the Puerto Rican Traveling Theater and now programs events at their Times Square location as well as in the Bronx.

The borough remains as Edgecombe remarked, “venue poor,” but there are continued signs of hope for new spaces. These new performance spaces include the Bronx Music Heritage Center, Boricua College, Andrew Freedman Home, as well as the current and future performance space

planned at Casita Maria Center for the Arts and Education. In addition, other nonprofits like Dancing in the Streets and The Laundromat Project, (and the one-off exhibition curated and produced by No Longer Empty at the Andrew Freedman Home) focus their performance works at alternative sites throughout the borough offering another source of connection between artists and public.

In particular, cleaning up the Bronx River has evolved into a strong force in the Hunts Point area. This clean-up work, which started in 1974 as the “Bronx River Restoration Project,” later developed into two other organizations. This catalyst, in addition to Majora Carter’s work with the organization “Sustainable South Bronx,” has now become part of the inspiration for the New York City Economic Development Corporation’s “South Bronx Greenway Project.” This initiative plans to create connections between the waterfront and Hunts Point residents as well as provide opportunities for economic growth (“Projects: The South Bronx Greenway”).

These plans echo the early work of the landscape designer Frederick Law Olmsted in the nineteenth century. Olmsted, who had designed New York City’s Central and Prospect Parks as well as Montreal’s Mont Royal Park, was hired by the Department of Public Parks to draw up a master plan for the Bronx in 1877. His visionary plan worked with the natural, irregular topography of the Bronx. He envisioned that the borough would remain residential with interconnecting roadways, and emphasized circular routing that would create discrete neighborhoods served and shielded with systems of irregular streets, parkways and transit lines (Gonzalez E. 2002: 43). This plan did not adopt the grid layout of Manhattan but gave the Bronx its’ own character. By 1893, the Bronx was to be urban (Gonzalez E. 2002: 46).

The South Bronx Greenway Plan’s development of new parks along the river, “greenstreets,” and continuous bike lanes interconnect areas of the South Bronx and provide a sort of buffering effect for the surrounding neighborhoods. The plans of Olmstead and these current design plans suggest how, after all these years, the land and the river itself, the topography, insists on its own approach. Olmsted and the Greenway Project partly reflect each other’s vision for the borough, over 100 years later.

This material also incorporates information listed in the “Timeline” compiled by the curators of *Urban Mythologies: The Bronx Represented Since the 1960s* (Yee and Hertz 104-105).

Art and Non-Profits in the South Bronx

19th Century

The piano industry flourished in the Bronx between 1879 -1925. At the end of the nineteenth century, piano making had become one of The Bronx’s signature industries. By 1919, the Bronx was, according to the *New York Times*, the “center of New York’s piano industry” (Bronx Chamber).

1940

1940’s – known as the “Great Migration,” Puerto Ricans leave the island and arrive in NYC and the South Bronx during the Great Depression, and in 1948 with “Operation Bootstrap” as the U.S. industrializes Puerto Rico, more people from Puerto Rico arrive in NYC and the South Bronx.

1941 – *Casa Amadeo* Record Store is founded; this shop is the oldest, continuously occupied Latin music store in NYC.

1947 – *Teatro Puerto Rico* founded in the Mott Haven area of the South Bronx and offered Spanish-language variety shows (at a time when there was no TV) that featured *jibaro* /country music, comedians, Mexican movies and popular music stars, icons like La Lupe, Tito Puente. Its’ “Golden Era” was from 1947-1956. “The Teatro Puerto Rico was to the Latino community in the South Bronx what the Apollo Theater was to the African American community in the Harlem section of Manhattan” (Verhovek 1987).

1950

1950's – post-World War II, more Puerto Ricans leave the island to arrive in NYC and the South Bronx.

1950 - Savoy Manor Ballroom on East 149th Street, at Walton Avenue, in Hamilton Heights. Along with Teatro Puerto Rico, this was another center for dance and music. It's now part of Hostos Community College. Wally Edgecombe, then-Director of Hostos Center for the Arts and Culture, commented to me how inspiring it was for the Center to be established on the same ground of the old Savoy (2013).

1952 – Hunts Point Wastewater treatment plant begins operation; this is one of the largest of NYC's 14 water pollution control plants. The plant treats wastewater from a 16,000-acre area.

1954 – Lolita LeBron along with four other men fired shots in the House Chambers at the U.S. Capitol in support of independence for Puerto Rico. Five persons were hit.

1955 – Bronx County Historical Society founded.

1956 - Major Deegan Expressway is built in the South Bronx, displacing hundreds of thousands.

1958 – Puerto Rican Day Parade/Desfile Puertorriqueño, Inc. is founded in El Barrio/Spanish Harlem, New York.

1960

1960 – John F. Kennedy visits the Bronx during his presidential campaign (Yee and Hertz 104).

1961 – ASPIRA organization is founded to empower the Puerto Rican and Latino community through advocacy and the education and leadership development of its youth (Aspira “Mission”).

1961 – Casita Maria Center for Arts & Education moves to the South Bronx from East Harlem; founders Claire and Elizabeth Sullivan (sisters of the television pioneer Ed Sullivan) willed into life in 1934. Working from a small East Harlem apartment, “Casita Maria’s goal back then was to give the children of recently arrived Hispanic families the educational support needed to thrive in their new homeland—the young could lead their parents and their community to full participation in the American Dream” (Casita Maria Center “History”).

1961 - *West Side Story* -- nationwide theatrical film release, features Rita Moreno, and depicts Puerto Rican diaspora in NYC

1962 - Bronx Council on the Arts founded: " A pioneering advocate for cultural equity, the Bronx Council on the Arts nurtures the development of a diverse array of artists and arts organizations, and builds strong cultural connections in and beyond The Bronx” (Bronx Council on the Arts “Mission”).

1963 – Cross Bronx Expressway is built. The construction of this expressway severely disrupted neighborhoods. One resident, Lillian Edelstein, in Robert A. Caro’s epic portrait of Robert Moses stated, “I was fighting for my home. And for my mother. And sister. And daughter. I had a lot to fight for” (Caro 1974: 865). There was another route the Cross Bronx Expressway could have taken and it wouldn’t have meant disrupting entire neighborhoods and cutting through East Tremont. At a time when picket lines in front of City Hall were rare, Edelstein was able to get busloads of middle-aged Jewish housewives to march outside, carrying signs she lettered herself at night (Caro 1974: 870). Even though ultimately unsuccessful, their stories of powerful struggles are also part of Bronx history.

1966 – United Bronx Parents founded by Dr. Evelina Lopez Antonetty is still in operation and operates as a community-grown organization that provides a variety of human and social services in the South Bronx community and on a global basis (United Bronx Parents “About”).

1967 - New York City Produce Market begins operations in Hunts Point. This Produce Market covers one third of the peninsula and is the source for most of New York City’s food with tens of

thousands of trucks moving through the area daily (Johnston). With an annual revenue of \$2.3 billion, this produce market is inaccessible to the local community; wholesale agreements prohibit residents from buying food there, and union arrangements bar residents from working there (Johnston). Yet this area is known as a “food desert,” as explained by reporter Elisabeth Ponsot, an “area with too few options for fresh produce and groceries given their populations. Residents here are disproportionately suffering from obesity, heart disease and diabetes — a fact experts contend can be the result of a community landscape devoid of healthy options.”

1967 - Chuck Davis formed the Chuck Davis Dance Company at the South Bronx Community Action Theatre, later moved to Bronx Community College. In 1977, he started DanceAfrica and relocated to Brooklyn (BAM Blog, “1977:The Origins of DanceAfrica”).

1967 – Most of the South Bronx is classified as a Model Cities Neighborhood by this federal program and allocated \$300 million (Yee and Hertz 104).

1968 – SEBCO/South East Bronx Community Organization is founded by Father Louise R. Gigante to offer subsidized rehabilitation housing and other services (South East Bronx Community Organization, “History”.)

1968 - Hostos Community College of the City of New York: Eugenio María de Hostos Community College was established in the South Bronx as a bilingual college to meet the higher educational needs of people from this and similar communities who historically have been excluded from higher education (Hostos Community College “Mission”).

1969 – Young Lords began in NYC to support neighborhood empowerment and Puerto Rican self-determination (1969-1973).

1970

1970s - Four jails and detention centers were added to Riker’s Island.

1970 – Joan Miller founded the *Dance Players*, where she experimented with socio-political ideas and satires. She taught dance at Lehman College in the Bronx for more than 30 years. In 2000 she retired from the dance department that she helped to found (she later died March 23, 2014). Her company was in residence at Lehman College from 1970 until 1980, afterwards they remained in residence unofficially (*PBS Great Performances*). One of her former students, Abdel Salaam, co-founded the Bronx-based dance company, *Forces of Nature*, and in 2013 was selected as the incoming artistic director for *DanceAfrica* at BAM.

1970 – Co-op City in the northeastern Bronx is completed with more than 15,000 subsidized apartments and many long-term Bronx families move there (Yee and Hertz 104).

1971 – Bronx Museum of the Arts was founded with a focus on 20th-century and contemporary art, while serving the culturally diverse populations of the Bronx and the greater New York metropolitan area (Bronx Museum “About”).

1972 – BronxWorks founded to help individuals and families improve their economic and social well-being. From toddlers to seniors, they feed, shelter, teach, and support their neighbors to build a stronger community (BronxWorks “Mission”).

1972 - South Bronx Overall Economic Development Corporation / SoBRO was founded to rebuild community and create jobs by developing local businesses, offering job training opportunities, and creating affordable housing and commercial spaces (South Bronx Overall Economic Development Corporation “Who We Are”).

1973 – Bruckner Expressway was built.

1973 – The Nixon administration stops all federal housing monies, prompting many Model Cities projects to be brought to a standstill (Yee and Hertz 104).

1973 – Nuyorican Poets Café: First founded in poet Miguel Algarin’s apartment, today the Nuyorican Poets Café continues as one of the country's most highly respected arts organizations and an acclaimed forum for innovative poetry, music, hip hop, video, visual arts, comedy and

theatre for artists traditionally under-represented in the mainstream media and culture (Nuyorican Poets Café “History”).

1973-1978 – Save Hostos College community mobilization struggle. Students, staff, faculty and community members fought to prevent the Board of Higher Education from closing the college down. As chronicled by Hostos Professor Emeritus Gerald Meyer, this five-year struggle was one of the most prolonged and successful mass movements in New York City. This struggle referenced past and international allies like the Young Lords, Pedro Albizu Campos, the leader of the Puerto Rican Nationalist Party, the tragically defeated Popular Unity government in Chile, all of whom were mentioned in the drive to Save Hostos College during the financial cutbacks of the 1970s (Meyer 97).

1973-74 – Hip-Hop is Born - The official birthday of the Universal Zulu Nation (founded by Afrika Bambaataa) is November 12, 1973. The official birthday of Hip Hop is November 12th, 1974. *Zulu Nation* began to build a youth movement out of the creativity of a new generation of outcast youth with an authentic, liberating worldview that is now defined as an international hip-hop awareness movement. Founder Afrika Bambaataa was a DJ from the South Bronx, and instrumental in early development of hip-hop throughout the 1980s. As one of the three originators (with Kool DJ Herc and Grandmaster Flash) of break-beat deejaying, Afrika Bambaataa is known as the “Grandfather” of Universal Hip-Hop culture and Father of Electro-Funk. Jams were held at Bronx River Houses – where Afrika grew up (Universal Zulu Nation “Hip-hop history”).

1973 – Kool DJ Herc, originally from Jamaica, is one of the founding fathers of Hip-Hop and started working “the breaks.” These parties were held in the basement community room of the Sedgwick Houses (1520 Sedgwick Avenue in the Bronx). August 11, 1973 marks the first party where Kool DJ Herc began (Kool Herc, “DJ Kool Herc”).

1974 - Boricua College was first founded in Brooklyn New York: The college was designed to serve the educational needs of Puerto Ricans and other Hispanics (Boricua College, “Introducing Boricua College”).

1974 - New York City Meat Market begins operation in Hunts Point

1974 – En Foco founded in the Bronx, and is dedicated to cultural diversity in photography (En Foco, “Home”).

1974 – 1984 – Barrunto Dancers, founded by Beti Garcia and Myrna Renaud, create and perform new dance works.

“*Barrunto* is a Puerto Rican word for the physical sensation one feels in anticipation of imminent, momentous change – a premonition. Barrunto Dancers believe that one can shape the direction of those qualitative changes. Barrunto Dancers are a multi-ethnic network of choreographers and dancers whose work tells stories of struggle and pride; whose techniques draws upon diverse dance heritages; who performances are reaching out to both dance audience and community audiences who have little access to dance. Located in downtown Manhattan: 61 Second Avenue” (Cultural Correspondence “Directory of Arts Activism”).

1974 - Bronx River Restoration Project formed by community activists to clean and restore the one of the most polluted waterways in the country (Bronx River Alliance, “History”).

1974 – The policy of “planned shrinkage” begins with the withdrawal of services like police, fire, health sanitation and transportation (Yee and Hertz 104).

1974 – Community organizations are founded: Mid-Bronx Desperados, Northwest Bronx Community and Clergy Coalition, People’s Development Corporation (Yee and Hertz 104).

1975 - Algarín rented Sunshine Café, an Irish pub, on East 6th Street, and the founding poets called it "The Nuyorican Poets Café."

1976-1986 – Disco Fever dance club. Run by Sal Abatiello who featured hip-hop artists including Grandmaster Flash, Run-D.M.C. and quickly became the most famous hip hop club in New York. Producer Russell Simmons said: “if a rap record doesn't go around in the Fever, it's fake”(Adler).

1976 - Community organizations are founded: Banana Kelly Community Improvement Association, Bronx Frontier Development Corporation (Yee and Hertz 104).

1976 – Largest number of fires in the Bronx: 33,465 (Yee and Hertz 104).

1977 – President Jimmy Carter visits the Bronx, and is followed by television and newspaper cameramen who record widespread devastation and destruction of the urban surroundings. This projects a powerful negative image of The Bronx across the nation and around the world.

1977 - A group of Puerto Rican nationalists drove out hundreds of tourists from Liberty Island and fastened the flag of Puerto Rico to the forehead of the Statue of Liberty on October 25, 1977 to demand the release of four political prisoners: Lolita LeBron, Rafael Cancel Miranda, Irving Flores and Oscar Collazo (Landa 1977). President Carter granted one of the political prisoners clemency a few weeks earlier and Andres Figueroa Cordero had returned to Puerto Rico.

1977 - The last Bronx piano manufacturer, Krakauer, left the borough.

1977 – CBS television broadcasts documentary by Bill Moyers, “The Fire Next Door” (Yee and Hertz 104).

1977 – Grandmaster Flash, originally from Barbados, is a hip-hop musician and DJ who innovated the backspin technique, punch phrasing, and scratching. He lived in the South Bronx and also performed at Disco Fever (Grandmaster Flash, “Biography”).

1977 – New York City suffers a “blackout” on July 13. Looting and fires result in damaged goods and property, including 473 Bronx businesses (Yee and Hertz 104).

1977 - Televised image of burning building televised during live coverage of World Series at Yankee Stadium (Yee and Hertz 104).

1978 – Mind-Builders non-profit community arts center offers after-school programs and guidance for young people in music and movement skills (Mind-Builders, “About Us”).

Late 1970’s – 1980’s - “Writers Bench” was the bench on the 2/5 train platform (where the two train lines intersect) at 149th Street/Grand Concourse that was a meeting place for graffiti writers (The Cyber Bench: Documenting New York City Graffiti, “The Writer’s Bench at 149St).

1979 – early 1980s “Rock Steady Crew:” break dance crew was organized by b-boys Jimmy D and JoJo in the Bronx.

1978-1993– “Fashion/Moda” helped redefine art and spotlight graffiti artists and was most active from 1978-1985.

1980

1980’s - Tats Cru: graffiti artists established next door to The Point (founding members: bio, Nicer and BG183) and continues today (Tats Cru, “The Team”).

1980 – Bill Aguado becomes Executive Director, Bronx Council on the Arts (1980-2009; he was first hired in 1978).

1980 – Ronald Reagan, campaigning for President, visits the South Bronx.

1980 – delegation from Soviet Peace Committee tours Bronx as local government official seeks foreign aid to rebuild the South Bronx (Yee and Hertz 104).

1980 – Founding poets, Miguel Algarin, Miguel Piñero and Lucky Cienfuegos bought the current site of the Nuyorican Poets Café (236 East 3rd Street).

1981 - Funky Four Plus One (also known as Funky 4 + 1, with a female MC) was the first Hip-Hop/Rap group from The Bronx, New York, United States to receive a recording deal.

1981 - National Congress for Puerto Rican Rights was founded in the Bronx to end discrimination against Puerto Ricans. Founder Richie Perez was tremendously influenced and mentored by Evelina Antonetty and United Bronx Parents and his work as part of the Young Lord movement.

1981 – *Fort Apache, The Bronx* – film release, Dir. Daniel Petrie.

1981-1994 -- Jawole Willa Jo Zollar, founder of Urban Bush Women, lived in the Bronx and received grant support from the Bronx Council on the Arts early in her career.

1981 -- Executive Artistic Director/Choreographer Abdel R. Salaam and Executive Managing Director Olabamidele Husbands co-founded the *Forces of Nature Dance Theatre Company* in the Bronx.

1981 – Bronx Council on the Arts Longwood Arts Gallery: in 1985 and under the direction of artist (MacArthur Fellow) Fred Wilson, BCA established the Longwood Arts Gallery with a strong commitment to presenting works by contemporary local, national, and international artists in its thematic and solo exhibitions. In 1991, a second gallery was created to focus on Bronx-based artists. The exhibition program at the Gallery has addressed the urban condition, national and cultural identity, immigration, violence, racism, urban space, the environment, local Bronx history, street culture, and popular culture (Bronx Council on the Arts “Longwood Arts Gallery history”).

1981 – Tim Rollins and Kids of Survival begin working together (Berman 78).

1982 - Pregones Theater (originally founded in 1979) is the first not-for-profit professional Puerto Rican theater in the borough. It operated as a traveling theater group until it was first invited to have a home base at the Longwood Arts Project (formerly P.S. 39) by Bill Aguado and the Bronx Council on the Arts. Later Pregones found its home at St. Ann's Church in Mott Haven in 1986. Pregones Theater is a Bronx-based ensemble whose mission is (1) to create and

perform original musical theater and plays rooted in Puerto Rican/Latino cultures, and (2) to present other performing artists who share their twin commitment to the arts and civic enrichment (Pregones Theater, “History”).

1982 – Hostos Center for the Arts and Culture - Hostos Center for the Arts & Culture consists of a museum-grade art gallery, a 367-seat theater, and a 900-seat concert hall. The Hostos Center presents artists of national and international renown, and its mission is to be a cultural force in the Bronx and throughout the New York metropolitan area (Hostos Center “Mission”).

1983 – Pepatián is founded as an artist collective by Pepón Osorio, Patti Bradshaw and Merián Soto. In 2015, Pepatián is defined as a South Bronx-based organization dedicated to creating, producing and supporting contemporary multi-disciplinary art by Latino and Bronx-based artists (Pepatián, “Mission”).

1983 – *Los Pleneros de la 21* - a group of musicians and dancers who play Puerto Rican folkloric forms of *bomba y plena* was first formed in the South Bronx, NY and is now based in El Barrio/Spanish Harlem (Los Pleneros, “About Us”).

1984 – Jesse Jackson, who was running for Democratic nomination, spent a night in a public housing project in the South Bronx to draw attention to the plight of the poor.

1984 – En Foco established bi-lingual (English/Spanish) photographic magazine *Nueva Luz (En foco* “programs”) in the Bronx.

1985 – Merián Soto, Pepón Osorio and Patti Bradshaw/Pepatián performed *Cocinado /Cooking* at then-PS 1 (now MoMA PS 1). Pepón Osorio received a Bessie/New York Dance and Performance Award.

1986 – Sculptor John Ahearn received commission to create works for South Bronx Sculpture Park (Yee and Hertz 80-81).

1987 – Bronx Puerto Rican Day Parade was founded.

1987 *Vamos a La Pena* founded: believes that “any activity can happen so long as the community organizes to make it so” (Union Square Awards).

1987 - Tom Wolfe's 1987 novel *Bonfire of the Vanities* is published. An excerpt of his description of the South Bronx:

“Utterly empty, a vast open terrain. Block after block – how many? six? eight? a dozen? – entire blocks of the city without a building left standing. There were streets and curbing and sidewalks and light poles and nothing else. The eerie grid of a city was spread out before him, lit by chemical yellow of the street lamps. Here and there were traces of rubble and slag. The earth looked like concrete, except that it rolled this way...and up that way...the hills and dales of the Bronx...reduced to asphalt, concrete, and cinders...in a ghastly yellow gloaming. He had to look twice to make sure he was in fact still driving on a New York street” (Wolfe 1987: 82-83).

As Sarah Chinn, a professor of English at Hunter College of the City University of New York commented: “The Bronx of ‘*Bonfire*’ is the Bronx of the white imagination, not the Bronx of, say, DJ Kool Herc or, not to press the point, Sonia Sotomayor” (Roberts).

1987 - *Rincon Criollo/Downhome Corner* or *La Casita de Chema*, was founded, and it may well be the oldest casita in the South Bronx. Its’ community garden serves as an important cultural center, internationally recognized as a "school and performance" space that serves as an important incubator for *bomba y plena* practitioners playing these traditional musical expressions of Puerto Rico's African legacy and its current working class (Torres).

1987 – Bronx River Art Center / BRAC was founded to bring professional arts programming to a culturally underserved population (Bronx River Art Center, “About Us”).

1988 Pepatián officially incorporates as a non-profit organization.

1988 – BronxNet and BronxNet Television Programming was founded to provide Public Access Shows (BronxNet, “About Us”).

1988 – The Hunts Point Economic Development Corporation was established as a non-profit organization to support economic development and improve the Hunts Point business environment.

1988 – Merián Soto and Viveca Vazquez were part of Dance Theater Workshop's ambitious "Tour de Fuerza" festival, a 10-day salute to the new Latin American movement in dance, performance and music. Jennifer Dunning of *The New York Times* remarked:

Contemporary Latin and Spanish-American arts, now fashionable, it seems, are being celebrated throughout the city. The Tour de Fuerza, a ten-day festival of new Latin dance and performance, is at Dance Theater Workshop, with Creative Time's Up Tiempo festival at El Museo del Barrio, and the Hispanic Heritage Month festival at the Triplex is to come in early November. Ballet Hispanico has been celebrating on its own for 18 years, however, and it is doing just that now..." ("Arts Review").

1989 – 1996 - Merián Soto and Viveca Vasquez co-produce *Rompeforma: Maraton de Baile, Performance and Visuales*, an international Latino artists' performance and residency project held annually in San Juan, Puerto Rico from 1989-1996 with notable artists from the national and international experimental performing arts scene (Guillermo Gomez Peña, Coco Fusco and David Zambrano, etc). Their work was hailed by other artists as a "seminal postmodern festival" (Homar 2010: 211) and the "key for the development of the experimental scene in Puerto Rico" (De Jesús).

1988-1991 - Renny Molenaar founded "Black and White in Color" Gallery in the Bronx.

1990

1990-2002 This twelve-year period, often referred to as the "Latin Boom" or "Latin Explosion," echoed the "Decade of the Hispanic" in the 1980s and marked the "largest gain in mainstream market share for Latina/o pop culture in commercial media in the United States," among other gains in population, some electoral shifts and a growing niche in goods and services (Rivera-Servera 2012: 10).

1990 – Bronx Tourism Council established (Yee and Hertz 105).

1991 - Whedco/Women's Housing and Economic Development Serving the Bronx Community was founded (Whedco, "Who We Are").

1991 – Pepón Osorio had a retrospective at El Museo del Barrio in New York,

1991 - The South Bronx Clean Air Coalition was founded.

1991 – Arthur Aviles was invited by Merián Soto to perform in *Rompeforma*. He presented a solo work: "El Alfabeto Espanol" (August 1991).

1992 -Mothers on the Move / *Madres en Movimiento* (MOM) was founded. MOM is a member-led community organization that serves as a vehicle for low-income people of color to take strategic leadership in campaigns to transform themselves and their communities (Mothers on the Move, "Who We Are").

1992 – *Nos Quedamos/We Stay* was founded: a non-profit community development corporation located in Melrose Commons community (Nos Quedamos, "About Us").

1992 - Vernon C. Bain Center, a prison barge, was affixed to the land as an adjunct of Rikers Island.

1993/94 – The Point C.D.C./ Community Development Corporation is founded by Paul Lipson, Mildred Ruiz, Steven Sapp, and Maria Torres in a former bagel factory on the corner of Manida and Garrison Avenues in Hunt's Point. The Point is dedicated to youth development and the cultural and economic revitalization of the Hunts Point section of the South Bronx (The Point, "About Us").

1994 – Youth Ministries for Peace and Justice was founded: YMPJ's purpose is to transform both the people and the physical infrastructure of blighted South Bronx neighborhoods and change the

systems that negatively impact them. YMPJ aims to rebuild the neighborhoods of Bronx River and Soundview/Bruckner in the South Bronx by preparing young people to become prophetic voices for peace and justice. They accomplish this through political education, spiritual formation, and youth and community development and organizing (Youth Ministries, “About Us”).

1994 – President Bill Clinton designates South Bronx as Federal Empowerment Zone with \$300 million to new projects and services (Yee and Hertz 105).

1995 - For a Better Bronx (FABB) emerged out of South Bronx Clean Air Coalition (SBCAC) to serve the South Bronx community by working for environmental justice and countering institutional racism (New York State Transportation Equity Alliance Common, “Member ”For a Better Bronx”).

1995 – Pregones Theater moves to a new theater located at 700 Grand Concourse on the corner of 153d Street in the Bronx.

1995 - National Puerto Rican Day Parade was founded as a nonprofit organization.

1996 Arthur Aviles moves to 861 Manida St. in Hunts Point the Bronx, and Aviles begins teaching children and adult dance classes at The Point CDC as well as creating dance pieces.

1996 In poetry, Juan Flores argues that in 1996, there began a new generation of voices: “there exists but one ‘Nuyor-Puerto Rican literature,’ whether in English or Spanish, from more varied points of geographic origin than Puerto Rico and New York” (Flores and Santos-Febres xiii). This is a significant change; earlier in the 1960’s and 70’s, there seemed to be an “unbridgeable gap between Nuyorican and island based poets, based on marked differences of class and urban experience” (Flores and Santos-Febres xviii).

This book was launched with a night of readings, performance and music in April 2, 2005 at Hostos Center for the Arts and Culture. I attended that night and something happened in that

three-hour presentation of work; not only was the atmosphere charged in all the mix of English, Spanish and Spanglish, but I remember walking out there as if I had traveled not only in distance, but also over time. Pedro Pietri's young son also read that night, and the crowd was mesmerized.

1996 – Rocking the Boat was founded to use traditional wooden boatbuilding and on-water education to help empower young people challenged by severe economic, educational, and social conditions to develop the self-confidence to set ambitious goals and gain the skills necessary to achieve them (Rocking the Boat, “About Us”).

1996 - HBO's America Undercover series presents *Hookers at the Point*, Dir. Bret Owens.

1996 – Kwikstep and Rokafella incorporate Full Circle Productions (building off of Kwikstep's 1992 crew of the same name) as a non-profit Hip-Hop collective.

1996 – Arthur Aviles was again invited to perform at *Rompeforma*, at the invitation of Merián Soto and Viveca Vasquez, in their last year of the event.

1996 – Bronx Lebanon Medical waste incinerator is shut down by local community and environmental organizers (Yee and Hertz 105).

1997 – President Bill Clinton visits the South Bronx. Following on the footsteps of Jimmy Carter, Ronald Reagan, and Jesse Jackson, Clinton is the last is the last President and/or Presidential candidate to visit the South Bronx.

1997 - Partnerships for Parks convenes the Bronx River Working Group. Building on the work of community activists who began the Bronx River Restoration in 1974, Partnerships for Parks convened this Bronx River Working Group to bring together more than 60 community organizations, public agencies and businesses committed to reclaiming the river and improving access to it throughout the Bronx (Bronx River Alliance, “History”).

1997 – First Lady Hillary Clinton visits South Bronx to launch a project to fight asthma.

1997 – Bronx is named, for the first time, an “All American City” by the National Civil League as a result of the collaborative work of local people and government to rebuild the South Bronx (Yee and Hertz 105).

1998 – Arthur Aviles and Charles Rice-Gonzalez co-found BAAD!/Bronx Academy of Arts and Dance at the American BankNote Building.

1998 – *Mosaic Literary Magazine* is launched to provide a website and quarterly print magazine that explores the literary arts by writers of African descent, along with MosaicBooks.com (Literary Freedom Project, “About: Mosaic Literary Magazine”).

1998 – Bronx celebrates its 100th Anniversary (Yee and Hertz 105).

1999 – Two Bronx visual artists receive MacArthur Fellowships: Pepón Osorio and Fred Wilson

1999 - For A Better Bronx successfully targets the closing of a medical incinerator in which burned 48 tons of medical waste from three states every day.

1999 – President Clinton offered clemency to 16 members of *FALN/Fuerzas Armadas de Liberacion Nacional* or Armed Forces of National Liberation

1999-2003 Vieques Campaign to stop all bombing exercises and close the U.S. Navy Base on the island.

2000

2000 Arthur Aviles Typical Theatre officially incorporates as a non-profit organization.

2000 – Voices UnBroken founded by Victoria Sammartino. This Bronx-based non-profit organization is dedicated to providing under-heard members of the community – primarily youth, ages 12-24 – with the tools and opportunity for creative self-expression. Through creative writing workshops in juvenile justice facilities, group homes, residential treatment facilities, jails, and other alternative and transitional settings, Voices UnBroken nurtures the inherent need in all people to tell their stories and be heard. It is our belief that this telling of stories and sharing of dreams leads to individual and community growth (Voices UnBroken, “About Us: Mission”).

2001- Sustainable South Bronx is founded by Majora Carter to support sustainability through environmental and economic solutions (Sustainable South Bronx, “About Us: Our Mission”).

2001- Bronx Tourism Council launches the Bronx Culture Trolley to encourage tourism and economic development in the Bronx.

2001- Bronx River Working Group (which in 1977 grew out of the Bronx River Restoration Project) then created the Bronx River Alliance as an official non-profit organization. As Dart Westphal, former chairman of the Bronx River Alliance, put it the other day: “Over time all the talk about bikes and parks and improving the urban environment gradually became more than talk. It became cool” (Kimmelman).

2002 -- HBO’s America Undercover series airs the second installment of the film series: *Hookers at the Point: Five Years Later* (Director, Brent Owens).

2002 BAAD! and Arthur Aviles Typical Theater found the Bronx Dance Coalition and *Bronx Dance Magazine*.

2003 - The Green Workers Cooperatives is founded as a South-Bronx based organization dedicated to incubating worker-owned green businesses in order to build a strong local economy rooted in democracy and environmental justice (Green Worker Cooperatives, “About Us: Mission”).

2003 – Hunts Point Fish Parade –this annual parade was first held in 2003 to raise public awareness that the community was soon to become home to the Fulton Street Fish Market. Prior to the first parade, The Point had led an outreach campaign on behalf of the residential neighborhood highlighting environmental concerns and protesting against this huge commercial enterprise coming to the area and bringing more pollution from truck traffic, etc. (The Point “Fish Parade: History”).

2003 – United States Navy agreed to leave the base on Vieques on May 1, 2003 after non-violent protest.

2004 – “Mi Sala” interdisciplinary performance and visual art project begins at the home studio of Wanda Ortiz (with DJ Buddha Bless), 220 East 134th Street.

2004 - Literary Freedom Project is launched as a development of Mosaic Magazine to host the Bronx Literary Festival (originally launched in 2003 as ReVerse Festival).

2004-06 – “Action Lab,” a two-year collaborative arts and community project between the Bronx Museum of the Arts and The Point C.D.C. Project Manager: Jane Gabriels. The projects (which included artists: Arthur Aviles, Christal Brown, Alejandra Delfin, Pattydukes, Sita Frederick, Ellen Hagan, Jule Jo Ramirez, Steven Sapp and Mildred Ruiz, among others) were folded into the Hunts Point Fish Parade in 2004 and 2006 with events happening along Hunts Point Avenue.

2005 – Pregones Theater moves from its theater on the Grand Concourse into its new theater (owned by the organization) on Walton Avenue.

2005 – The Venezuelan President, Hugo Chavez, visited the South Bronx and set-up a charitable foundation specifically for organizations in the South Bronx. The foundation has given millions of dollars and signified Mr. Chávez’s legacy in the South Bronx, a neighborhood filled with the kind of poor and working-class residents whose struggles he identified (Robles).

2006 – Bronx Museum of the Arts expands with the addition of a new gallery and educational facilities.

2006 – South Bronx Greenway project is announced to create more connections between the waterfront and Hunts Point residents (New York City Economic Development Corporation, “South Bronx Greenway: Overview”).

2007 - Fulton Fish Market moves to Hunts Point. This Industrial Park now houses the largest wholesale produce market and meat market in the world and the largest fish market in the world outside of Japan (DiNapoli “An Economic Snapshot of the Hunts Point Food Distribution Center”).

2008 - The “Bronx Blue Bedroom” Project was a gallery that featured solo artist projects and was founded (2008-09) by artist and curator Blanka Amezkua in her apartment.

2008 - The Rebel Diaz Arts Collective (RDACBX) was founded as a Hip-Hop community center in the South Bronx by brothers Gonzalo and Rodrigo Venegas and other artists. Initially an abandoned candy factory, community members came together to convert the space into an Arts Collective turned Hip Hop Community Center with a full media center, including a recording and production studio, workspace/art gallery, film screenings and performance space. For over five years, and with 25 dedicated members, their performances, educational workshops, exhibitions and multi-media trainings aimed to provide a safe space for cultural exchanges. Their motto: “Building Community through Arts and Culture in The South Bronx is A MUST!” (Indiegogo, “Our past: Community Roots”)

2008- Barretto Point Park opens with a floating pool designed by the architect Jonathan Kirschenfeld as well as a beach and playgrounds.

2009 - Bill Aguado retires from BCA after nearly 30 years as Director of the Bronx Council on the Arts.

2009 -- Bronx Arts Space artist run collaborative space founded by Linda Cunningham and Mitsu Hadeishi.

2009 -- DreamYard locates to South Bronx, 1085 Washington Ave., and becomes the largest arts education provider for young people in the Bronx (DreamYard Project “About Us: Mission”).

2009 -- Concrete Plant Park (designed by Jim Mituzas) is a narrow 1,900-foot length of riverfront hemmed in by the 12-lane Bruckner Boulevard, Westchester Avenue and a fence separating the park from Amtrak rails. Remnants of the defunct concrete plant were salvaged to create a sculptural centerpiece (Kimmelman).

2009 – Foundry Theater’s *The Provenance of Beauty/A South Bronx Travelogue*, created by Melanie Joseph with poet Claudia Rankine, offered a poetic narrative of South Bronx history and landmarks via a guided bus tour (Isherwood).

2010 – Boricua College moves to its new Bronx location at E. 161st St. and Third Ave (Melrose section of the South Bronx) with a 4 1/2 - acre housing development and 14-story college campus. The campus includes a theater venue (building in process).

2010 - Lolita Lebron dies, age 90 in Puerto Rico.

2011 – Spofford Juvenile Detention Center known for its heavy-handed punishment of teens and poor living conditions, is closed with community support (Hirsch).

2011 – Bronx Documentary Center founded to support photography, film, and new media (Bronx Documentary Center, “About”).

2011 – APAP@HOME is launched (renamed in 2015, “Bronx Artists Now: Showcases & Conversation”). Producer/Curator: Jane Gabriels, Pepatián. After five years of producing showcases that featured over 40 artists at City Center, Pepatián then introduced a new showcase model, APAP@HOME. Initiated in 2011 by Jane Gabriels, APAP@HOME works with a

network of South Bronx performance spaces to create a unique opportunity for presenters and funders to tour three Bronx venues and see showcases of new work by Latino and Bronx-based multidisciplinary dance and performance artists. Venues include: BAAD!/Bronx Academy of Arts and Dance, Bronx Council on the Arts, Hostos Center for the Arts and Culture and Pregones Theater. This initiative was inspired by attending National Performance Network/NPN annual meetings and participating in informal exchanges between artists and presenters, Montreal Studio 303's SPARK project (which brought presenters directly to artists studios), and the caliber of artists and their full-length pieces produced through the Young Roots Performance Series at Hostos (Pepatián, "Projects: APAP@HOME").

2011 – Dancing in the Streets moves to the South Bronx, via a three-year partnership with Casita Maria Center for the Arts and Education, and brings its 28-year legacy as a producer of innovative public performances to reclaim, revitalize, and promote natural, architectural, and cultural treasures of the Bronx; and contribute to the borough's "cultural renaissance" (Dancing in the Streets, "About Us").

2011-2013 The Young Roots Performance Series at Hostos Center for the Arts & Culture features emerging artists experimenting with the artistic roots of Afro-Latino traditions to create new branches that reach into the future. The series was made possible by a grant from the Rockefeller Foundation's highly selective *New York City Cultural Innovation Fund 2010-12*, which supports creativity and the arts, with an emphasis on innovation. Artists include: poet Caridad De La Luz/La Bruja; dancer/choreographer Sita Frederick; percussionists Oreste Abrantes, Jason González, and Nelson Matthew González; dancer/choreographer Antonio Ramos; vocalist/composer Raquel Rivera; B-girl Rokafella; and dancer/choreographer Noemi Segarra. Project Director and co-author of grant: Jane Gabriels (Young Roots Performance Series, "Press Release").

2012 -- No Longer Empty exhibition "This Side of Paradise" at Andrew Freedman Home and Longwood Art Gallery "Home is Where The Bronx Is" exhibition.

2012 – Boogie Down Rides starts as part of the exhibition “This Side of Paradise,” presented by No Longer Empty. Boogie Down Rides is a bicycling and art project (Boogie Down Rides, “About”).

2012 -- Hunts Point Landing – public space opened near the Fulton Fish Market, and part of the overall South Bronx Greenway which includes a network of pedestrian and bicycle pathways to connect Starlight Park with Bronx Park and Concrete Plant Park, Hunts Point Riverside Park, and Barretto Point Park to the south.

2012-13 -- Sustainable South Bronx (under new leadership) along with Greenworker Cooperatives and Bronx Council on Environmental Quality join together with other residents and allies to fight against the relocation of Fresh Direct to the Harlem River Yards (South Bronx Unite, Tale of Two Cities Action Alert Update”).

2012 -- The Bronx Music Heritage Center (BMHC) is founded to celebrate the rich musical legacy of the Bronx through showcasing the borough’s “Living Legends” and inspiring the next generation of Bronx artists. BMHC is an initiative of WHEDco. The BMHC Laboratory opened in April 2012 at 1303 Louis Niñé Boulevard, Bronx, NY. The lab will be a "pop-up" space to share and experience art and music (WHEDco “Arts: Bronx Music Heritage Center”).

2012 - Starlight Park opens near East 177th Street.

2012 - Bronx Creative Community Trust is formed with the participation of non-profit arts organizations to march in the Puerto Rican Day Parade in the South Bronx, June 2012. Artists and organizations include: BAAD!/Bronx Academy of Arts and Dance, Bronx Council on the Arts, BronxNet, En Foco, Excel Yoga, Full Circle Productions, KR3T’s Dance Company (choreographer Violeta Galagarza), Habana/Harlem, Caridad De La Luz/La Bruja, Mainland Mix/Leenda Bonilla, No Longer Empty, Pepatián, The Point, Pregones Theater, Rhina Valentin/La Reina del Barrio. Producer: Jane Gabriels

2012-13 -- The Laundromat Project begins their work in Hunts Point. Their mission is to amplify creativity that already exists within communities by using arts to strengthen community networks (Laundromat Project, “About: Mission”).

2012-13 -- Bronx Arts Alliance collective was founded to serve and promote arts and arts activities and be a voice for funding and advocacy in the Bronx.

2013 – Rebel Diaz Arts Collective were evicted from their space (478 Austin Place). They launched a fundraising campaign to raise awareness about gentrification and displacement in the South Bronx and to find a new, permanent home. RDAC is now located at 478 Austin Place in the Bronx as a Hip-Hop Community Center (Rebel Diaz Arts Collective, “Our Mission”).

2013 – Bronx Council on the Arts has hired an architectural firm to design their new offices at 2700 E. Tremont Avenue, Westchester Square.

2013- BAAD! / Bronx Academy of Arts and Dance displaced from 841 Baretto Street and move to a new venue in Parkchester (2474 Westchester Ave.). BAAD! had a lease until 2015 to remain in their space but they were priced out and forced to leave in 2013. The new landlords of the BankNote Building told BAAD! that they aimed to transform the site into the cultural and commercial hub of a revitalized neighborhood, and BAAD! was not part of this future. Co-founder Rice-Gonzalez stated, “the politicians who hailed the arrival of the building’s owners five years ago have a responsibility to protect neighborhood arts groups. ‘This is an opportunity for them to do something.’ He called for a systemic change.” Aviles called the move, “painful,” adding that, “the conditions were created so that we had to leave. What are the conditions that allow real estate developers to continue to have the power to displace the arts and artists?” (Hirsch).

2013 – Pregones Theater merges with the Puerto Rican Traveling Theater (located in Times Square, Manhattan) and programs performances at both venues.

2013- Wally Edgecombe, Director of Hostos Center for the Arts & Culture, retires as Director after 30 years (first began in 1982).

2014 – Bronx Commons to be built to permanently house the Bronx Music Heritage Center with performance, rehearsal and archival space. Bronx Commons will also offer 270 affordable green apartments, live/work space for elder musicians, a green grocer, a hydroponic rooftop farm, and recreational space. Led by WhedCo in partnerships with city departments and development company.

2014 - Hip-hop pioneers Afrika Bambaataa, Grand Wizzard Theodore, Grandmaster Melle Mel and Grandmaster Caz Brown are leading the effort to bring a “hip hop campus” to the Bronx. Their dream is to create “Windows of Hip Hop,” part museum, part school and part civic center to educate and promote the form’s legacy and reach (Simmons).

The Future - This legacy of artist- and resident-led community building will continue to grow, strengthen and empower the South Bronx.

Appendix Four

Choreographies and Training: Merián Soto**Merián Soto Choreographic Works**

EXHIBITIONS/INSTALLATIONS/VIDEO

Muestrario Rompeforma: Maratón de Baile Performance & Visuales, 1989-1996

2013

Presented at Museo de Arte Contemporáneo de Puerto Rico.

Documentary video.

Triangulations: Revisiting OYWP

2012

Lorenzo Homar Gallery, Philadelphia, one-person show

Two 3-channel video installations.

CHOREOGRAPHY

BRANCH DANCES

Soto presented her first explorations of this series at a shared evening produced by Pepatián at BAAD!/Bronx Academy of Arts and Dance (841 Barretto Street) in 2004. This premiere was the beginning of a seven-year research and performance project, “Branch Dances.” This artistic series led Soto to rename her dance practice, create three extensive outdoor projects, two visual exhibitions as well as two blogs that chronicled the work’s development. The audience at BAAD! (myself included) in 2004 were watching and participating in a beginning; Soto was exploring her ideas with us, and figuring them out live, in performance.

This solo led to larger-scaled works that incorporated other artists into her practice. In a shared evening presented by Pepatián in collaboration with Pregones Theater in 2006, Soto presented “Branch Dances” accompanied by Cuban-born, classically-trained jazz pianist Elio Villafranca, and a costume created by designer Christine Darch. These elements gave the performance a theatrical elegance. At the National Association of Latino Arts and Culture/NALAC 2006 annual conference that I attended with Soto, her work was presented in a more intimate setting.

Accompanied by pianist Villafranca, Soto slowly found her conversation with the branch, her

movements, and the live music. At the APAP/Association of Performing Arts Presenters conference produced by Pepatián in 2006, Soto performed with dancer Marion Ramirez at City Center studios. Soto has a deeply held presence that has a way of saturating the atmosphere with focus.

In 2007-08, Soto began an extensive, outdoor work *Wissahickon Park Project* with a group of dancers, selecting different areas of the park for their practice in each season. The public was told about the location and date of the events through social media, flyers, word-of-mouth, blog, and newsletter mailings.

At the 2011 APAP@HOME project, the work *Postcards from the Woods* was shown with movement and video of the outdoors (taken by Soto) to create an immersive environment. This showcase later led to a year residency at Wave Hill (28 acre estate, consisting of public gardens and a cultural center in the Riverdale section of the Bronx, New York) with four outdoor performances accompanied by live music; I supported the project as Project Manager. Also during this time, Soto continued with another year long outdoor project in Philadelphia.

This work and the video documentation of these outdoor projects led to a collaboration with Taller Puertorriqueño to create a large, outdoor project, *SoMoS (We are)*, in the middle of in the “cultural heart of Latino Philadelphia” (*Taller Puertorriqueño*). On the night of this October 2012 performance, the temperature suddenly dropped. For the performers, it was a test of stamina to stay focused in the cold. Having the work happen in a parking lot located in the middle of the city brought a large public to the event, and there was a palpable excitement in the air. In the parking lot, there were several white geo-domes lit different colors like jewels and surrounded by a ribbon of lights. Each dome was a specific setting for a performance, in addition to the outdoor sites demarcated by branches, tree trunks, lighting and video projections. It was an unforgettable night.

Soto created two blogs to distill the work: One Year Wissahickon Park Project and Merián Soto/Branch Dances. In 2006, Soto re-focused her art-making to Philadelphia and changed her company name from “Merián Soto Dance & Performance” to “Merián Soto / Performance

Practice.” The name change more accurately reflected her movement practice and choice to make her work come alive outdoors with nature as a meditative movement practice; “I want us to remember that we are nature” (Soto, *meriansoto.com*).

Merián Soto’s dedication and lengthy exploration of the work shows her commitment to exploring balance, directionality and flow in movement (tying into her years of work in developing energetic modes) in order to develop a practice that expands this impact into a multiplicity of directions. Soto brought her “Branch Dance” series from the outdoors to indoor locations, and created performances for audiences as well as the general public to engage with different locations outdoors. She incorporated video and live music in both outdoor and indoor performances. Soto used her documentation of the work to create exhibitions, bringing her video perspectives of the natural outdoors and performance into the urban indoors. She wrote about her work, and encouraged others to engage with it through writing. All of these different works Soto developed these different works to create conversations about our relationships to the outdoors. This work is a thorough dedication to a particular energetic mode of work, of moving slowly, with great nuances in presence.

BRANCH DANCE SERIES

SoMoS (We Are)

Premiere: October 2012

Taller Puertorriqueño, Municipal Parking Lot, Philadelphia.

A full-evening site specific performance installation.

Stage performances: Conwell Dance Theater, Performance Garage, Philadelphia; Pregones Theater NYC (2012).

Branch Dances @ The Barnes: 3 Branch Dance Practices from SoMoS

2013

Dance USA Conference, Barnes Foundation, Philadelphia.

Site specific performance.

Branch Dance at Wave Hill

2011-12

Wave Hill Arts Center, Bronx, New York.

A series of four seasonal outdoor performances.

Wissahickon Reunion

2011-12

Wissahickon Valley Park, Philadelphia

A series of four seasonal outdoor performances,

Branch Dance #847

2011

New Dance Alliance Anniversary Marathon, Dixon Place, NYC

Winter Dance

Premiere 2010

Performance Garage, Philadelphia

Mercyhurst College AC DFA Festival, Erie PA; Conwell Dance Theater, Temple U 2010;

Pregones Theater, Bronx, New York 2011.

Branch Dance # 437

2009

92nd St Y Harkness Dance Center, Marathon 75, NYC

Postcards from the Woods

2009

Philadelphia Live Arts Festival (commissioned work)

University of Wisconsin (Madison, WI); Pregones Theater, NYC; Performance Garage, Philadelphia (2009)

Balancing Acts

Premiere: 2007

Philadelphia Live Arts Festival

Temple University, Thomlinson Theater (2008).

One Year Wissahickon Park Project

2007-08

Wissahickon Park, Philadelphia

A creative research project of 16 performances.

What is Love?

Premiere: 2007

Lincoln Center for the Performing Arts, NYC (commissioned work)

States of Gravity and Light #'s 1 & 2

Premiere 2006

Hostos Center for Arts and Culture Bronx, NY

Lehman Center for the Performing Arts, Bronx, NY; NALAC Conference, San Antonio, TX (2006)

States of Gravity and Light # 2

2006

Philadelphia Live Arts Festival

Three Branch Songs

Premiere: 2006

Hostos Center for Arts & Culture, NYC.

Temple University Conwell Dance Theater, Philadelphia; Pregones Theater, NYC; Schuyler Rainbow Stage, Huntington, NY (2006).

Branch Dance Series

2006

Numbered series of improvisational dances (guerilla dances) working with tree branches, over 50 performances in Wissahickon Park, Philadelphia; City Center/APAP showcase, NYC; New Festival, Philadelphia; Northport and Centerport Parks, Long Island, NY.

Solo Improvisations

2005

A collection of seven-minute improvisations exploring alignment into balance; Temple University; Jump it Up! Festival, Bronx, NY; BAAD!/Bronx Academy of Arts & Dance, Bronx, NY.

OTHER WORKS, 2008-2012 (not part of Branch Dances)***Circulations***

Premiere: 2012

Fall Bridge Dance Festival, Mt Vernon Space, Philadelphia

Collaboration with Marion Ramirez

Noemi's Dance

Premiere: 2010

Dance Theater Workshop, World Dance Alliance Global Convening, NYC; Conwell Dance Theater, Temple U, Philadelphia

Feel Free

2012

new work for students

Pulcinella

2011

Work for students in collaboration with Maurice Wright, Thomlinson Theater, Temple U

Refusees

2010

Conwell Dance Theater, Temple University

Work for students

A Song of the Heart

2008

Conwell Dance Theater, Temple University

Work for students

SALSA SERIES

This series of works investigates Salsa as choreographic source. Soto “unbinds Salsa” is how Alvan Colon Lespier, Associate Artistic Director of Pregones Theater (South Bronx, New York) described her work. Within the Salsa community, Soto remarked, “nothing is authentic. Especially salsa. You think you know it and it gets changed. Salsa in New York is different than the salsa in Caracas, and it’s different than the salsa in Las Vegas or Los Angeles. Different communities move it in different ways. I’m not preserving anything. I’m playing with salsa on a very contemporary level” (Kasrel).

I started working at Pepatián just after *Asi se baila un Son*/How to dance a Son (Montuno) was performed at the legendary Jacob’s Pillow (Massachusetts). I supported the project at the APAP/Association of Performing Arts Presenters annual conference at the El Flamingo Nightclub along with Company Manager (and former dancer with Pepatián) James Adlesic. The performance began after a salsa dance class was offered to the public. As Soto explained, these classes were part of her vision for the performance project: “I was never interested in the codification/commodification of salsa by a few; the urge to “own” or control a popular form is antithetic to my principles. I love salsa for its communal nature, for its subversive nature, for the pleasure and freedom of it” (Soto “La Maquina”).

In 2002, Soto was selected to show her work at the coveted Joyce Theater’s Altogether Different Festival. For this event, she created the solo *Prequel(a): Deconstruction of a Passion for Salsa*. Soto described to me how the name *prequel (a)* was inspired by the *Star Wars* series, and also

contains a pleasurable “wink” for the Spanish-speaking public, who might pronounce Prequel (a) as one word, *precuela*, suggesting the first prequel and also, more specifically, the female prequel. In an interview in *The Philadelphia Citypaper*, Soto also states, “I was working with the idea of memory. Also I was working with the idea of salsa – does it come from the music or from the dancer? And it’s like a time travel thing in a way. I use this loop pedal and I loop my voice. It’s kind of close to hip-hop, how they use the beat boxes. It’s a lot of hybridity of influences” (Kasrel).

Soto emphasizes the improvisational nature that underlies popular forms. As she explains: “improvisation involves the practice of freedom through choice” (Soto “La Maquina”). To develop her work, Soto often organized work-in-progress showings as an integral part of the creative process. For her work *La Maquina del Tiempo* (*The Time Machine*), one of her first showings took place at the Bronx Museum of the Arts. By 2004, Soto no longer had a company manager. She organized most of the work herself and I tried to help with communications and materials with venues and funders.

THE SALSA SERIES

La Máquina del Tiempo (The Time Machine)

Premiere: March 2004

Temple University, Philadelphia, PA.

full evening work

Toured 2003-2005

Also performed at: DancePlace, Washington, DC 2005; The Egg, Albany, NY 2004;

Dance Theater Workshop, NYC, 2004; Lafayette College, Easton, PA, 2004; Bryn Mawr College, PA, 2004.

Performed as work-in-progress at: Rutgers University, Camden, NY, 2003; World Financial Center, NYC, 2003; Temple University, PA, 2002, 2003; Bronx Museum of the Arts, Bronx, NY, 2003; Amble Dance Center, Philmont, NY 2003.

Prequel(a): Deconstruction of a Passion for Salsa

Premiere: January 2002

Commissioned by the Joyce Theater in New York City.

solo work.

Also performed at: Hostos Center for Arts & Culture, Bronx, NY 2004; Rutgers University, Camden, NJ 2003; The Wilma Theater Dance Boom Series, Philadelphia, PA 2003; Temple University, Philadelphia, PA, 2002.

By 2002, Soto's work was being presented under "Merián Soto Dance & Performance" instead of "Pepatián." She changed the name for her dance company.

Así se baila un Son (How to Dance a Son Montuno *)

Premiere: June 1999

Commissioned by Central Park SummerStage.

Also performed at: Hobart & William Smith Colleges, Geneva, NY, 1999; Jacob's Pillow Dance Festival, MA, 1999. Hostos Center for Arts & Culture, Bronx, NY, 1999; University of Florida Gainesville, FL, 2000; Chicago Museum of Contemporary Art, IL, 2000; El Flamingo Nightclub, NYC, 2001 (during APAP annual conference); Annenberg Center, Philadelphia, PA, 2001; Joyce SOHO, NYC, 2001; The Joyce Theater, NYC, 2002.

As reviewed and contextualized by Jennifer Dunning in *The New York Times*, the program at Summerstage was "...set to a stylish, vibrant score by Adalberto Alvarez and explores salsa as choreography, cultural artifact and a medium for improvisation and the expression of personal style and sensuality. Ms. Soto, Pepón Osorio and their Pepatián troupe were among the first to mine and reveal the riches of multiculturalism without the frills of political correctness and ethnic kitsch" (Dunning "Salsa").

* *Son Montuno* is a reference to the Afro-Cuban music and dance form that provides a strong foundation for salsa and the mambo.

Sacude

Premiere: 1991

Also performed by Marion Ramirez (2014), Noemi Segarra (1999),

OTHER SIGNIFICANT WORKS (1987 – 1998; not part of the Salsa Series)

Pelea de Gallos (The Cock Fight)

1998

commissioned by Lincoln Center for the Performing Arts (NYC) & Hostos Center for Arts & Culture (Bronx).

group work

Premiere: Lincoln Center Out-of-Doors Festival, August 1998.

Additional performances: Hostos Center for Arts & Culture, Bronx, NY, 1998, 1999; Central Park SummerStage, NYC, 1999; Jacob's Pillow Dance Festival, Lee, MA, 1999; University of Florida, Gainesville, FL, 2000; Chicago Museum of Contemporary Art, IL, 2000; Annenberg Center, Philadelphia, PA 2001; Bronx Academy of Arts & Dance (BAAD) NY (2001); Columbia-Greene Community College, Hudson, NY (2002); Winter Gardens, World Financial Center NY (2003).

Reconstruction of the work for students at Temple Univ: CORD Conference, Philadelphia (2011).

Pelea de Gallos (The Cock Fight) was performed at the Winter Gardens, World Financial Center in 2003 with Marion Ramirez and Arthur Aviles (previous performers who helped generate the material were Stephanie Tooman and Niles Ford). At the Winter Gardens, I performed as part of Merián Soto Dance & Performance and was one of the members of the “blue” team. The colors of the teams – blue, red, green - represent political parties in Puerto Rico. We yelled and placed “bets” on which of the “cocks” would win for our team. I was performing and also socializing in a performative way with the other dancers on stage, acting and being inside the piece and still inside myself as a member of this big porous community.

Todos Mis Muertos (All of my dead ones)

1996

Premiere: El Museo del Barrio, NYC (1996).

solo performance.

Also presented at: Institute of Contemporary Art (ICA), London, UK, 1996; Judson Memorial Church, NYC, 1997; Skidmore College, Saratoga Springs, NY, 1997.

Familias

1995 (created in collaboration with Pepón Osorio)

Commissioned by the Hostos Center for Arts & Culture.

Premiere: Hostos Center for Arts & Culture, 1995.

full evening collaboration with visual artist Pepón Osorio.

Additional performances: Columbia College, Chicago, IL, 1995; Newark Museum, NJ, 1995; Rutgers University, NJ, 1997; Temple University Conwell Dance Theater, PA, 2001.

Historias

1992 (created in collaboration with Pepón Osorio)

Commissioned by Jacob’s Pillow Dance Festival (MA), Dance Theater Workshop in New York City and the Los Angeles Museum of Contemporary Art.

Premiere: Jacob’s Pillow Dance Festival, Lee, MA, 1992.

full evening collaboration with visual artist Pepón Osorio.

Toured (inter)nationally 1992-1999

Additional performances: Dance Theater Workshop, NYC, 1992; Museum of Contemporary Arts, Los Angeles, CA, 1992; University of the Arts, Philadelphia, PA, 1992; Fleisher Art Memorial, Philadelphia, PA, 1992; Atlantic Center for the Arts, New Smyrna Beach, FL, 1992; Center for Fine Arts, Miami, FL, 1992; Segundo Encuentro Latinoamericano de Danza Contemporánea Independiente, Universidad Autónoma de México (UNAM), Mexico City, Mexico, 1992; Cornell University, Ithaca, NY, 1993; Performing Arts Center, Fort Wayne, IN, 1993; Rutgers University, New Brunswick, NJ, 1993; Lincoln Center/ Serious Fun Festival, NYC, 1993; Pregones Theater, Bronx, NY, 1993; Painted Bride, Philadelphia, PA, 1994; Festival

Internacional de Teatro Manizales, Colombia, 1994; Hostos Center for Arts & Culture, Bronx, NY, 1995; Carver Cultural Center, San Antonio, TX, 1995; Aaron Davis Hall, NYC, 1996; Univ. of Puerto Rico, Mayaguez, PR, 1997; Swarthmore College, PA, 1998; Skidmore College, Saratoga Springs, NY, 1999; Teatro Tapia, San Juan, PR, 1999.

Reconstruction: University of the Arts, PA (2007)

*Reconstruction of the work for students at Temple Univ: **Mujeres***, reconstruction of the women's section of *Historias* (2011)

Tú y Yo, (You and Me),

Premiere: 1989

Conwell Dance Theater, Performance Garage, Philadelphia (2011)

Reconstruction of the work for students at Temple Univ. (2011)

SDHS Conference, Arts Bank, Philadelphia (2012)

Puerto Rican Trivia

Premiere: 1987 (created in collaboration with Pepón Osorio)

(solo Como How we see/ do we see?)

Also performed by Noemi Segarra at BAAD!/Bronx Academy of Arts & Dance (2002), Marion Ramirez, Conwell Theater, Temple University (2014).

¡Cha Cha! Usa la cabeza! (Girl! Use Your Head!)

1987

Reconstruction, Georgian Court University, Lakewood, NJ (2011);

Conwell Dance Theater, Temple University (2008)

Conwell Dance Theater, Temple University, Philadelphia (2014; Merián solo perf)

OTHER WORKS (1975-2002)

Entrada (Entry), 2002

Canto A Yemayá y Ochún (Song for Yemayá and Ochún), 2001

Forest Moments, 2000

¡Revienta! (Explode!), 1998

Nieve Sucia (Dirty Snow), 1997

Cómo desnudarse (How to Undress), 1996

Jai Kint Cu Bao (Lizard Laying in the Sun), 1993

Broken Hearts, 1990 (created in collaboration with Pepón Osorio)

Referencias (References), 1990

No Regrets, 1988 (created in collaboration with Pepón Osorio)

Wish You Were Here, 1987

Pachanga en dos Medios (Pachanga in Two Mediums), 1987

Saints on Wheels, 1987

How to Dance the Cha-Cha-Cha, 1986 (created in collaboration with Pepón Osorio)

Chúpate esta en lo que te mondo la otra (Suck on this one while I peel you another one), 1986 (created in collaboration with Pepón Osorio)

¡Ay! Gran Poder de Dios (Oh! Great Power of God!), 1986

Cocinando (Cooking), 1985 (created in collaboration with Pepón Osorio)
 Underconstruction, 1985
 Xón, 1984
 Salsimprovisa (1984) (created in collaboration with Pepón Osorio)
 Escalio (Tillable Land), 1983
 Negro (Black), 1981
 Blanco (White), 1981
 Sueño de Malanga (Malanga Dream), 1980
 Flor de Caimito, 1980
 El Agua Viva (The Living Water), 1979
 La sirena y los borrachos (The Mermaid and the Drunks), 1976
 Pedacito de Cristal (Chard of Glass), 1975

Merián Soto: Additional Dance Training with biographical information

At 20 years old, when Soto moved in 1974 to live and study dance in New York University, she started creating her own work right away, and also danced with Barrunto Dancers, led by choreographer Beti Garcia. In 1986, Soto's performance of Garcia's solo from 1975: *Luisa Capetillo - Un Ejemplo* (an Example) was reviewed by dance critics Bruce Supree (*Village Voice*) and Jennifer Dunning (*New York Times*). Both noted Soto's high caliber performance but were critical of the overall piece. Jennifer Dunning stated it was "a dance about a turn-of-the-century Puerto Rican activist that had the boldness and lack of complexity of poster art. But it was nonetheless a deeply felt solo, performed with powerful clarity by Merián Soto" (*Dunning "Barrunto"*). Burt Supree commented more extensively:

In a dark blue dress and red kerchief, Merián Soto was fierce in Beti Garcia's heroic solo from 1975, *Luisa Capetillo - Un Ejemplo* (an Example). The piece has a didactic element.... Though many of the movements, early on, are recognizable expansions of moves associated with physical labor, others are flamboyant, sharp, and punctuated, showing independence and high spirits. The footwork becomes saucy and clever, with the syncopated gaiety of festive West African dances. Full of herself, Soto flings her limbs at odd angles, thrusts her fist in the air for the victory she's earned. But it seems to me that this kind of piece doesn't engage our feelings much, and, so, doesn't reach out effectively. It also suffers from being sliced into sections.....probably biographical references that the audience isn't privy to... Garcia, Soto and the other members of Barrunto Dancers, are surely trying to do much more than this with their dancing - to unite and inspire (Supree).

By 1986, the Puerto Rican diaspora had made a strong impact in New York City, yet the dance critics did not comment on Garcia's use of *plena* outside of a folkloric context nor comment on the different context of a work first made in a 1975 and its performance nearly a decade later.

In New York City, Merián Soto, joined other dance artists from Puerto Rico: Viveca Vazquez and Awilda Sterling who also trained, performed and taught when they arrived in New York City. Teacher, dancer, and choreographer Awilda Sterling-Duprey is an established figure in the Puerto Rico's contemporary arts scene. Viveca Vázquez is a choreographer, dancer, and a professor of humanities and modern dance at the University of Puerto Rico. In the late 70s and early 80s, Vázquez, Sterling-Duprey, along with Petra Bravo, Gloria Llompart and Maritza Pérez, founded Píson, the first experimental dance collective of Puerto Rico. In 1990, Vázquez also co-founded with Teresa Hernández Taller de Otra Cosa, Inc. a nonprofit organization committed to the development and production of experimental dance and performance projects.

At that time, Soto had a loft/living and rehearsal space on Canal Street. Soto worked with Sterling-Duprey for a few years in the late 1970s before she returned to Puerto Rico. Sterling-Duprey described Soto's method of working:

Merián Soto was beginning her own projects. She would take us as her dancers and we would experiment. We would gather together, being friends, and we would do performance, sometimes at her studio, at that time on West Broadway and Canal Street. She was always very appreciative of our movements and how we brought back to her the ideas that she was experimenting with. At that time she was experimenting with Cuban "Son Montuno" – she was decoding the traditional time and frame of the musical structure. She was breaking that syncopation into something more personal and adding gestures, freezing movements while others continued dancing. "Son Montuno" was the basis of what would become mambo and salsa – so you would dance with a partner to a steady beat, and people would improvise but you would always have a structure that would pull you back together again. Merián was experimenting with that -- making solos, duets, trios – she was using the classical structure of European or American dance in "Son Montuno" (Ritter, "I have to feel it" 62).

Unlike Soto who moved to New York City to live permanently, Vazquez and Sterling-Duprey chose to migrate back and forth from the island to New York City in the late 1970s/early 1980s, making work in both locations. When Sterling-Duprey left New York City in 1978 to return to Puerto Rico with her young son, she used her living room as studio space in Santurce. "Soto would also come to give workshops and incorporate us into performances, when she would visit on vacations" (Ritter, "I have to feel it" 64). At some point in these visits, Soto also studied the Afro-Caribbean dance form *bomba* with

the folkloric performing group, Los Hermanos Ayala. This “circular migration” was a constant in the artists’ lives.

Soto also entered into a seven-year apprenticeship with kinesthetic study pioneer, Elaine Sommers from 1978 – 1984. Sommers had developed “kinetic awareness” when osteoarthritis began to limit her dancing. In working with Sommers, Soto was following lineage that Sommers had created when she sought the help of Charlotte Selver and Carola Speads. In Germany, Selver and Speads had studied breathing and movement approaches with Elsa Gindler. Upon reaching the United States in their escape from Germany during WWII, they continued to develop their somatic approaches through deep awareness to sensation.

Sommers used the work of Selver and Speads to develop movement. She experimented with developing movements through the use of small balls as cushions on the floor. The body would lean on them and the balls would work with the weight to help release the body more fully into gravity. As the body released, the mobile balls would suggest movement responses. She was interested in how this self-initiated breath and movement activated the nervous system, the blood and the lymph (Eddy, “A brief history” 12). In 1985, Sommers founded the Kinetic Awareness Center as a body therapy and system for understanding connections between mind and body. This work was a centerpiece of Soto’s training and later teachings.

Additionally, Elaine Sommers was one of the original members of the Judson Dance Theater, a dance collective in 1961-64 that helped develop experimental dance. Her dance lineage includes studies with: Louis Horst, Merce Cunningham, Daniel Nagrin, Don Redlick, Mary Anthony, Charlotte Selver, Carola Speads, Jean Erdman, Janet Collins, and at the Martha Graham School from 1947-64. She also took classes and workshops with Robert and Judith Dunn in connection with her work at the Judson Dance Theater (Eddy, “A brief history” 12). In 1983, Merián Soto along with Pepatián co-founder Patti Bradshaw performed in Sommers’ intermedia dance concert, *Solitary Geography*, at New York City’s Performing Garage, along with performers Min Tanaka and Suzushi Hanayagi, with music by Jon Gibson.

From 1981-1986, Soto earned money to fund her performances by working as a go-go dancer. In a 1993 article Soto wrote for *Heresies* magazine, “Sensuality and Pleasure,” she describes how since the early 1980s she has worked with improvisation and experiential knowledge and awareness of anatomy and inner geography (from her work with Elaine Sommers) that is also informed by her love of Salsa (dance form born in New York City in the early 1970’s) and her experiences as a go-go dancer. Soto writes: “the celebration of sensuality and pleasure is a strong component of this work” and states how she finds it “...interesting that only once has a critic addressed the sensuality of these works. What is it about sensuality and pleasure that critics fear or are blind to?” (Soto “Sensuality”).

Soto also trained in Alexander Technique (with June Ekman, 1983-87), Iyengar Yoga (with Jenny Kapuler, 1986-96), Vinyasa Yoga (with Jennifer Schelter, 2006-09) and Vinyassa Yoga (daily practice at Blue Banyan Studio, Philadelphia; 2012-13). With her trainings and performance experiences, Soto developed her own work based on “modes” and improvisation, and taught and offered performance opportunities to the next generation of artists.

Appendix Five

Context: Arthur Aviles history with Pepatián

Upon graduation from Bard College, Aviles danced with Bill T. Jones/Arnie Zane Dance Company from 1987 to 1995 and toured with this company internationally. He was awarded a New York Dance and Performance award (*Bessie*) for his outstanding creative achievement during the Jones/Zane seasons in 1988 and 1989.

In 1996, Aviles founded Arthur Aviles Typical Theatre/AATT and that same year he moved the company to the Bronx. His return to the Bronx was at the invitation from artists (and fellow Bard College alumni) Mildred Ruiz and Steven Sapp (co-founders of the award-winning poetic theater ensemble *Universes*). Aviles was invited to develop a dance program in Hunt's Point at the youth development organization they co-founded with Maria Torres and Paul Lipton, The Point, C.D.C./Community Development Corporation. In 1998, Aviles and Charles Rice-Gonzalez founded BAAD!/Bronx Academy of Arts and Dance and moved from The Point (with the support of Bronx Council on the Arts Executive Director Bill Aguado) to occupy a new site around the corner at 841 Barretto Street. BAAD! has become a home for many Afro-Caribbean-Latino artists, residents and the LGBT communities.

While a dance critic like Claudia La Rocco might refer to Aviles's efforts in Hunts Point as "yeoman's work" to "maintain a safe, welcoming space for performers and people of all stripes..." (La Rocco 2008), Aviles himself describes himself as wanting something different; while "a lot of Bronx choreographers, he said, want to make their mark in Manhattan. "They want something bigger, which I understand," he added. "I want something small. Something respectful" (La Rocco 2005).

Arthur Aviles has a long connection with Pepatián. Soto had invited Arthur Aviles to perform in Puerto Rico as part of *Rompeforma* (1991 and 1996) and at Dance Theater Workshop through her curatorial project *!Muevete!* (1991).

In October 1999, Arthur Aviles presented four works at Hostos Center for the Arts & Culture as part of the “Bronx Dance Fest:” *Puerto Rican Faggot from the South Bronx Steals Precious Object from Guiliani’s East Village (premiere)*, *Things Which Transect Our Vision*, *This Pleasant and Grateful Asylum* and *Elysian Fields*.

Working with Aviles, Pepatián commissioned a new work, “*Untitled #3 (after Rita Gonzalez)*” to animate video works at the Bronx Museum of the Arts, one of the collaborating venues in “Jump It Up 2001: Bronx Artist Spotlight.” The Museum wanted to create links to their visual art works to help animate their collection.

Since 2001, Pepatián has supported the work of Aviles and Rice-Gonzalez through showcases and shared evenings of performing arts at various venues: BAAD!, Joe’s Pub, Pregones Theater La Casa Blanca, etc. as well as in artist showcases produced at City Center studios during the annual APAP conference in 2003-2006. Aviles showed the development of his work at these showcases, including sections that later became part of the evening-length work, *Mi Ceilia Mi Puente*.

Significantly, Pepatián was one of the first to partner with Aviles and Rice-Gonzalez’s organization and produced dancers from Soto’s company (Gina Benitez, Sita Frederick, Antonio Ramos, Noemi Segarra) at BAAD! at the first “Jump It UP” (2001). This collaboration with BAAD! was the beginning of fourteen year relationship between the organization that continues today. Pepatián has collaborated with BAAD! to program multiple artists in its festivals: in 2002, BAAD! started its second group of festivals: *Boogie Down Dance* and *Blacktin@* (the @ symbol signifies both male and female; blacktino, blacktina), in addition to two festivals begun in 2001: *BAAD! Ass Women* and *Out Like That*. In 2002, BAAD! also began the Bronx Dance Coalition, of which Pepatián is a member, and *Bronx Dance Magazine* to support dance in the borough and the.

In 2010, BAAD!’s mission was described as: “BAAD! is a 70-seat workshop, rehearsal and performance space dedicated to presenting, producing and nurturing cutting edge and

challenging works of emerging, evolving and established choreographers, dancers, directors, playwrights, poets, musicians and artists who are women, people of color and/or from the lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender community” (Hadaway 2010).

Appendix Six

DVD informational sheet***Familias***

Familias. Dir. Fred Weiss. BronxNet, ¡Bronx Live! 1995. Video.
 Documentation of work created by Pepón Osorio and Merián Soto
 Hostos Center for the Arts & Culture (Bronx, NY)
 Duration: 1:24:30
 Note: quality is not high due to age of original VHS.
 © BronxNet 1995

The Making of a Family

The Making of a Family. Dir. Al Cacippo. BronxNet, ¡Bronx Live!. 1996. Film.
 Documentary film of *Familias* with interviews of participants
 Duration: 28:28 minutes
 © BronxNet 1996

How I Became a Boogie-Down Rican

Documentation of solo created by Jane Gabriels. Oct. 2013.
 Northwestern University Department of Performance Studies interdisciplinary graduate student
 conference: In Bodies We Trust: Performance, Affect, & Political Economy (Chicago, IL).
 Duration: 18 minutes
 © Jane Gabriels, 2013

How I Became a Boogie-Down Rican

Documentation of solo (excerpt) created by Jane Gabriels. May 2014.
 BAAD!/Bronx Academy of Arts and Dance (Bronx, NY)
 Duration: 7 minutes
 © Jane Gabriels, 2014

Cocinando

Documentation of group work by Pepón Osorio and Merián Soto. 1985.
 PS1 (Queens, NY)
 Video Stills, duration: 2 minutes
 (there is a spelling mistake on this current DVD - *Cocinando* is the correct spelling. I will have
 copies of the revised DVD by November 30, 2014)
 (the image quality is not high but you can see the casita that Osorio built in the space. It's not
 easy to read but Soto made her entrance sitting on a couch carried by six men).
 © Merian Soto, Pepon Osorio, 1985

¿Cómo nos ven? ¿Vemos? / How are we seeing? Do we see ourselves?

Documentation of solo by Merián Soto from *Puerto Rican Trivia*, created in collaboration with Pepon Osorio. 11 Jan. 1987. Performance.

Emmanuel Midtown YM-YWHA / 92nd St Y (NY, NY)

Duration: approx 2 minutes

© Merian Soto, Pepon Osorio, 1987

Branch Dances

Documentation of work created by Merián Soto Performance/Practice, 2012.

Wave Hill (Bronx, NY)

Video Stills, duration: 2 minutes

© BronxNet, 2012

Bronx Dance Fest '99

October 1999

Hostos Center for the Arts & Culture

a two-week dance concert series curated by Pepatián's co-founder Merián Soto

Duration: 7 minutes (excerpts)

© BronxNet, 1999

Pepatián's Bronx Hip Hop Academy

Documentation of Hip Hop Academy with Rokafella, La Bruja, Toofly, DP One and teens at BronxWorks. Pepatián. June 2014.

Photographs, duration: 1 minute (artists featured: DP One and Toofly)

© Marisol Diaz, 2014

Out of La Negrura / Out of Blackness

Collaborative project created by choreographers/dancers: Sita Frederick, Ana "Rokafella" Garcia, Marion Ramirez.

Produced by Pepatián, 2006 & 2009 performances at Pregones Theater -Teatro Pregones

Photographs, duration: 1 minute

© Marisol Diaz, 2006 & 2009

Shadow Lands

Created in collaboration by poet Caridad De La Luz and dancer Cynthia Paniagua. Produced by Pepatián.

Premiered at Pregones Theater-Teatro Pregones, June 2013.

Photographs, duration: 1 minute

© Marisol Diaz, 2014

Bronx Moves

Documentation of Hunts Point Homes or SPED the BX with Larissa Velez Jackson and dancers.

Bronx, NY. Pepatían. June 2014.

Video stills, duration: 1 minute

© BronxNet, 2014