

Abstract

The Afro-Indigenous diasporic body as a repository of imprinted memory and space of embodied knowledge cradles this written body of work and work of the body–action research thesis *(Re) Membering Forwards: Excavating and Embodying Cultural Memory*. My autobiographical memory account looks back while going forward as an applied creative praxis and collaborative process –a rich interwoven layering of embodied response emerges as an Afro-flamenco choreography.

A key feature of my process was in rooting my work through the lens of diasporic thinking and embodied questioning. With the aim of identifying and articulating how coexisting aesthetic codes emerge, the body as text revealed profound cultural memories. By engaging with and within varied environments (spaces and places) – an employed methodology, temporal codes of embodied understanding were intuitively amplified. Through this interactive work (from studio to on location film shoots), I have deepened my understanding of the confluence between materiality and immateriality within specific spaces.

MONTCLAIR STATE UNIVERSITY

(Re) Membering Forwards: Excavating and Embodying Cultural Memory,

An Afro-Diasporic Dance Film Rendition

by

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A Master's Thesis Submitted to the Faculty of

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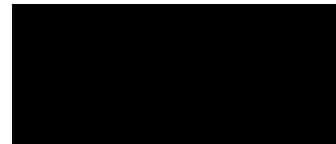
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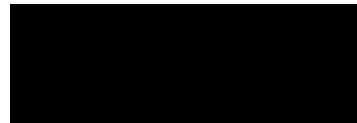
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*(RE) MEMBERING FORWARDS: EXCAVATING AND EMBODYING CULTURAL MEMORY,
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A THESIS

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Introduction

Cultural memory acknowledges an ever present link between the diaspora and the cultural heritage home place. I recognized a deep yearning to recall, return and reconnect to the notion of an enlivened memory and sense of home (re) defined. My dance film *(Re) Membering Forwards: Excavating and Embodying Cultural Memory* situates itself at the center of a creative journey exploring cultural memory through the lens of diaspora agency and authority. From the inception of creative and choreographic motifs, the notion of Afro-flamenco aesthetic as a coexisting space of recognition and revelation informs and transforms my trajectory. This 14 minute film was shot on location at various locales on the island of Borikén (Puerto Rico) and premiered on Friday, August 5, 2022 via Youtube online platform. Works in progress showings of the film occurred on April 8, 2022 during the annual Community Day film festival at Albuquerque Academy.

As an entry point and place of entry work, this creative and choreographic offering explores and embodies (my) ancestral movement lineage emerging from: 1) West-Central Africa Yoruba language speaking Peoples; 2) Iberian flavors from Al Andaluz (Southern Spain); and 3) indigenous textures of the Taíno-Arawak Peoples from the islands of Boriken (colonial name Puerto Rico), and Coabana (colonial name-Cuba).

Part of the crux of my research is the creative work of combining African fabric print as refashioned costuming associated with traditional flamenco dance accouterments. Here, I refer to the *Manton de Manila* (silk shawl used in flamenco), as an example of a framing aesthetic embellishment in the dance.

Rationale

The root of this thesis emerges from a deep interest in exploring how my mestiza-mulata decolonized body is a space for experiential and experimental flamenco expression. As a person (and body) who interrogates aesthetic and cultural experiences, I take the right and muster the courage to disrupt tradition in order to retrieve from cultural traditions a hybrid sensibility passed on to me by ways of my Afro-Latina Caribbean familial makeup. Indeed, in my genealogy, Afro emerged from ancestral roots in West African land and the language of the Yoruban Peoples; Indigenous comes from the Taíno-Arawak Peoples of the Boriken (Puerto Rico) islands and Coabana (Cuba); Iberian emerged from ancestral lineage traced to Andaluz (Southern Spain) and the Canary Islands. It is within the richness of these imprinted cultural memories, excavated, and cultivated lived experiences, that I found the inspiration and the materials for this research. As a multiracial person of color, dance, dance making, and dancing hold personal space and meaning of cultural affinity and deep connection.

Histories rooted in racialized and colonized spaces of fragmented accounts have influenced and impacted my consciousness and way of being. Because of this, I feel a deeply rooted sense of urgency to remember, recall, and reconnect to my ancestral history as well as a desire to disrupt assigned aesthetic codes through an experiential and experimental journey of intimate self-questioning. Through oceans of relatable personal time and spaces, I sensed a growing disconnect between what I intuitively wanted to express and what I actually was expressing through dance. Specific to how my performance practice emerged, in this work, I referred to two dance cultures that define and affirm a dance ecology and evolution of it: Flamenco and Afro-Caribbean dance rhythms and associated dances. I also explored how the refashioning of traditional costuming can be a space for disruption. In the case of this work, the

traditional flamenco shawl of Manton de Manila, becomes a space of radical creative exploration.

This thesis process allowed me to activate and bridge performance and reflection purposefully—a pedagogical praxis I value, foster, and encourage within my teaching and performative practices. My embodied behavior was a space of focused interest and integration in this dialogue between theory and practice. This choreographic endeavor became an essential and critical space for articulating my aesthetic voice. In wanting to exchange and expand my artistic experiences of situating dance presentation beyond that of stage performance, the idea to integrate film technique and choreography was central to my decision to create a dance film. The opportunity to revisit, review, and revise through visual processing of captured choreographic content provided space for deeper attention to detail within a frame (sound and site) while cultivating focus from just filming content into a space of film making with a purpose.

In *(Re) Membering Forwards: Excavating and Embodying Cultural Memory*, the following questions framed my approach to my cultural, aesthetic and choreographic research; the development of the dance film; and the trajectory of this thesis writing.

- Q1: Which of my dance cultures is perceived as a dominant embodied presence?
- Q2: Which dance culture is perceived as dormant within my cultural memory?
- Q3: How might sensory systems encourage the emergence of hidden cultural memory?
- Q4: How might ritual practice disseminate embodied knowledge?
- Q5: How might cultural indicators inform coexisting diasporic spaces of expression?

A central and critical focus of *(Re) Membering Forwards: Excavating and Embodying Cultural Memory*, is recognizing and honoring my coexisting cultural identities, aesthetic

affinities, and genealogy of diaspora-rooted entanglements of understanding. The work bridges layered planes of embodied knowledge, dancing wisdom, and cultural affinities and creates an enlivened performative space. I am attempting to invoke new directions within my experimental sensibilities and experiential sense of learning through dance to reveal a spectrum of unknowable surprises, intuitive knowing, and disseminated knowledge. The nature of this research and creative work provides fertile ground for developing an autoethnographic research framework of cavernous embodied questioning, knowledge, and aesthetic articulation.

As a contributing framework for embodied knowledge, the full body of this thesis work (research, creative process, completed film, and companion paper) is a contiguous conversation between creative, scholarly and performative text while coming from a place of emotion, vulnerability, and authentic manifestation. It is a self-(re) discovery of knowing and being as a diaspora presence in dance, dance making and screendance creation. While on the creative trajectory of this work, my pathway included deep engagement, dialogue and willingness to dive deep, risk failure, encounter “road-blocks” and potential directional shifts. Both internal and external daily challenges proved to be significant to how I navigated a field of uncertainty, surprises, and a timely attainment of research goals.

Reconnecting to a refreshed sense of personal process was influential in developing an intimate sense of self trust. Artistic freedom to explore and develop this intimate body of work emerged as a significant, meaningful and multi-layered engagement. (Re) claiming artistic agency while connecting to cultural memory provided and acknowledged spaces of recognition. This framework of creativity and connection beckon a deep consideration of what it means to enter spaces of fullness and presence. The sense of a memory emergence and artistic awakening reflects how the *American Heritage Dictionary* (2000) defines the act of (re) membering: “to

bear in mind as a deserving gift or reward” (597). Indeed, the process and a pathway of this work was embraced as a cosmic gift of self-discovery.

Research

Fabric and Memory

The root of this thesis emerges from an interest in exploring how my mestiza-mulata decolonized-body holds space for experiential and experimental flamenco expression. As a body that questions lived and imprinted aesthetic experiences, I leaned into my personal agency and courage to disrupt imprinted colonized embodiments within the lexicon of the commercialized aesthetics of flamenco and discover a sense of hybrid sensibility that is rooted in my Afro-Latina heritage. It is within the richness of these imprinted cultural memories as well as excavated and cultivated lived experiences, that I found inspiration and context for this research.

My research into my lineage required authentic agency and aesthetic self determination through realms of self-discovery and self-actualization. To disrupt aesthetics connected to formalized, colonized, and structured flamenco practices and instruments, I leaned into two thought processes. First is the idea, “*Sin pedir permiso, me agarro aquí,*” translated as without asking permission, which resonated deeply with me, as I gave myself the permission to follow my creative instinct and impulse to design, discover and deliver something new, something fresh, something re (born). As an anchoring point “*me agarro aquí*” (translated as hold me here) helped me carve a conceptual space to situate a manifesting compositional practice. This compositional practice is defined by an emerging sensibility of aesthetic liberties and deconstructivism of conventional ideas, structures and movement motifs. The second idea I leaned into is described by Diana Taylor:

[We] learn and transmit knowledge through embodied action, through cultural agency, and by making choices. Performance, for me, functions as an episteme, a way of knowing, not simply an object of analysis... If performance did not transmit knowledge, only the literate and powerful could claim social memory and identity. (xvi-xvii).

Question # 1, Which of my dance cultures is perceived as a dominant embodied presence?, and Question # 2, Which dance culture is perceived as dormant within my cultural memory? served as an internal conversation and consideration between coexisting aesthetic heritages and recollections of experiences. These Informed the first phase of creating movement content and led me to explore (de)colonized traditional costuming associated with flamenco dance shawl design. I vividly remember my paternal grandmother's flamenco and rumbera costume hunch draped with various traditional flamenco shawls (*manton*). I wanted to excavate and enliven this memory within the creative trajectory of this thesis. Thus, research around the meaning of the dance shawl design and decolonizing and refashioning the *manton* became the creative anchoring point for my thesis film.

The traditional *manton* (shawl) is an embroidered silk shawl derived from the Filipino *pañuelo*. In the circles of flamenco costume and wear, it is also referred to as a *Manton de Manila*. These shawls were popular in the Philippines, Latin America and Spain during the colonial era in the mid-16th century. During the 18th century, its popularity increased in multiple regions of Latin America, and the shawl design evolved. Figure 1.1 displays a traditional *Manton de Manila* that my paternal grandmother owned and performed with as a *flamenca* (female flamenco practitioner-performer); it is a prized possession holding spaces of memory and honoring. In wanting to preserve and prevent increased wear and tear of a valued relic, interaction with this *manton* was minimal. In place of using this particular relic, I purchased a

new and dimensionally similar practice manton which allowed me to recreate traditional manton maneuvers demonstrating movement efficacy. This also contributed to my ability to recreate patterns with a much heavier and aesthetically refashioned manton. Figure 1.2 shows the aesthetically refashioned manton I created.

Figure 1.1 Traditional Manton De Manila



Figure 1.2 Modeled Refashioned Manton



The aesthetic bridging and blending between Figure 1.1 and Figure 1.2 maintained the open squareness when folded, creating a triangle design with threaded fringe as an extension to the manton body.

Figure 1.3 displays a session of local sourcing of African print fabric, and Figure 1.4 displays one side of a finished refashioned maton. This aesthetically decolonized manton serves as a process of excavating and reimagining the memory of my grandmother through the lens of a decolonized cultural history.

Through the creation of it, I found myself reconnecting to a memory and a recall of a time when my wearing of African print fabric clothing was a daily practice. The process of engaging with each necessary step of designing and constructing the final artifact deepened my memory recall. I remembered my grandmother teaching me to sew basic stitches using needle

and thread, and eventually advancing my skills to learning on her prized Singer sewing machine. A deep memory of her crocheting colorful doilies as table coasters resting under ceramic flamenco dolls emerged during the process of thinking about the crochet frame on which I laced the shredded fringe fabric to hang. The memory of crocheting, flamenco dolls, and manton all connected in a single reflection space.

Figure 1.3 Sourcing African Print Fabric



Figure 1.4 Multi Block African Print Side



The symbolism embedded within the hybrid aesthetic and refashioned *manton* design provides levels of contextual and visual meaning. A critical “first step” was to find and buy African print wax fabric for what I envisioned in my (re) fashioned design. I encountered several challenges in the process of sourcing a collection of promising prints. Somewhat sensing and somewhat recalling the significance of specific designs, I felt my knowledge was weak in this regard. I made the deliberate choice to spend significant time going through yards of fabric in an in-person shopping space, recognizing the importance of this purposeful exercise and goal. A series of “fabric whisperer” sessions allowed me to connect to a distant memory. I recalled how, when I was sixteen, my connection to the African and Black dance community and participation

in set classes inspired my love of making and wearing African print clothing. This joyous memory inspired a clever direction and design decision: one side of the refashioned Manton would be made from pre-cut squares, thereby aesthetically disrupting the canvas, and the opposite side would consist of only kente cloth. Kente refers to a Ghanaian textile, made of handwoven cloth, strips of silk and cotton as a traditional weave style. Historically the fabric was worn in a toga-like fashion by royalty among ethnic groups such as the Ashanti and Ewe. It is also worn by queens, princesses and women of Dagbon. This experimentation gave way to a delightful game of collision and clever midair maneuvers revealing alternate sides when manipulating my manton. A day trip to Shabazz Market on West 116th street in my native Harlem, NYC, and encouragement from my aesthetic consultant and adult daughter Gabrielle N. Rojas proved to be incredibly fruitful. The goal of the day's visit was to engage with the African community and business owners who sell continental wearables and related goods at Shabazz Market. This commitment forced me to step out of my subdued and shy social comfort zone. I found myself actively seeking out information about the various patterns used on the multiprint panel squares, spending valuable time to make purposeful purchases.

Midway through my time at Shabazz Market, I threw myself into full performative initiatives, revisiting and revamping the performance presentation of my refashioned African print manton to accommodate various spaces in the open air shouk (market place). With each of the three demonstrations, the performance space was flooded with onlookers and curious minds. The exchange of information ignited great personal joy and affirmed the originality of my creative idea. As a cultural indicator, as posed in question #5, the deep discussions between myself and an elderly African vendor from a region in Gambia about the meaning and commonality between specific patterns and those emerging from my African and Afro-diaspora

memories were insightful. This conversation was among the richest experiences along my creative journey and process. Figure 1.5 and 1.6 display the conversational setting at the open African Village Shabazz Market. This encounter provided rich information which opened a space for deeper contemplation of an emotional connection to the aesthetic and creative choice made leading up to this very special exchange.

Figure 1.5 Shabazz Market Selfie

Figure 1.6 Conversation with Mata Shabazz



The work of Yinka Shonibare MBE investigates aesthetic disruption as it relates to African print wearables and diasporic meaning. Maintaining an ongoing and deep fascination with his multi-media art led me to (re)imagine similar ways of decolonizing and reframing aesthetic expression of conventional norm wearables. One work in particular as displayed in Figure 1.7, visually engaged me and evoked a sense of aesthetic blending through costume refashioning. The multilayered ruffled skirting reflects similar aspects to traditional flamenco costuming. This image ignited levels of inspiration for me which first appears with the

refashioned manton design and bata de cola dress train used in my final dance film choreography. My aim was to offer another interpretation of a major flamenco emblem by blending West African fabric prints (Figure 1.3) with a recognized flamenco costume shawl fashion—initially.

Figure 1.7 Shonibare MBE Champagne Kid (2013)



In the article “Time and Transformation in the Art of Yinka Shonibare MBE,” Rachel Kent, chief curator at the Museum of Contemporary Art (MCA) Australia, introduces the work of the British-born Nigerian artist “who employs a diverse range of mediums—from sculpture, painting, and installation to photography and film—to probe matters of race, class, cultural identity and history ” (7). Kent’s emphasis on the Afrocentric aesthetic theme of Shonibare’s art-making process and work provides visually engaging and impactful representation. The remarkable collection and art contribution through images and imagery resonated with me. Within a complex, fully integrated space of physical, mental, and spiritual resonance, I recognized cultural affinity between Yoruba and Western cultural elements through Shonibare’s

aesthetic polarity. Drawing inspiration from featured collections and Shonibare's process methodology, I made a deliberate decision to immerse myself in Afrocentric contemplation and Afro-aesthetic staged environment. I excavated notions of familial cultural and personal memory situated within my West-African cultural affinity. Mirroring Shonibare's methodology of immersing himself in mainstream and Nigerian pop culture (Kent 28), I saturated my practice through sensory immersion and interaction with staged fabric environments and pictorial assemblage.

Throughout my creative process I began to develop a sense of how practice and theory are perpetually linked; which inspired how I became aware of how my aesthetic world exists within this diasporic space. Developing a working understanding and definition of diaspora identity through the work of theorist-scholar, Augustin Laó-Montes was key. Laó-Montes posits the notion of Afro-Latinidades and Diasporic Imaginary as a signifier, deserving of academic currency and space for developing a field of research. He states that the hyphenated expression of "Afro-Latinidades as a domain of difference serves as a space for analyzing the conceptual value embedded in such identity denominations and geo-historical categories" (118). As a discursive framework he argues for a redefined and challenged registry of limitations of the subalternized histories of Afro-diasporic subjects within and beyond the borders of its definition. Within my embryonic understanding of his framework, I situate my work as a conceptualized and overlapping aesthetic identity of diaspora knowledge and emergence through the dance making process.

Instrumentation & Strategies

During the final week of Montclair State University summer session in June 2020, a final student showcase performance presentation allowed me to use my refashioned manton. The performance reaffirmed the sentiment of a positive direction in a flourishing thesis work. I sensed an authentic audience and felt a genuine performer connection with my audience. After the performance, there was much curiosity about the remodeled manton. Another outcome resulting from the embodied understanding of this short choreography was realizing that I needed to increase my upper body endurance to facilitate the movement flow of the somewhat heavy fabric – much heavier than a silk manton. Hence, both the physical and visual experiences allowed a deeper understanding of how to engage my entire sensory system with the manton.

Returning to a home/school studio environment after the summer 2021, I began to focus on the areas of an emerging body of work, during my rehearsal/choreography sessions, that I identified as needing clarity and refinement. The introspective and interactive communication environment of working in a black box theater became a catalyst for stripping away all initial hesitations, overthinking, and distorted embodiments. Wanting to encourage, connect to, and cultivate levels of active and authentic engagement leading to self-actualization, each rehearsal/choreography session allowed purposeful aesthetic shifts.

Figure 1.8 and Figure 1.9 illustrate an immersive process methodology that reflects the balance between creative process, spontaneity, and organized chaos staged in the intimate space of a black box theater environment. The need to establish and cultivate a protective working space was critical at this stage of my process. A series of communication between the school technical director and colleagues ensured undisrupted windows of space and time availability.

The dialogue between the culturally specific fabrics and my body provided a fertile ground for aesthetic disruption, leading to a process of elimination of key gestures associated with otherwise homogeneous and unquestioned flamenco gestural vocabulary. In a multifaceted and multilayered immersive approach, the opportunity to identify and normalize within this environment the aesthetically dominant movements, as articulated in my Research Question # 3 and Question # 4 , begged for the central query of knowing how to express polyrhythmic qualities.

Staged Environments

Wanting to dive deeper into understanding how temporal hybrid aesthetic exchanges emerge as unique rhythmic dynamics and rhythmic personalities, I explored new ways of cultivating a spontaneous response within a staged environment. Figure 1.8 below displays a basic installation of items meant to evoke memory and organic movement. A conga drum rests upstage right covered in the same print fabric used in the refashioned traditional bata de cola (the flamenco long train traditional dancers wear) in addition to well-positioned photo copy printouts of family members who have transitioned from this life and are still honored in memory.

Beyond a staged prop, I decided to engage with the instrument as a way to add yet another layer of sensory response and tactile sensation experiences. Percussive music making as play exploration surprisingly evoked memory. This experience and outcome is explored in the following section *Percussive Rhythmic Associations*.

Figure 1.9 was inspired by wanting to capture an immersive reflection experience and needing to engulf myself in a pod of various Kente cloth prints. Again, allowing myself to explore new ways of thinking, feeling and experiencing, this activity sparked a refreshed praxis

of creative exploration and expression. In the act of being silly, youthful and unpredictable, I recognized a fraction of my younger self and youthful curiosity.

Figure 1.8 Immersive Process



Figure 1.9 Immersive Reflection



Later in the field, I would allow choreographic space for this gestural ritual representation to emerge as I danced at the La Plaza Rogativa (The Procession) as displayed in Figure 2.0 below. Within this space and time of exploring film shoot angles and rehearsing choreographic sequences using the refashioned *manton*, a deep memory emerged dating back to my Roman Catholic upbringing: images of high mass processional, visiting bishops, and a sanctuary filled with young innocent practitioners of the faith. The image of having a required veiled head by a smaller style *manton* called “*mantoncillos*” or “*picosalso*” associated with traditional accessories for flamenco dresses, also worn over the shoulders, evoked an emotional response and aesthetic recognition. I recognized the connection of a faith practice of the past and an aesthetic embodiment in the present.

Figure: 2.0 La Plaza Rogativa Statue/Old San Juan



The iconography of La Plaza Rogativa Statue (Figure 2.0) provided a reflective and visual space to explicate a frame for understanding and making sense of how and what I was sensing during the various sessions at this sight. A sensing of imposed religiosity, belonging and separation impacted how gesturing emerged in the choreography.

Percussive Rhythmic Associations

Another critical component of excavating and embodying deep cultural memory included dynamic activity that incorporated a gradual and steady series of tactile play-practice using hands and feet. After securing the use of a school-owned congo drum, I played basic rhythmic patterns that I remembered from when I was a young child, deepening a pathway to cherished cultural memories. These basic patterns functioned as a type of family anthem, releasing a time capsule of memory, celebration, and identity I had forgotten. I recalled the joy, beauty, and love experienced when my mother's youngest brother, Micheal Acuña (who passed away tragically a

long time ago), took the time to pass on his percussive knowledge and celebration of familial heritage music rooted in Afro-Caribbean lineage.

The cultural connection of the Congo drum and Afro-Caribbean musical characteristics are rooted in distinctive polyrhythmic, or cross-rhythm structure. The conga drum takes its origin in Cuba; its dimension can only be understood in correlation with the vast numbers of enslaved Africans who were brought over predominantly from the Bantu-speaking Congo region of Africa during the 17th and 18th centuries. The medium-sized conga drum is placed directly in front of the player with the tumba, a thin, single-headed drum, whose pitch depends on the part of the head being hit, placed to their right. When used, the quinto, a smaller type of conga drum with a higher pitch, is placed between the conga and the tumba in a triangular formation (notice that the quinto drum is now placed directly in front of the conguero). In the Afro-Puerto Rican music tradition, the Conga drum aesthetic is reflected in the Bomba drum, which is shorter and could be either a quinto or tumba to flank a conga formation.

By my third improvisational percussion session, I found myself playing the basic rhythms I was exposed to over sixty years ago. The fluid exchange between vocalizing the rhythms and calling out Uncle Mikey's name as an homage flooded a memory bank of deep recall. By the fourth immersive session in this space, I decided to print out and stage photos of family members who have transitioned as a method of recalling specific memories involving each unique individual and their personality. This is shown in Figure 1.8, to the left on the floor various printed photos are arranged in a tight cluster.

Needing to understand and translate this emerging polyrhythmic structure with my feet, as in the flamenco forceful footwork sections (flamenco escobilla), I started practicing familiar patterns with and without formal flamenco footwear. These various escobilla rhythms or

patterns/units in a flamenco palo are often practiced until they become familiar, identifiably imprinted as deep muscle memory. Flamenco rhythms are usually of either 12, 4 or 3 beats. The rhythmic unit is called compás, thus one Compás includes either 12, 4, or 3 beats. Most flamenco styles (Palos) have 12 beats. Palos with 12 beats include Soleá, Alegría, or Bulería. An immediate challenge was having to negotiate, to understand and rhythmically balance the sounds that are initiated in the hands and feet. Conga hand technique encourages a similar pattern of heel – toe – slap – toe – heel – toe – open tone – open tone in the flamenco footwork. The playful exploration between upper and lower limb inspired levels of joy, wonder, and childlike fun. These sessions opened up for me a space of deepened curiosity and possibilities.

Sense and Sensations

A series of movement exercises (prescribed and free-form) provided opportunities for an expanded sense of self expression, rich with sensuality and remembrance. Reflecting on Research question # 2: Which dance culture is perceived as dormant within my cultural memory?; Research question # 3: How might sensory systems encourage the emergence of hidden cultural memory?; and research question #4: How might ritual practice disseminate embodied knowledge?, I decided to explore tactile sensations to understand how sensory systems contributed to meaningful embodied knowledge. I explored two differentiated aesthetic tracks of movement practice which included a structured or free form dynamic full body warm-up that included isolated percussive footwork patterns rooted in either a flamenco structure or polyrhythmic Afrobeat foot stomp. I contrasted these with upper body posturing. The numerous sessions unveiled aesthetic realities and understandings related to Q4: How might ritual practice disseminate embodied knowledge?

The notion of cultivating and nurturing creative cognition through novel exercises prompted the exploring of flipping footwear and foot percussion choices. Practicing traditional foot percussive rhythm barefoot and executing Afrobeats foot stomp in traditional flamenco shoes evoked an enriched sense of embodied aesthetic diaspora. It became a pillar for restructuring a choreographic sequencing design emerging from an organic response to sensory prompting. Diving deeper into this practice of free-form meets disrupted aesthetic structure— a sense of reliance on embodied knowledge “flow” defined my practice moving forward.

Immersive Integration

To prepare for the exploration of familiar and unfamiliar sites as changing social, economic, and environmental conditions shape them over the years, it was important to establish an embodied groundedness in the studio. I needed to develop for myself a practice of connecting to my senses and sensations that would support and/or translate in the field during the dance film recording in and around the island of Boriken. I needed to cultivate a purposeful focus, to help me inhabit the various sites with the truest and most honest presence while making the right aesthetic choices. (My field experiences in Puerto Rico are described in detail in the Methodology section.) The varying levels of immersive sensory system integration and exchange laid the groundwork for my ability to adapt as I headed into uncharted performative territory. Armed with the will to dive into deep aesthetic risk and artistic exploration, I knew I would be entering a world of unknowns, surprises, and trepidation. Sensing the shift into new and unidentified spaces to film, I relied on the pillars of muscle memory and dance wisdom to define the inherent aesthetic nature of the dance I was creating.

In structuring a choreography framework that translated from studio to field, it was important to establish a palette of reproducible movement material while simultaneously leaving room for spontaneous embodied response. My ultimate goal was to cultivate a space that allowed for set choreography and improvisational movement to communicate and coexist. This type of approach minimizes the risks of ambiguity and rigidity in the choreographic work.

From the studio to the field, and now the final challenge was to transpose the dance from the field to the filmic medium. My first step was to create a storyboard to ensure that the focus would stay on my chosen movement themes. I initially worked from the inside out, my body guiding my decisions, then relied on the filmed sequences for the next steps. My palette of movements and the wisdom of my body, both physical and mental, helped me identify the tools to use for each task.

Along this learning journey, I had to learn the ins and outs of digital media and applied technology. I navigated through countless YouTube instructional videos on such topics as: how to assemble and maneuver gimbals, using external hard drives, employing a front loading Røde microphone, and using software editing, all of which was daunting. Starting from scratch with no prior experience in film, I was at first constantly confronted with technical challenges and questions, which all required for me to come up with creative solutions. It got better with time. The overall financial investments were equally steep. As a one-woman show, having to assume the hats of a producer, performer, camera woman, and technical crew both onsite and in the editing studio, I sometimes felt I was in a three ring circus act. Overwhelmed, disappointed, and feeling at times distraught, these emotions and experiences, though not necessarily new, unsettled my proposed schedule plan. Rather than finishing my work in May, I extended my finalizing the thesis through the summer.

Methodology

This section details the methods integrated in sourcing and creating the various instruments used throughout the creative process towards the completion of the thesis. The planning, execution and finishing of the written and final edit of the dance film took twenty-four weeks. Although several roadblocks derailed my progress towards completion of the final goal, the dance film, I remained committed and determined to pursue this indispensable body of work.

Collaborative Investigation # One: Barbara Blumenfeld, Seamstress

The need to aesthetically disrupt traditional costuming associated with flamenco dance, specifically the *Manton de Manila*, inspired my first collaboration with Barbara Blumenfeld, a seamstress of flamenco costuming. Barbara is the mother of Alice Blumenfeld, a former student at Albuquerque Academy (where I have taught dance since 2001), who is also a professional flamenco dancer. Having a first hand visual example of flamenco costuming creations by Barbara, I recognized the quality of work produced. Her work became known to me during the Festival Ballet Albuquerque winter performance season of *The Nutcracker*, in the Land of Enchantment, where both Alice and I have danced as guest artists since 2011. Upon sharing my creative idea with Alice, I got the sense that the collaboration between Barbara and myself would be successful.

A type of cosmic blessing paved the way for Barbara Blumenfeld and I to (deeply and enthusiastically) connect and collaborate on the manton project. Over a period of four weeks during the height of New Mexico's governor's "Shelter In" mandate, we managed to communicate via Zoom to come up with a most unique flamenco-inspired regalia. Not being fully vaccinated at that time, we cautiously met in person, double-masked, mindfully engaging in

a physical space while maintaining the mandatory six feet social distancing parameters. This collaborative journey was a labor of love, of learning, exploration, and art making. I embrace the exchange of knowledge, questions, and delightful endgame surprises and very special memories.

The first of its kind (at least I choose to believe this), the weightedness of the reimagined and refashioned manton proved to reveal aesthetic surprises, physical challenges, and design epiphanies. I had to learn how to cut fabric, hand stitch, sew on a sewing machine, crouch, and strip the fabric. The result was an unusually heavy shawl, which made physical manipulation very difficult. I realized I had to increase my upper body strength and stamina in order to manipulate the shawl with an apparent sense of ease and fluidity. I started practicing essential maneuvers and movement patterns on a daily basis. Initially, I stayed within the range of movement patterns and midair pathways associated with traditional Manton de Manila choreography. Wanting to break away from the flamenco tradition and discover new ways of embodying hybrid aesthetics, I incorporated techniques from the circus tradition. I refer here to the manipulation of a single object in midair, as performed in contact juggling. But for the purpose of this thesis, I choose to keep this explanation brief. However, I recognize that this area of self-discovery holds realms of possibility when thinking about contemporary framing of this prop integration. Figure 2.1 shows collaborator Barbara Blumenfeld engaging in creative play with the final design construction of the refashioned African print *Manton*.

Figure 2.1 Barbara Blumenfeld

During the in person sessions with Barbara, the opportunity to indulge in play and practice was incredibly useful. Her knowledge of and experience with traditional flamenco costuming informed my next (essential) steps regarding refinements of the choreography. We realized that the weight of the refashioned manton added to a full body bata de cola, long train flamenco style dress, would challenge the dancing. Needing to make the most out of our shared time in the studio, I focused on how the design of the *manton* could be improved and how I could move with the object efficiently. An exploratory movement session is included in the final dance film edit outtake.

Collaborative Investigation # Two: Caro Acuna Overa, Musician and Composer

An investigation on the notion of Afro-flamenco fusion sound sparked with multi-talented musician, flamenco cante (vocalist), and music composer Caro Acuna-Overa. An international artist within the various aesthetic music circles, their work within jazz, jazz flamenco and indigenous rhythmic sounds and scores, is recognized. Their creative flamenco credits include cante hondo, cajon and a wide range of instrumentation performance. We vaguely knew of each other from the National Institute of Flamenco in Albuquerque, New Mexico, Acuna-Overa as a former program administrator and myself as a long standing member of the organization and active practitioner within the adult Flamenco Experience I-III program.

It started out as a loose idea in floating conversations, stemming from a shared desire to compose an original score. Initial conversations hinted at the possibility of having a first round of a track to work from and develop into a multilayered polyrhythmic musical work. Not having a clear idea about how a polyrhythmic sound could and/or should reflect an emerging notion of Afro-flamenco rhythmic composition, I intentionally widened the space of my aesthetic and rhythmic interpretation. What emerged after a five-week process of requests and revisions was an all-inspiring, intricate, and clearly culturally hybrid composition. The experience of commissioning an original soundtrack for a dance film was a new learning experience. However, it spared me the burden of navigating through issues of musical copyright and ownership. Caro was very generous with her time and connections. Her professional reputation allowed her to recruit musicians from the flamenco tablao community. The collective contributions far exceeded my hope and aims of acquiring a unique hybrid sound complementary to the dance.

As I explored how sound might support the choreography, engaging with the music became a crucial part of developing codes of memory. Because internet access was unreliable in Boriken, I had to become so intimate with the music that it was ingrained in my memory. The

concerns and planning over the issue of music playback reoccurred daily as we kept changing locations during the filming sessions. Hearing the music with minimal environmental disruptions proved to be incredibly challenging, although use of a portable speaker to play the music was ideal, except for a problematic issue of playing music at early hours. In the end, having internalized the music, I was able to integrate and immerse myself in the performative process of my dance-film offering.

Collaborative Investigation # 3: Deva Smith from The Ruffle Factory.

The third collaborative investigation emerged from an aesthetic yearning and idea to extend the tail of the bata de cola skirt to a mermaid-length train to achieve a longer, fuller, look with a heavier weight. At the 11th hour, Deva and I connected in person to discuss our collaboration and my ideas of refashioning a traditional bata dress. Deva Smith is the mastermind and owner of The Ruffle Factory—a flamenco costuming and seamstress business in New Mexico. From afar, I had admired her creations and design for the Yjastros American Flamenco Dance Company based in Albuquerque, New Mexico. The company is associated with the National Institute of Flamenco and Conservatory of Flamenco Arts where I maintain a long standing membership and participation in their training program for adults and dance professionals.

Within the next week, a reimagined bata de cola dress sketch materialized. Figure 2.2 displays a playful pose that reflects our conversation about how the weight of a bata dress would/could influence movement choices while strongly suggesting the Africanist aesthetic presence and elements in flamenco dance expression. The practice bata de cola dress weighed 10 pounds more and provided a tool for developing necessary stamina for the legwork and lower

body gesture and postures. Deva Smith was incredibly helpful and generous with her time to guide through understanding the dynamics of a weighted multilayered traditional bata. The art and skill required to dance well in a traditionally constructed bata requires considerable time to learn and master. Maneuvering a drastically long and layered skirt and ruffled train commands codified technical knowledge. Working and dancing in a bata is something aggressive in appearance. The energy and exactness of leg placement under the circular rope frame while executing mid air tosses and lower limb wraps are signature moves. My concern and focus was on how to embody technical excellence and aesthetic meaning within the framework of my research questions.

My collaboration with Deva provided a wealth of possibilities and positivity related to aesthetic disruption of traditional costuming practices. Her experiences of working with internationally renowned flamenco artists and creatives is recognized and respected and her willingness to push aesthetic boundaries with me fed an artistic risk taking curiosity. The refashioned bata de cola was all that I had hoped for. Deva's seamstress skill, costuming knowledge, and aesthetic eye balanced my experience of the needs of the person wearing the bata de cola. At my suggestion, Deva placed open folds as a way to encourage air flow and range of upper body movement. The masterful work produced an amazingly beautiful and accomplished product. The next step was to continue choreographing while wearing the refashioned bata and decide how to skillfully manipulate the refashioned manton— the two costume pieces became co-conspirators in an emerging choreography.

Figure 2.2 Deva Smith @ Albuquerque Academy Dance Studio Space



After several sessions of rethinking through the initial refashioning designs and personal hours of practice, we decided to add more weight at the base of the largest ruffled end and less train length. This choice allowed me to focus more on the practical aspects of setting floor patterns and pathways as imagined in the field and less on having to perform big maneuvers as associated with codified bata skills. Additionally, the new fabric design and construction revision allowed opportunity to dance with the *manton* fluidly.

In the Field

Old San Juan/El Convento

Old San Juan is a repository of sensory memory, short-term and long-term memories, relating to my cultural past. I vaguely remember that in the 1960's, during my first stay on the

island, I spent a considerable amount of time with my grandaunt (my maternal grandmother's sister), her military husband, and their children. They owned and resided in a building with a distinct Spanish colonial architecture style. The hotel I was staying in this time is a converted nunnery, reflecting old world values and elegance. It reminded me of my grandaunt's house in many ways. In Old San Juan her (then) house reflects a long history of colonial design and landscape with its Gothic, Renaissance, and Baroque mélange.

I decided to film at El Convento, despite some logistical concerns. This historical landmark was an excellent location to explore choreography and staging of various shots and provided interior and exterior spaces that were relatively easy to access with minimal disruptions. The open air spaces were mostly uncrowded and offered the opportunity to move freely without masks. However, there were many complications with using the space. The Wifi access, essential for syncing the various devices used for filming, proved to be inconsistent. Setting up the various shots early in the morning and at dusk took a considerable amount of time. We never knew when to start the prep time for hair, make-up, warm-up and blocking of the choreography in time for Wifi availability, which caused great anxiety. Having to reset emotionally before the next filming round required incremental time to shift into purposeful presence.

It was after a third round of filming, I experienced an aesthetic, performative, and site-specific breakthrough. I had channeled and deeply connected with the energy of an ancestral presence. The camera kept rolling even though the choreography had ended. It captured a very emotionally charged moment: my body collapsed to its knees; folded in two, I started to sob with all my soul. Giving me the space to deepen whatever was happening, I was neither touched nor consoled. My daughter and camerawoman understood on some spiritual level what was

happening. As I emotionally recovered and composed myself, I affirmed verbally: “I crossed over and connected with our ancestors.” Upon wiping my tear-drenched face, I noticed a female figure looking on the top landing of the open air terrace. She was sobbing and silently applauding what she connected with in my performance. As she disappeared, I gathered my thoughts and things to debrief at a nearby seated area. Within ten minutes, this unknown woman re-appeared, coming towards me with a full assortment of flowers. She engaged with me in a type of esperanto to communicate her impression and appreciation of my choreographic offering.

This event would be the first of several crucial moments of attempting to capture how sensory systems evoke cultural memory excavation and its embodiments. It was the first of several strong moments to confirm that the dancing body is a repository of cultural memories, capable of communicating with others outside of language, through its own system of rhythm, physicality, and emotional presence. The following digital image Figure 2.3 captures a reflective space following the exploration of a structured improvisation session which took place on the first landing, open space veranda. I began to recognize a sense of aesthetic liberation and agency to abandon rigid formalized posturing. An embodied field of codified movement gestures learned and mimicked in practice and performance was in question. Consumed in deep thought between rounds of restful reflection, I began to recognize how by gradual shifting away from stylized flamenco dance, a new space was emerging. The aesthetic embodiments of performing structured choreographic sequences at different interior locations yielded contrasting different yet equally demonstrative responses in me as a performer. An interactive movement and choreography exploration at the site where an inner lattice wrought iron bars structure was an emotionally jolting memory and experience. The yett-like late medieval gate as a space of defensive, controlled points of entry and exit evoked relational experiences within and outside of my

immediate aesthetic response. I recognized multiple opportunities to negotiate emotions and memories as a space to mediate and embody meaning. Allowing myself to yield into a space of radical openness and vulnerability required a deep commitment to inquiry and wanting to understand what this cosmic exchange meant. As a conduit channeling cultural memory and intergenerational memory loss, I engaged in a shifting internal landscape of understanding.

Figure: 2.3 Reflection at El Convento Veranda



Filming on and around El Convento, specifically, the outdoor steps adjacent to El Convento inspired meaningful cultural memory. My recall circled around layered sounds of early

morning ocean wave breaking and palm tree fronds when early rising was cultivated as a way to connect with nature and less of human foot traffic and associated noise.

Las Picuas

Three days later, the stay and film shoot at Las Picuas, located in Rio Grande further east, was vastly different from the previous experiences and work. In contrast to San Juan, the quiet and isolated background of oceanfront scenery close to the national forest was ideal for the type of choreographic reflective and balanced harmony I had envisioned. Setting up the shots to reflect thoughtful choice and consistency required lots of planning. We had to plan ahead for where the sun would be positioned at various times of the day. We were battling the sand fleas while trying at the same time not to react in voice and/or movement. The remote location and distance from the oceanfront container home was not optimal for accessing wifi and/or Bluetooth and required for us to solely use an iPhone for these shoots, with the addition of a Røde microphone to capture some natural sounds. These sounds were inserted later in the final edit. I would wake up between 2:00 AM–4:00 AM to capture amazing sounds from the ocean and rainforest. Anticipating how the ocean water and current would affect the weight of a drenched bata de cola and the choreography of the movement, I had packed three sets of trains of slightly different lengths and sizes. My thoughts were: less fabric-less drag, more length-more dramatic and encouraged drag. The overhead shots, capturing low level movement to evoke ritual cleansing, relied on spontaneous engagement with the environment: hands over face, scooping, while seated in the water. A site-specific spiritual evocation, the contrast of sound, movement, and expression enriched this portion of the work and choreography. During this choreography segment the reliance of having to focus on grounding my lower body in shifting wet sand against

a strong ocean current required a spontaneous balance between set choreography (created in studio) and an improvisational movement response to nature's movement. The additional weightedness and wet fabric in ocean drag both challenging and instructive, enriched the aesthetic sense of sensory organization in movement. Apart from the logical challenges and outcome, sitting at the core of this work was the deep memory of how my mother spent a voluminous amount of time by and in the ocean. As a place of deep reflectiveness, comfort and ritual, my memory of her full day trips to ocean spaces felt like sacred space. Sharing many exercises with her by the ocean, I began to understand the importance of leaning into silence and embracing the natural sounds of moving water. It is here I developed a personal connection to and love of moving waters, ocean water as a sacred place of remembrance and ritual. During the filmic choreography I invited this memory to deepen and become enlivened. The arm gesturing of facial and upper body cleansing symbolizes this deep memory. This experience opened a passageway for deeper memory to emerge unguarded and reassuringly.

Loíza

On the northeastern coast of Puerto Rico, north of Canóvanas, east of Carolina, and west of Río Grande sits the town and municipality of Loíza. It is known as Puerto Rico's center for African-inspired traditions. It is home to one of the largest Black populations on the island; more than 60 percent of its 30,000 residents identify as Black (negroes). My familial heritage on my father's side has roots there. A plan to explore and film in Loíza required a culturally sensitive approach. Before venturing out to scout the appropriateness of filming at Raul Ayala's y Los Hermanos Ayala Company of Bomba dancers and percussionists, I had spoken to Mr. Ayala to communicate my travel plans. All appeared initially favorable. I had curiosity about the

legendary vejigante masks history and connection between Africa, Ponce and Loíza. In this region, the Africanist mask-making traditions use coconuts instead of paper mâché. I sensed a need to reconnect to my dance roots in Bomba as a sensory way to remember and recall cultural dance memories. (Bomba dance is a Puerto Rican dance with African roots where the dancers lead the musicians through lively improvisation and instantaneous creativity.) Raul Ayala is the hub for African and Afro-Caribbean culture, dance, and art in Loíza. Figure 2.4 shows Casa Ayala where Vejigante mask making workshops are held and the introduction of Bomba dance history starts. Thereafter the actual Bomba dancing and drumming workshops are held at a local beachfront.

In Figure 2.5, displays Doña Ayala, (Raul Ayala's mother) generously offering a deep history of the vejigante mask masking and Bomba dance tradition. My interaction with Doña Ayala sparked a memory of my African great grandmother and her ritual/spiritual practice in Santeria/Vodou religion. The recall flashed mental images of symbolic figurines, head sculptures made from dried coconut cases, green bananas (plantains) soaked in honey, and the vivid image of her smoking a long cigar, while propped on her throne-like seating area. I remembered her in black full length period clothing, wearing her full crop of tightly coiled white hair, against her jet black skin. The power of remembrance and recall deepened my sense of authentic agency to (re) claim aesthetic space. The relaxed time in discussion and exploration provided a space to (re) connect to emotional shifts and awareness which in turn would translate into physical embodiment.

Figure 2.4 Ayala/Loíza



Figure 2.5 Doña Ayala



Figure 2.6 Paper Maché Vejigante Mask/Ponce



I wanted to engage with my roots through ancestral Afro-Caribbean dance, using the body and its senses to access a deeper state of aesthetic disruption and recentering on a co-

existing, hybrid place – a place where Africanist and flamenco aesthetics can merge authentically, organically, and meaningfully; a fertile Afro-flamenco space where I could root new practices and thrive. What was fascinating about my relatively short and guarded visit was a vibe I recognized from the days when I visited my great African elders and maternal great grandparents. Embedded in deep reverence and respect for my great grandmother's belief system rooted in a mix of Santeria, Vodun, Orishas (deities), I sensed her unseen presence in Raul Ayala's space. The sacredness of this space sanctioned a measure of cultural sensitivity and did not allow a direct creative engagement like requesting to film at this location. I decided not to film and instead spent time experiencing and enjoying cultural wisdoms, widening a space to connect to powerful spiritual forces and memory.

Ponce

The last and final shot was in Ponce, a large city on Puerto Rico's southern coast and birthplace of my mother Naomi Rivera (1927-1972). Its well-preserved old town features grand mansions built in the unique Ponce Creole architectural style, such as the Centro Cultural de Ponce Carmen Solá de Pereira. Relatively nearby, the center of the city is a sugar plantation where my maternal grandfather as the son of an African and Afro-Caribbean native was forced into a life of hard labor. He was married to a mulata light skin Black woman. His wife, my maternal grandmother, worked in the plantation main house as a servant. During my visit, the historical sites, environing streets, pronounced church service sounds along with regional foods brought back some deep memories. I had originally planned to film a section of the dance in an urban site, at the (abandoned) hospital where my mother was born—the Alberque Caritativo Tricoche. At that time, the neoclassical one-story structure covered an entire city block. The

building remained unchanged until the 1918 earthquake damaged part of the southern side. The reconstruction of this flank was completed in 1928, with a second story added to the original design. My idea was to honor the memory of my grandmother and mother at this site with my dance – the dance that embodies the richness, history, and ancestral legacy of my multicultural family. Both these women had always found a way and the money to encourage my pre-professional interest in dance and support my dance studies. The extreme heat and hot temperature thwarted the plan to film during the day. The choice to capture my cultural memory sentiment within the peripheral spaces of this site inspired deeper reflection and interest to explore this more in a future body of work.

Figure 2.7 Caritativo Trioche Hospital



Creative Process

Embarking on this creative journey provided numerous opportunities of self discovery and a refreshed understanding of my own artistic process. I recognized key and contrasting aspects of my artistic process as it pertains to placing myself, my dancing body in the center of the work and text, especially in comparison to working with an ensemble of young students of dance learning and performing choreography for a theater concert venue. The creative liberty to dive into movement exploration having a sense of unbound aesthetic limitations and creative agency was most illuminating. There were spaces of interconnectedness related to how I work with ensembles and how I work solo for a solo body of work. I had to take on a network of strategic planning regarding a balanced sense of collaboration, craft, personal accountability, technique based discipline, and best use of time and resources.

During the undertaking of informing and transforming my shifting and articulated artistic process, I cultivated ways to stay rooted which was critical to developing content while bridging context. This took the form of deep reflective practice, daily embodied sessions of movement exploration, structuring movement motifs, and setting choreography. Additionally, I invested significant time planning and plotting out a Plan B, while also remaining open and ready for immediate problem solving.

Part of the learning curve associated with my transforming artistic process was having to develop sensibilities about working in a distant environment in the field. Working, performing, and filming in spaces that hold specific meaning, traditions, habits, mores, customs and values required deep considerations and cultural sensitivity. The importance of staying alert, patient, responsive and flexible became significant to my process. Along a trajectory of repeat shoots on the same location I began to understand the need for spontaneous shifting. These on location

experiences presented a unique feature to my artistic process as I developed ways to identify, connect and respond to up-close encounters with a pedestrian audience in an informal setting. While filming, I noticed a reciprocity of respect and curiosity emerging from a performer-onlooking audience exchange.

I shared a work in progress 5 minute version of the work in April 2022 during the annual Community Day film festival at Albuquerque Academy. In attendance were students grades 6-12th and faculty of the school. Hoping to capture the essence and theme of my creative and choreographic work, the shorter version provided content for eliciting response to a five-question post film viewing discussion. These questions are presented in the Appendix. For the sake of time and schedule limitations, I held an informal in class discussion. Student response revealed levels of surprise, wonder and curiosity about how and why the work emerged. Beyond this, they suggested I include more footage of the Picuas site oceanfront choreography which apparently created a deep visual engagement.

Discussion

Because I want to cultivate an authentic understanding of how embodied representation emerged, my aforementioned research questions guide my post production discussion in this thesis section.

Q1: Which my dance culture is sensed as a dominant embodied presence?

During initial movement explorations, I sensed an overwhelming corporeal presence of flamenco dance's "exotic" posturing and gestured expression when glancing into the mirrored dance studio wall. I recognized in myself affected embodiments and unconscious mimicking characterized by stylized and structured training I have received from conservatory practices in

flamenco, specifically. These practices were characterized by rigid pedagogical techniques, structured movement combinations and absence of individual “soul-based” expressions. Finding one's soul-based aesthetic expression or *duende* within these spaces of practice takes a back seat. I decided to take a leave of absence from practice spaces focusing on flamenco dance technique and classical Spanish dance (*escuela bolera*) as a way to decentralize what I recognized as a dominating aesthetic within me. Flamenco and *escuela bolera* dance styles when presented and taught in dance conservatories follow a highly codified structure. Lots of work. Against this backdrop, I shifted into a schedule of improvisational flamenco movement explorations which included a shift away from recognizable flamenco music rhythms to support a non-codified embodied response. In this case, the Afro-flamenco music I commissioned (layered with Africanist and Afro-Caribbean beats and breaks) bolstered me in my exploration of authenticity and hybrid choreography. What started to emerge was an authentic and hybrid response within the third week of a self-structured in-studio movement and choreographic practice. This became a type of counter practice as a way to recall and (re)member through aesthetic spaces of diasporic embodiment, leading me to the next question..

Q2: Which dance culture is sensed as dormant within my cultural memory?

When I began reflecting on my dance culture experiences through a practice of sensing in the present, I recognized the result of a history of imposed aesthetic structuring and formalized training. My body has been immersed in codified dance training and presentation from non African-centered frameworks and spaces of teaching and learning. This has repressed my cultural memory, presence, and embodied diaspora expression to a diminished space of recall. The Africanist aesthetic and hybrid dance culture recognition required deeper reflection and self-

questioning along my creative process, but helped me define a trajectory of authentic (re)memberence.

Q3: How might sensory systems encourage the emergence of hidden cultural memory?

Allowing myself the creative freedom to explore various sensory systems as a pathway for releasing obscure and eclipsed cultural memory was a significant development in this action research and creative exploration. By interfacing with specific environmental conditions and spaces, the emergence of specific cultural memory became apparent.

Returning to the birthplace and former habitations of my Boriquen familial experience, on the island of Boriken (Puerto Rico-colonial name), I was influenced by a wave of time-scaled currents of cultural memory. Floating between short memory, long history, and active recall, my understanding of the bigger picture became clearer.

The immediate impact of the environment, including tropical island weather and atmosphere conditions upon landing and throughout the filming, deepened my understanding of my being within a diasporic presence then and now. Interfacing with and being engulfed by the sight, sound, and sensation of ocean water, high coastal and frontal winds, sweltering temperatures and the coolness at sunset, all informed the dance. Being surrounded by the everyday native common island language, foods, and city and country vibes enriched and expanded how I related to various spaces, sites, and the emergence of cultural memory.

Q4: How might ritual practice disseminate embodied knowledge?

I recognized the importance of cultivating a practice of ritual as a space for intuitive response and embodied knowing. It was within these shifting and growing rooted spaces that I found meaning and purposeful practice. My ritual practice journey required periods of internal somatic dialogue that transcended the physical aspects of seeing, listening and feeling. As a type

of embodied realism and realities, I leaned into the experiences of the present inhabited dancing space. As a space of videography participation and for delivering a field of factual visual content – film as a primary reference source served the purpose of digitally journaling emerging embodied understandings.

Q5: How might cultural indicators inform coexisting diasporic spaces of expression?

I interfaced with cultural indicators such as erected monuments depicting religious practices and historical commemorative scenes. These included El Morro, part of the San Juan national historic colonial military site rooted in forced labor of the island's chattel slavery and the thick foliage and indigenous presence at and around El Yunque national forest. These iconic cultural spaces served to reference and inform (what I coin) as a balanced coexisting space of aesthetic expression. In performance and during the film shoot I noticed a lessening of mind chatter and more of an intuitive response to specific cultural indicators. As a visual reference as highlighted within the choreography and framed with specific sites, the aim of portraying a richly diversified co-existing cultural narrative centralized and framed the body of work. The shaping of (my) Afro-flamenco dance film rendition carved a personalized space of knowing and being in a diasporic contemplation.

Conclusion

The creative process and trajectory of engaging in this deeply meaningful work holds great significance to me. I pressed forward to overcome a cavernous pool of challenges to arrive at a place of joy, melancholy and accomplishment with this level of research and creative engagement. I realized upon viewing the final dance film edit that this body of work is a

testament and archive of a deeply personal journey through artistic curiosity, risk taking and commitment to cultivate art making experiences in dance and through film.

The final process of organizing the August 3rd online presentation on YouTube required attention to detail and timeliness as I navigated the online format of the public presentation, sent out formal invitations and gathered viewer survey responses. I was pleased to observe and know (in real time) there was an interest in viewing my work, and setting up this virtual presentation contributed to the expansion of my digital media knowledge.

Additionally, the post dance film viewing responses to my five question survey (see Appendix) provided curiosities, wonder, more questions and useful insights. Many of the responders similarly felt the choice to film on location worked well as a backdrop. They felt that the natural sounds and soundtrack created a balanced engagement between the visual and auditory aspects, although one critical recommendation was to edit the wind level sound. This was a technical aspect I struggled to understand, know, and navigate, and I recognize that I need to expand my knowledge and abilities in the area of film and media application. I also realized my learning style requires hand-on, experiential and in-person experiences as a way to develop deeper understanding and ease.

One responder expressed interest in seeing more dancing in place of the stills of colonial sites where my family resided in and around Old San Juan. I integrated this suggestion in the final dance film edit. I decided to include footage from the reflective start of this journey –at the shore near El Yunque rainforest during the slow setting of the sun. The slow fade into a deeper sense embodied knowing and moving forwards into a space of (re)membering made aesthetic sense.

Others were curious about the highlighted historic statues. Perhaps including voice over content during the appearance of the iconic representation could have provided clearer meaning and connection for the viewers. There was also a deep interest in knowing what is next for me as the creator and choreographer of this work. Another suggestion was to consider having a post-film artist talk if I continue to develop and present this work on a future platform. In fact, there is a plan to expand this dance film with recent, relevant and forthcoming footage supported by a further defined research topic.

All things considered, my process and final presentation inspired refreshed levels of creative curiosities, possibilities and wonder in me and brought me to the next phase. What might be a contemplative space and new creative direction for me? This question is at the root of my emerging plan and commitment to continue and contribute to a global conversation about diasporic thought, knowledge and studies as related to dance, dance making, and dance film creations. A component of the next envisioned plan and chapter is to pursue conference participation as a panelist, presentator and/or workshop facilitator in both academic and wider artistic spaces where the inherent nature and important work framing diasporic thought is sought and investigated. My active participation as a core member of the Black Flamenco Network: Flamencos Unidos Africanos Y Afrodescendientes will centralize my work as an independent researcher, global dance curriculum and course designer, and dance filmmaker. My next research and film project will include a return visit to Cuba and initial travel to West Africa as I develop a biopic documentary tracing an “*Ida Y Vuelta*” : a diaspora dancing culture journey. Seated at the heart of this work is my emerging topic of interest: Afro-flamenco aesthetics as a performative practice. This frames a new and refreshed academic and artistic

direction for me, and I hope that this next project will be facilitated through a Fulbright award (application pending).

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Appendix

Post Film Viewing Survey

1. How do the locations impact the mood of the film?
2. How did the costume impact the film's meaning and your experience?
3. Describe one aspect of the film that impacted you the most.
4. Did the music enhance the story that the filmmaker was trying to tell?
5. Is the story of this dance film unique to the Afro-Caribbean diasporic culture or could the story of this film have taken place in another site or setting?