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**Dancing Latina Identity: A Rendering of Contemporary Latina Self-
Representation in American Concert Dance**

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Abstract

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When considering the Latina dancer in the United States it is easy to conjure images of a fruit crowned Carmen Miranda shimmying in front of the camera, videos of Jennifer Lopez swinging her hips in dark and crowded clubs, sultry salsa dancers rocking and twisting on their bedazzled stilettos, or Jalisco girls who swirl the hemlines of their rainbow colored skirts as they parade down the street. These depictions of the Latina dancer are duly noted for creating a means of visibility for an otherwise invisible demographic. However, they also function to reinforce stereotypical ideas of the Latina moving body which limit Latina agency by positioning dancing Latinas within a set of prescribed representational practices. My study bridges Latina/o studies with dance studies in order to ask how Latina women are utilizing modern and contemporary dance styles to upset and redefine notions of the dancing Latina. I focus on the choreography of four women in particular; Michelle Manzanales, Maray Gutierrez, Annabelle Lopez

Ochoa, and Nancy Turano who each presented work in association with Luna Negra Dance Theatre's *Latina Choreographers Project*. Through my study I place the project's mission into dialog with the corpus of choreography commissioned during its three-year lifespan (2006-2009). My close analysis serves to elucidate the stories that the choreographers chose to tell. For some, the deconstruction of icons provided the most compelling exercise in the process of excavating beneath quintessential Latino facades. For others, the strong recollections of home and the feeling of not being able to assert a defined location characterized their investigations of cultural identity. The *Latina Choreographers Project*, I contend, sets a historical precedent by pursuing and presenting the work of Latina choreographers in a field that has traditionally excluded the Latina voice. I argue that by engaging four choreographers with extraordinarily diverse relationships to Latinidad and presenting them to an American audience, the *Latina Choreographer Project* presents an invaluable opportunity for intercultural and cross-cultural dialog that aims to relay the complexity and nuances of a contemporary Latina experience.

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Chapter One: The Latina Choreographers Project

INTRODUCTION

In imagining the Latina dancer it is easy to conjure the punctuating hips of the Salsa or the Cha-Cha, and the smooth, rolling undulations of the Rumba. She is playful, exotic, eroticism balanced on long bare legs. Certainly this invocation of the Latina dancer is not without real-life referents both on the silver screen and on the dance floor. Latino cultures celebrate a wealth of social dance forms, many of which have become iconic of the culture itself. Indeed these social dance forms offer a great deal of accessible embodied knowledge about the societies and individuals that generate and participate in them. However, the consistent pandering of this dance style toward heterosexual normativity and the male gaze is hard to reconcile with the nuances of a lived Latina experience.

I do not wish to indicate that these vernacular dance styles are devoid of agential opportunity for female performers. Through dance, women are permitted to publicly celebrate their sensuality, spontaneity, and exhibit their natural or perhaps cultivated skill for rhythm and movement. In the majority of social dance spaces however, female dancers are subject to manipulation by a male partner whom they are ultimately performing both with and for. Under these circumstances the agency that the Latina dancer can secure is limited by the power that her male partner maintains over her.

Heavily buttressing the iconic image of the dancing Latina in the popular imagination is nearly a century of Hollywood investment. Priscilla Peña Ovalles' 2011

book *Race, Sex, and Stardom: Dance and the Hollywood Latina* details the paradox of Latina films stars from Rita Hayworth to Jennifer Lopez. These public stars found individual economic success and celebrity through roles that perpetuated racialized, sexualized notions about Latina women. While Latinas in general are matched against this myth of the sexually available dancing Latina, I contend that the myth is more potently applied to Latinas who utilize dance as a means of expression without adhering to the movement stylizations that support preconceptions about them. Such dancers are at the very center of my study.

This thesis extends itself to complicating the perceived notions of the dancing Latina. The moving Latina body is routinely presented as an exotic food product: labeled hot, spicy, and flavorful. Such descriptions suggest that the dancing Latina is nothing more than consumable, digestible eroticism. My investigation pushes beyond this mythological figure constructed for her palatability, by engaging the choreographies formulated by Latina women themselves. How is the stereotype of the Latina dancer intercepted and subverted by women who seek to create new modes of representation in their dances? What stories do they compose, and how do they embody and perform their own concepts of race, gender, sexuality, and community?

The study I present here focuses on the *Latina Choreographers Project*, an initiative of Chicago's Luna Negra Dance Theatre predicated on the development and presentation of new Latina choreography. The women whose work was commissioned as part of the *Latina Choreographers Project* offer diverse experiences regarding their

relationship to Latinidad, their artistry, and the thematic content nurtured under the project. I suggest that this initiative offers a historically unprecedented space for the modern Latina to enact a subversive reallocation of bodily and intellectual agency in public. By resisting, and sometimes even toying with traditional representations of Latina-ness, the Latina dance maker operates as a recuperative cultural *curandera*, offering counter narratives that re-present Latina stories while simultaneously repossessing and redeploying the Latina body.

My project takes up Latina choreographers in an academic field veritably bereft of such a conversation. While scholars such as Thomas Defrantz, Brenda Dixon Gottschild, and Yutian Wong have recently challenged dance studies to address the work of African American and Asian American artists, studies to date concerned with Latino identity are nominal. As an early pioneer of modern dance, José Limón garners a certain level of recognition for his contributions. But in reference to Limón's cultural position as a Latino artist the discussion is further limited. Studies on Latino identity in dance by and large restrict themselves to vernacular or folkloric movement forms. It is within this gap that my thesis project seeks to intervene. By facilitating a convergence between dance and Latino studies, I argue that Latina/o dance artists are not only vital to American modern and contemporary dance, but that their choreographies represent a dynamic site for the circulation and validation of Latina/o identities.

For the purpose of this inquiry I turn to the choreography of women in particular to trouble the stereotype of the non-dimensional, dancing Latina body. My investigation

claims modern and contemporary dance as a viable medium through which to explore the complexities and double marginalization of Latina consciousness in the United States. I argue that the physical performance of Latina identity subverts existing inaccurate, or incomplete, representations while providing a space for Latina identity to be expressed in all of its nuance and fluidity. Because I aim to demonstrate that Latina dance artists are active contributors to the remembrance, formation, and re-formation of their cultural heritage, this study addresses both the Latina/o community and academics working in Latina/o and dance studies.

LATINIDAD AND THE AMERICAN DREAM

A full half of the growth in the United States over the last decade is due to an increase in the Latino population (Ennis 2). With Latino visibility growing ever stronger, the pressure on underlying racist ideologies in the U.S. is increasing, forcing cultural conflicts into public spaces. Political spheres are currently rife with issues of immigration and citizenship in regard to the growth in Latino communities. In addition, many civil and social intuitions are promoting archaic policing tactics like racial profiling, raids, and mass deportation in an effort to stymie the Latino presence in the U.S. Underlying these debates and proposals is a xenophobic sentiment that perceives the influx of the Latino population in the U.S. as a threat to its hegemonic structures.

Further silencing the presence of Latinos in the U.S. is a national conversation on race that tends to bypass the Latino by framing race in overly simplistic terms of white and black. The varied tones of Latino skin resulting from the blending of Indigenous

American, European, and African bloodlines escape simple binaries and easy categorization but are no less worthy of analysis with regard to lived experience and political autonomy. Certainly this defiance of racial classification via skin color leads to some ambiguity around naming who is and who is not Latino. Many Latino communities organize themselves not around color (although skin color may serve as a defining feature) but around religious affiliations, performance or musical traditions, geographic locale, or specific ethnicities and racial configurations such as American Indigenous or African-Caribbean, for example. These are all markers of unique Latino identities though no single marker completely characterizes all Latinos. Latinos are a diverse grouping of many different nationalities, communities, and cultural practices.

In this study I use the term *Latinidad* to refer to all people of North American, Central American, and South American descent who define themselves in relation to Latino culture. *Latinidad* is inherently multiplicitous, but it speaks to a sense of amity amongst pan-Latino communities. Even as my study is concentrated in the U.S., the need to invoke a larger conceptualization of Latino culture arises through the diversity of connections and experiences that the artists of the *Latina Choreographers Project* bring to their work. *Latinidad* therefore serves as a reference not to a singular national identity but to a broader shared identity stemming from a Spanish colonial past.

For much of *Latinidad* the Spanish language is the unifying force used to express cultural belonging. Deborah Paredez clarifies however that “the Latino market is not reducible to Spanish-language markets” (21). She speaks of a mainstream desire to lump

Latinos together as Spanish speakers which negates the complex and varying relationships Latinos have with language generally. Indeed Latinos, often communicate bilingually and trilingually, and alternately many Latinos do not maintain the Spanish language at all, but, particularly in the U.S., communicate in English only. Paredez speaks of Latinidad in the U.S. not as an identity defined by the Spanish language, but rather as a dis-identification with English-speaking America. She notes that Latinos are “intrinsicly excluded from English-language U.S. culture” (21). Language, therefore, cannot be a truly comprehensive system of categorization; rather it is the culture that the language creates which weighs more heavily in matters of inclusion or exclusion. Despite the inherent difficulties in defining a Latino identity, they do not excuse the dismissal of the Latino population from the dialog, be it artistic or otherwise.

Such continual negation of Latinos in the conversation on race leaves Latino populations forever suspended: claimed neither here nor there. Chicana feminist Gloria Anzaldúa developed a theory of borderland identity to explain the constant occupation of liminal space experiences Chicanos. This liminality is a construct of the double colonization that permeates many Latino cultures. Double colonization, in this case, refers first to the Spanish conquest, a process that stripped indigenous populations of their language, customs, land, and freedom. This violent intrusion was then replicated once more by the United States and other Anglo superpowers. The constant re-negotiation of physical, emotional, and psychological borders characterizes the experience of Chicano people.

Here I extend the concept of borderland identity from *Chicana/o* toward the broader definition of *Latina/o* in an effort to demonstrate solidarity within a grouping of cultures each derived from the same colonial enterprise and which tend to be conflated within a larger system of racial insensitivity toward difference. It is not my intention to assert an unnecessary and non-existent uniformity to a worldwide conceptualization of “essential” Latino-ness, but it is my objective to facilitate a conversation about what this identity means to the many people who claim it and celebrate it.

In my approach to the work of Latina artists, I situate them as the experts of their own cultural location. Historically, as Anzaldúa notes, this arrangement has not been commonly accepted. Using the term “*internal exile*,” Anzaldúa explains that the Latina is neither exotic enough to warrant interest, nor assimilated enough to be understood as a valued agent within American society (*Borderlands* 243). Anzaldúa suggests that the Latina’s geographic proximity renders her invisible, therefore disqualifying her from disseminating any expertise on her own experience of colonialism and marginalization. This manner of thought repeatedly makes intellectual exiles out of our own indigenous thinkers. It is important for me to disrupt this notion by aligning myself with the resistive politics of Anzaldúa. I argue that modern and contemporary concert dance offers a new way for Latinas to tell old stories that better reflect the fractured, hybrid, and multiplicitous truths of the Latina experience.

BRIDGING THEORIES

The theoretical basis for this thesis convenes at the junction of two academic

disciplines: Latino studies and dance studies. Latino studies functions to disrupt dominant systems of power by exposing the structures and epistemologies that aim to maintain and promote the marginalization of Latino groups. It also focuses on the social and historical complexities that shape Latino culture and identity. I pair Latino studies with dance, and the study of it, because dance provides a particularly rich site for the exploration of identity formation and cultural expression. The process of colonial enterprise has so often consigned the Latino to the body through a history of manual labor, skin politics, and for women, sexual and procreative responsibilities. The primacy of the body in dance, as opposed to other art forms, makes dance an exceptionally intriguing vehicle for Latino expression. By re-appropriating the body through modern dance performance, the Latina/o challenges the conventions of hegemonic constructions that define the Latina/o body as commercially exploitable and otherwise devoid of value. In this way, Latino dance performance already aligns with the ideals of Latino studies.

Bridging theories from the two disciplines illuminates the intersections that already exist but also calls attention to the gap in the conversation between the two modes of study. By combining these two disciplines I am attempting to demonstrate that dance provides a channel for generative Latina/o subjectivity and critique. In addition, I argue that dance studies should recognize the contributions of Latina artists because their work richly examines the intersections of history, race, and the body.

Latina scholars Yvonne Yarbro-Bejarano, Cherríe Moraga, and Alicia Arrizón proclaim the Latina experience as one silenced by sexism and racism enacted from both

within and beyond Latino culture. Together these scholars advocate for an autonomous public emergence of the Latina body through performance as a method of challenging systematic suppression. Moraga declares performance as a modus of “uncovering resistant, resilient, and living memory” (*A Xicana Codex* 42). Moreover, she conceives of performance as way to reclaim a body usurped by colonization and plagued with an impossible culturally constructed dichotomy that requires the veneration of the La Virgin, or else be cast aside as a *Malinche*, a fallen woman. The body is entirely paramount in disarming oppression because it is completely inseparable from ideologies of race, gender, and sexuality. Identity inevitably manifests in the body where these imagined conventions collide; therefore identity must be repossessed through the body. The Latina body, as the contested site, is a potential vehicle for subverting the paradigm when it is reclaimed in the public space of the theatre.

While publications from these scholars, such as Arrizón’s *Latina Performance: Traversing the Stage*, provide a wealth of information regarding Latina identity formation and performance, they largely neglect to realize dance as a performance medium.

Latina/o scholars that do address dance and the embodiment of identity on the other hand, work with decidedly folkloric, vernacular, and commercial dance styles. As discussed in the introduction, Priscilla Peña Ovalle for example, offers a very complex project that explores issues of colorism, economic sustainability, and a fabricated Latina identity in regard to the media presentation of the dancing Latina body. Scholar Cindy García alternately takes on “pan-Latina corporealities” in Salsa social networks. Her research

however, concerns itself primarily with the corporeal population and navigation of the dance environment rather than the dancing body itself.

In 2009, three Latina scholars, Olga Nárrera-Ramírez, Norma Cantú, and Brenda Romero, compiled a collection of essays entitled *Dancing across Borders: Danzas y Bailes Mexicanos*. The collection engages with traditional and popular dance as a site of social identity formation but it entirely ignores modern dance artists. In doing so, the collection negates nearly one hundred years of modern dance influence on both sides of the border. It is this sort of large-scale tacit disavowal of the Latina/o modern dancer that pushes me to intervene. I draw on these prior works for their considerations toward the relationship Latina/os have to their moving bodies but must insist on including modern and postmodern dance as a worthwhile location for the examination of Latina/o culture.

To do so I turn to the processes of cultural intervention undertaken by dance scholars Thomas DeFrantz, Brenda Dixon Gottschild, and Yutian Wong. Through their research and subsequent publications, they have developed critical methodologies for examining the ways that culture is embodied through concert dance. Their contributions to dance studies rewrite the subjectivities of Black and Asian bodies into the history of American modern dance by critically detailing legacies, bodies of choreography, choreographic processes, and political missions. With regard to the Latino there is work yet to be done.

Author Susan Manning in her 2004 book *Modern Dance, Negro Dance: Race in Motion*, references Mexican-born dancer José Limón as a figure mindful of his

relationship to otherness by suggesting that he utilized his cultural location to inhabit both marked and unmarked bodies in his performances. Manning however, does not explicitly engage Latino dance-making in its own right. Her short case study on Limón is framed primarily by the distinction between blackness and whiteness in dance. It considers Limón as a figure that upholds notions of a “universal” body not accessible to Black dancers of the same era, additionally proposing that his “universal” body functions to conceal the homosexual subtext in his choreography. Manning does not address Limón’s body or work in the context of a Latino presentation. More recently, Ramón H. Rivera-Servera, a scholar who has often considered queer dance clubs for their value as spaces of national and communal negotiation, discussed the work of Nuyorican artist/activist Arthur Aviles in his 2012 book *Performing Queer Latinidad: Dance, Sexuality, Politics*. Rivera-Servera’s investigation into Aviles’s concert dance productions emphasizes the dialog that Aviles is building between his choreography and the community. This foray into Latina/o concert dance is the optimistic point of departure that my case study carries forward.

Ultimately, I understand the two separate disciplines of Latino studies and dance studies to be compatible. Ann cooper Albright’s book, *Choreographing Difference: The Body in Identity in Contemporary Dance* (1997), while failing to address any faction of Latino presence in dance, reflects many ideologies of the Latina feminist. For Albright, the body is never divorced from race, gender, and history; it carries with, and converses with, those components at all times. Albright states, “The physical presence of a dancer’s

body refuses any loose assumptions about the playful postmodern multiplicity of dancing, by relentlessly insisting on the cultural moorings—the social implications of gendered, racial and historical ties—which that live body can never escape ” (180). An understanding that the body is the locus of race, gender, and even history draws the two disciplines together. My research critically activates and bridges Latino studies with dance studies by connecting their shared goals toward the acknowledgment of historic and contemporary contributions made by Latina/o artists in dance.

LUNA NEGRA AND THE LATINA CHOREOGRAPHERS PROJECT

In 1999 Cuban-born Eduardo Vilaro founded the Luna Negra Dance Theatre. Based in Chicago, the company is founded on a concept of multiplicity. Luna Negra’s name alone conjures images of male and female, light and dark, while referencing a perpetual waxing, waning, and renewing (Vilaro). Vilaro’s company branded itself as a Latino dance company and sought to express the multiplicity and dynamism of the Latino experience. Vilaro’s definition of Latino is that of a body of communities intersecting with the conquest of the Americas. His definition is formulated through a practice of diplomacy that disaffirms the creation of antagonists and protagonists (Vilaro). I have made clear that my own definition of Latino differentiates the colonized from the colonizer and I maintain this definition as part of a radical politic that seeks to name and therefore challenge the source of oppression. However, I am interested in and empathetic to Vilaro’s use of term Latino, which cautions against polarity and implements a particular strategy in the presentation of a U.S.-based Latino organization.

Vilaro's approach is one of inclusion rather than exclusion and his faithfulness to that mission while he remained artistic director of the company from 1999-2009 is clearly visible in the cultivation of the company staff, repertory, and the audiences that Luna Negra continues to pursue. Vilaro speaks for a need for open communication and conversation stating:

I was inclusive because if you start a company here, you are an American company. So the first reflection has to be about what's happening here culturally. I needed to have the public questioning: why isn't everybody in the company Latino? So that I can ask: is everybody around you Latino? No. But can they partake of a dialog? I need a dialog; I need that dialog in the studio as well as in the audience. (Vilaro)

While he does provide employment for many Latina/o dancers, there is also space in the company for other identities. His company, therefore, is grounded in a dialectic relationship between those that identify as Latino, as well as those who do not but who are invested in Latino culture, in addition to those who Luna Negra is inviting to join the conversation through their performances. This call for dialog is imperative when considering the dearth of Latino dance companies in the United States.

Under Vilaro's direction, Luna Negra distilled its unique mission by incorporating an effort to navigate clear of traditional folkloric representations and stereotypes of Latino culture. Opting to forgo the traditional conventions that these dance forms maintain, Luna Negra defined a space expressly dedicated to new ways of thinking about the Latino as dancer, artist, storyteller, and cultural architect. This is not to suggest that Luna Negra completely disregarded its relationship to folkloric or vernacular dance; rather, the company chose not to define itself by it. By refusing to adhere to any concept

of “authentic” cultural movement, the company is free to draw on these dance styles for inspiration, not for the structured content and predetermined meanings that these forms intone. Such a departure allows for the exploration of Latino culture on the basis of border negotiation and mutability rather than as an archetype of ridged conventions.

In keeping with its mission to steer away from clichés, Luna Negra pushed to challenge the domination of male voices in a field populated by a female majority. Vilaro speculated that “in order to make change happen, I needed to look at it in a holistic way and I need to make change happen in every part of culture.” For Vilaro, this meant that as he contested stereotypes of Latina/o dance he also aimed to confront gender stereotypes both from the perspective of a dancer and from the perspective of a Latino. It is duly noted that Latino culture notoriously propagates gender difference in diametrically opposed conventions of *machismo* and *marianismo* in the same way that concert dance has traditionally hyperbolized notions of femininity and masculinity.

In taking this challenge up, Vilaro proactively sought female choreographers for his company, conceiving the *Latina Choreographers Project* as ongoing initiative. The project’s errand was to commission the work of both established and emerging Latina artists. The goal was to consciously reserve room for women’s subjectivities in the discipline of dance-making; the project therefore, offers alternative stories while decentering the overwhelming prevalence of male voices in the field. He saw the project as a necessary intervention in the field and he took on the responsibility because he understood that he had the resources to do so. In total, three works were created for the

project: *Eterno Despertar* (2006) by Maray Gutierrez, *Sugar in the Raw* (2007) by Michelle Manzanales, and *Nube Blanco* (2009) by Annabelle Lopez Ochoa. Moreover, Luna Negra sought to provide the fiscal support for these commissions with contributions from female patrons; the *Latina Choreographers Project* is funded by women and made by women (*Luna Negra* Program Notes). By carving out a space for Latina artists to engage with dance on their own terms, the project also provides a platform for disrupting typecasts of the Latina moving body.

The *Latina Choreographers Project* presents a twofold challenge to the mainstream; first by claiming the legitimacy of Latino culture and secondly by presenting Latino culture through the voices of Latina women who are already doubly subjugated within mainstream culture. While the body of choreography created under this initiative does present Latina viewpoints and themes, Vilaro insists that the dance pieces be considered first and foremost for their universal artistic merit. Vilaro's hope for the project is that it would validate women's perspectives and contributions not only within Latino culture but also within the dance world and U.S. culture at large. He advocated for these artists on a national stage resisting the tendency to patronize the work as "women's" or "ethnic" and thereby separate and secondary to the work of white men. This project is not designed to reify gender and cultural differences in the dance world but to dispel them by showcasing the exceptional level of artistry that these women are capable of generating. Essentially, Vilaro wanted to showcase the choreographers of the *Latina Choreographers Project* as worthwhile dance artists who tangentially happen to

be dealing with Latino themes and who also just happen to women. As I argue elsewhere, I find gender and culture to be primary subjects of this body of work. However, Vilaro's challenge is posed both to the audience and to the field to encourage them to confront their own presumptions about gender difference and to view these works with new eyes toward individual perspective in the same way that they have long since consumed the work of men (Vilaro).

In 2009, Chicago's Luna Negra Dance Theatre kicked off its first full season expressly dedicated to women with a single evening-length showcase that compiled the three commissions of the *Latina Choreographers Project*. The full concert was presented just once at Chicago's Harris Theatre on March 28th (*Luna Negra Program Notes*). My study will consider all three pieces, Gutierrez' *Eterno Despertar*, Manzanales' *Azucar Cruda*, and Ochoa's *Nube Blanco*, focusing on the connections forged among them in regard to thematic content. Also included in the program was a revival of Nancy Turano's *Carmen Act I* (1998), one of the very first works acquired by Luna Negra. Although Turano identifies as an Italian-American and not a Latina, I incorporate this work into my case study because its presence in the program advocates for an interracial dialog about Latino culture very much in the ethos of Vilaro's mission. I consider therefore, Turano as the fourth choreographer in the project.

The *Latina Choreographers Project* concert took place as Vilaro was transitioning away from Luna Negra to fill the artistic directorship at Ballet Hispanico after the retirement of company founder, Tina Ramírez. The *Latina Choreographers*

Project remains one of Vilaro's concluding contributions to Luna Negra. Through his residency with the company, Vilaro advocated for Latino dance artists, identified himself publicly as a gay Latino through a solo project of his own undertaking, and pressed the visibility of women in the dance community (Chremos). His advocacy for the recognition and validation of minority subgroups is highly commendable and speaks to his personal experience and investment in challenging social systems of oppression. Vilaro not only asked for the mainstream to take notice and include subject positions which have been traditionally silenced, he employs a praxis of holistic inclusion himself that he intends to carry forward as the current artistic director of Ballet Hispanico

A PROCESS OF SEEING; A PRACTICE OF HEARING

My primary research effort in this study relies largely on close performance analysis of the works that comprise the *Latina Choreographers Project* repertoire.¹ In the following chapters I will read the content of the dance pieces for the manner in which a Latina/o representation is activated. How do these choreographers challenge present stereotypes of Latinas and Latino culture? How are they using dance to express their lived experience? This analysis seeks to trace the autobiographical nature of these works in accordance with Albright's deduction: "In the very act of performing, the dancing body splits itself to enact its own representation and simultaneously heals its own fissure in that enactment" (186). The fissure, or fissures in this case, are between the individual,

¹ All dance performance analysis included in this study was conducted using archival video recordings of Luna Negra's showcase concert at the Harris Theatre in Chicago on March 28, 2009. The archival footage for my research was generously provided by Luna Negra Dance Theatre.

the community, and the politics of nationality and citizenship within the United States. By galvanizing a representation of the body through dance within the public frame of Luna Negra's project, these female artists formulate a commentary of the community and the nation.

In many ways a delineation of gender is exactly the substance of the *Latina Choreographers Project* as a historical endeavor. The body of choreography within the project puts forward questions about conventions of masculinity and femininity in such a manner that asks for critical engagement. In the way that the *Latina Choreographers Project* opened a space for women to speak, I continue this effort by offering a sustained critique of the paradigm of male-centered artistry and scholarship. My analysis functions in solidarity with the Latina choreographers of this project and it seeks to interrogate the Latina positionality they present.

In addition to close performance analysis, I have conducted interviews with three of the four choreographers participating in the project.² Furthermore, I interviewed company dancer and communally-proclaimed Luna Negra historian, Veronica Guadalupe, as well as Eduardo Vilaro the artistic director under whose leadership the project developed. This process served as a particularly rich and valuable component of my research. Through the inclusion of interviews, my intention is to ensure that the voices of those who actualized this body of Latina choreography are able to speak in conjunction with their work and processes. In this way, I attempted to undertake a

² Mary Gutierrez was not available for interview within the time frame of this study.

reflexive praxis that positions my study as critically receptive but continually supportive of the community with which it engages.

In an effort to provide context for this endeavor and position it within the sphere of American modern dance, I also employ textual analysis of a number of related historical documents using for example, reviews and program notes which have been provided by Luna Negra. By implementing an archeology of archival literature produced internally by the company and externally through the media I hope to convey a sense of popular reception as it relates to the company's cultural agenda.

Throughout my research process, however, I have not uncovered any reviews of the *Latina Choreographers Project* undertaken by Latina/o dance critics. While Luna Negra's dance program was announced in many Latino oriented newspapers in the Chicago area, these outlets did not critique the performance. This serves to further highlight the scarcity of Latino/a voices in the field of dance. Moreover, a lack of Latina/o responders ensures that Luna Negra's performances are always read through the lens of critics from alternate subject positions. Susan Manning presented a concept of *cross-viewing* as a method of understanding the generative possibilities of such a process (xvi). She claims that cross-viewing allows for those in differing social locations to see and comprehend the position of someone from another social location through the witnessing of their artistic representations. In the case of the *Latina Choreographers Project*, the mainstream is invited to witness the expressions of a Latina experience. Manning states that "cross-viewing has the potential to alter how publics read bodies in

motion and thus to effect social and artistic change” (xvi). While reviews by mainstream (or white) critics do instigate the intercultural dialog that the Luna Negra seeks, a lack of Latina/o responders—reinforces the unchecked privilege and power of the mainstream who often fails to productively cross-view. Instead, many mainstream critics rely on traditional [read hegemonic] conventions of judgment in their responses to Latina work, undermining the political charge and unique perspectives that these pieces intone. As a Latina, my discussion of these choreographer’s work and my analysis of published reviews seeks to intervene in the stagnant loop between Latino artistry and conventional critique.

Because my thesis is just the beginning of a larger conversation yet to be had about Latinos in dance, I would like to first present a structure that imagines Latina/o dance with some regard to its depth, complexity, and ghosts. I aim to disrupt any imagined notion of Latino modern and contemporary dance as occurring only in the current moment in which my thesis focuses. To do so I draw on sources that detail the historical presence of Latino modern and contemporary dance artists José Limón, of The José Limón Dance Company, and Tina Ramírez, of Ballet Hispanico, who each nurtured successful dance companies that preceded Luna Negra with work in the same cultural vein.³ I wish to locate Luna Negra’s mission within a very real genealogy that has yet to

³ The genealogy that I map in this study is not exhaustive; it excludes many prominent Latina/o dance artists in the U.S. who have produced important work addressing Latina/o identity. Of particular interest is Puerto Rican dancer/choreographer Merián Soto whose presence in New York City spans from the 1970s into the present, paralleling the time period of Ballet Hispanico. Soto’s artistic practice often differs from the more traditional models of the companies that I am detailing here. She often performs as a solo artist and positions her work within more avant-garde circuits. For this reason, a discussion on her work in

be fully realized. By illustrating Latino dance as historically grounded, the *Latina Choreographers Project* stands significantly but not singularly in a non-static, evolving narrative.

The following section illuminates the development and evolution of the Latino presence in modern and contemporary dance. I aim to foreground the conceptualization of a Latina/o identity for The José Limón Dance Company, Ballet Hispanico, and Luna Negra in relation to the cultural moment of each. Not only have these companies highlighted a Latino/a voice in dance, but they each made commendable efforts to honor and draw attention to the stories of Latinas in particular. Limón's own choreography enlivened the stories of Latina women, offering these characters up as the focal point of their own tales, and deigning their roles with sympathetic awareness toward their gendered position. Ramírez founded and directed her own company for forty years during which time she established a secure place for Latino dance in the U.S. while mentoring a number of young Latino dancers. Luna Negra follows her lead by formulating new Latino representations that push against conventions while maintaining a space for Latinas to interject their artistic voices into the conversation. Together these artists present a recognition of minority voices within the national dance scene that becomes more visibly marked with each new generation.

relation to what I present in this study could offer a number of interesting intersections and divergences from which to examine both a Latina legacy and the formation of Latina identity through dance. For more information about Soto's work see Stacy E. Schultz's 2008 article in *Woman's Art Journal* "Latina Identity: Reconciling Ritual, Culture, and Belonging."

SENDING DOWN ROOTS AND REACHING FOR THE SUN

José Limón's entrance into the world of modern dance chronologically marks the introductory chapter of U.S. Latino dance artists. Under the mentorship of Charles Weidman and Doris Humphrey, Limón began his dance training in 1928 continuing to develop over the following years into America's preeminent Mexican-American modern dancer. With the formation of his own dance company Limón offers the first acknowledged modern choreographic expression of Latino culture formulated by a Latino dancer.

Prior to Limón's work, the only existing representation of Latino culture widely recognized in modern dance was a choreographic spectacle by Ted Shawn which premiered in 1920 and toured for seven years. Entitled *Xochtil*, the dance demonstrated a fetishized Mesoamerican indigeneity. Shawn developed the starring role, an exotic and yet subservient Indian princess, as the principle debut for Martha Graham (Sherman 59-63). The representational value of the dance weighed on the premise of the white corporeal "neutrality" of the choreographer and the performers, echoing a prominent tradition of early modern dance (Desmond 261). The commodification of Latino heritage in *Xochtil* conceived of the Other with mystery and intrigue, in addition to presenting a debacle of drunkenness and lustful greed that invited the same colonial gaze as beckoned by the Hollywood depictions of dancing Latinas in the mid-twentieth century.

In 1947, Limón established The José Limón Dance Company in New York City naming his mentor, Humphrey, as the artistic director. Limón largely participated as a

residential choreographer, creating many dances for the company that overtly explored his own Mexican heritage. Among such culturally themed choreographies like *Danza Mexicanas* (1939), *Tonantzintla* (1951), *Diálogos* (1951), and *La Piñata* (1969), Limón made a number of commendable contributions in the staging of Latina stories. Most notably, with his first contribution to the company, *La Malinche* (1949), as well as his very last piece, *Carlota*, which premiered in 1972 just after Limón's death (Limón & Garfola 133-49). Limón's attention to and interrogation of his cultural heritage in his work along with his acute attention to Mexican female icons solidly scripts him as an appropriate artist with which to situate the genealogy of the *Latina Choreographers Project*.

While I assert that Limón profoundly and transparently demonstrates a sense of Latino cultural grounding in its body of work, his company did not seek identification as a Latino organization. Indeed, under the artistic direction of Humphrey, a great deal of the company's repertoire was developed to advocate a universal approach to the human experience rather than a specific cultural one. Manning observed this incongruity and thusly positioned Limón's as a performer/choreographer within a tradition of early modern dance that permitted and applauded the "freedom to inhabit both culturally marked and unmarked bodies" (193). While this switching is highly problematic when performed by white bodies, suggesting a privileged sense of liberty to appropriate the cultural practices of the Other, Limón's subject position as a mixed-race (French-

Indigenous American) immigrant ultimately means that he inhabited a space that required an ability to code switch.

Limón's dance company came into being at the end of WWII, a time of national pride in which the U.S. was pushed to imagine new conceptualizations of race relations in the wake of the war effort. This vein of nationalistic ideology emphasized a "neutral" process of assimilation that promised to socially benefit those who submitted to it. I theorize that Limón adopted this creed of nation building through assimilation; at least superficially, and that this ideology materialized through the Limón Dance Company which promoted universality and therefore remained unattached to a cultural legacy. However, the project of assimilation was not "neutral," it was grounded in a politic that imagined whiteness as ideal. Limón's project, I argue, was similarly coded with a particular politic. When read through a counter-hegemonic lens, Limón's choreography subverted an acculturation project through the continued presentation of identifiably Latino stories.

After Limón's death in 1972, the company resolved to move forward maintaining the existing repertoire and expanding their choreographic portfolio (*Limón Dance Foundation*). The work commissioned since Limón's departure is diverse in its cultural origins and offerings but missing the Latino specificity that Limón's presence provided. Ballet Hispanico, founded by Tina Ramírez the same year that Limón died, took up where Limón left off. I position Ballet Hispanico as the benefactor of Limón's cultural legacy in so far as it becomes the next company of similar stature and structure with

strong Latino/a leadership, particularly but not exclusively pertaining to the New York artistic community.

Ramírez thrust Ballet Hispanico toward an explicit Latino agenda. The company was developed initially as a response to the realization that Latino dance students had no opportunities for jobs in the modern dance world; Ramírez hoped her company could be a solution to that problem (Adam 7). Her attention to a distinct cultural perspective reflected the sociopolitical shift in the surrounding culture prompted by the burgeoning civil rights movements. Latino civil rights ideology rejected coerced assimilation, favoring instead a distinct identity purporting to honor the lived experience of the Latino within the United States. Ramírez intended for Ballet Hispanico to be a sort of Latino parallel to The Alvin Ailey American Dance Theatre (established in 1958).⁴ Ballet Hispanico would support and celebrate Latino dance and dancers just as the Ailey company supported African American dance performance and performers.

Ramirez garnered a number of honors for her work as artistic director of Ballet Hispanico including being named Latina of the Year by *Latina Magazine* (2000), winning the Dance Magazine Award (2002), and the National Medal of the Arts in (2005). Regardless of this success, Ballet Hispanico has been unable to concretize the distinction of the Ailey's company model within the Latino community or U.S. culture at

⁴ A virtual meeting between Alvin Ailey American Dance Theatre and Ballet Hispanico occurred in 1975 when Ballet Hispanico presented a concert featuring works choreographed by Alvin Ailey, Talley Beatty, and Donald McKayle. Together these choreographers represent a strong sampling of artists whose work is deeply rooted in the tradition of black dance. These works as commissioned by Ballet Hispanico highlight an effort to engage and credit the relationship between Latinidad and the African diaspora (McDonagh).

large. This begs many questions about artistic implementation and public perception that I cannot begin to answer here. What is clear is that Ballet Hispanico is the longest running dance company in the U.S. dedicated explicitly to a Latino agenda and it is producing artists that are motivating forces for Latina/o dance.

Ballet Hispanico provided a nurturing home for Eduardo Vilaro as an emerging artist; he performed as a principle with the company from 1988-1996 (Carman). Shortly after his retirement from Ballet Hispanico, Vilaro moved to Chicago to establish Luna Negra Dance Theatre (1999). Luna Negra stands on the shoulders of Ballet Hispanico, carrying forward its legacy “to preserve and celebrate Latino culture” and extending its reach toward Midwest (*Ballet Hispanico*). This move represents an important shift in Latino modern dance precisely because it decentered NYC as the stronghold of the Latino dance legacy that I have mapped here, thereby allowing it reaching new audiences and new communities.

This move was furthermore distinct in ideology. Where Ballet Hispanico often embraced folkloric dance and elements of vernacular Latino dance styles, Vilaro shied away from them. When asked about this he comically stated “I’m not *West Side Story*.”⁵ Essentially, Vilaro imagined himself as a new generation and he wanted to break from tired depictions of Latino dancers that stifled creative voice and played into stereotypes. While branding his company “Latino,” Vilaro would not allow himself to be pressured

⁵ For more on the intersections between Latinidad, dance, and *West Side Story* see Deborah Paredez’s forthcoming article “Queer for Uncle Sam”: Anita’s Latina Diva Citizenship in *West Side Story*.”

into presenting pre-determined image of Latino-ness. Instead Vilaro wanted his company to explore what it meant to artistically define “Latino” in a contemporary sense. He hoped that his company could be valued both for their cultural specificity and for their “universal” artistic merit (Vilaro). This imagining of American multiculturalism pushes against assimilationist practices; instead promoting a vision that celebrates and embraces diversity by allowing different cultural forms, both Western and non-western to exist simultaneously.

The line between formulating new images of Latinidad through Western concert dance and being free to honor elements of traditional Latino dance styles proved difficult to tread. In 2004 Luna Negra was reviewed in the *Chicago Reader*, a popular local paper that focuses on arts and entertainment. The (white) critic, Kelly Kleinman, casually dismissed three out of four of the evening’s works, suggesting a disregard or a disconnect between reviewer and reviewed. In contrast, Kleinman praised a restaging of Vincente Nebrada’s jazzy, rendition of traditional Latin dance forms in *Batucada Fantastica* (1983) as a “perfectly executed celebration of traditional Latin music and dance.” The critic went on to state, “if ethnic dance can be so good, there's no reason to bother with anything else,” further remarking that “Latin tradition should play a less prominent role in the group's identity. It seems Luna Negra wavers between ethnic and modern dance, and as a result does neither well” (Kleiman). Here, Kleiman suggested that Latino dance and concert dance cannot be synonymous, highlighting the difficult task that Latino dance companies continue to face. While not all critics of Luna Negra expressed such

clear condescension, many reviews of the company's work interweaved similar biases together with praise as I will detail in the following chapters of this study

To date Luna Negra has enjoyed thirteen seasons built on a commendable collection of work that under Vilaro focused strongly on Latino voices and themes. In 2009, the year of the *Latina Choreographers Project* concert, Vilaro left Luna Negra to replace Ramírez as the artistic director of Ballet Hispanico in New York. He vows to push forward the mission that has defined the paths of these two companies since their inception and to seek out more opportunities for both Ballet Hispanico and Luna Negra to collaborate in order to strengthen the Latino presence and community in concert dance (Carman).

Vilaro provides an ideal example of the sort of dedication Latino dance needs in order to successfully advocate for visibility and community. In the future, I hope to weave together the histories of José Limón Dance Company, Ballet Hispanico, and Luna Negra into a larger project that claims the Latina/o body as a viable producer of cultural knowledge in the United States. The genealogy I map here, however, cannot be inclusive of all the Latina/o voices across the U.S. that have shaped Latina/o modern and contemporary dance; but my research does draw a distinct line through three of the largest players.

Moving forward I seek to understand how Latina choreographers converse with past representations of themselves as they formulate new ones in their own choreography. I resolve to demonstrate that the dances of the *Latina Choreographers*

Project are not free floating apparitions of Latino culture within American concert dance, but rather that they belong to a larger conversation. They are imbued with a history and an ancestry of their own. The negation of their history thus far positions my research as both timely and necessary. How do Latinas reformulate traditional dance styles, both vernacular and folkloric, to speak with agency? For what modes of expression do they place these conventional representations aside? How are Latinas using the body to resist a legacy of oppression and silencing? How do these dances politicize the Latina in the United States? In the following chapters I argue that the choreographers of the *Latina Choreographers Project* critically reimagine their past while asserting space for their present state of consciousness.

MAPPING THE WAY FORWARD

Chapter two will consider two choreographers that predicated their work on re-imaginings of Spanish dance icons— Carmen from Bizet’s opera and the flamenco dancer. By addressing this reoccurring theme I attempt to develop an understanding of how Spanish culture is recognized, appropriated, and challenged within the Latina dance community. Through the deployment of these icons, the two choreographers instigate a deconstruction of conventional power dynamics. The cultural politics of gender and sexuality serve as the impetus for this deconstruction for both Annabelle Lopez Ochoa and Nancy Turano of the *Latina Choreographers Project*.

Turano’s work deconstructs Bizet’s Carmen in *Carmen Act I*. Her rendition reformulates Carmen into three fragmented selves, one representing the survivalist, one

the sensual, and one the spiritual. Turano's three Carmens stand alone, there is no male presence for them to compete with or define themselves in relation to. By reviving and re-enacting this canonized narrative, Turano is able to engage a new perspective, affording the central female new complexity and autonomy. I position this piece and its commentary on female agency against Ochoa's commission, *Nube Blanco*. Rather than expressing a relationship to Spanish culture from a distant historical past, Ochoa presents a comical rendering of her own childhood using Spanish flamenco as a fluid medium with which to paint a commentary on masculinity. As in Turano's dance, Ochoa's piece stars a female protagonist whose sharp tongue is employed like a steely defense against the encroachments of the masculine *zapateado*.

By examining these works in conjunction with one another I reveal how the effects of Spanish colonialism remain in play in regard to a contemporary construction of Latina identity. While the dances acknowledge and at times even romanticize a relationship to Spanish culture, I propose that these choreographers demonstrate a desire to activate the aspects of Spanish heritage on their own terms. Their dances are therefore a conversation between the ownership of Spanish cultural elements and the implications of colonialism and *machismo* that they carry. Resistively these dances assert agency for women by redeploing these historicized icons through an empowered female perspective. This feminist re-interpretation, which conditionally hails Spanish influence, is a departure from much of the current scholarship surrounding Latina and Chicana feminisms, which seek to renounce colonization entirely and reclaim indigenous rites.

My inquiry considers this departure as it relates to the use of a western mode of artistic expression.

In the final chapter I enact close readings of Texas native Michelle Manzanales' *Azucar Cruda* and Cuban immigrant Maray Gutierrez's *Eterno Despertar*. Through autobiographical renderings of memory and home, I argue that these two choreographers explore the concept of *nepantla*, or the liminality of Latino/a identity. Manzanales' piece reflects on her own Mexican-American heritage and Texas roots. She focuses on feelings of isolation and struggle between a private, familial culture and a public, national culture common to many U.S. based Latinos. In *Eterno Despertar*, Gutierrez also explores her roots as she works around an image of water, recalling an ocean crossed in migration. Her dance demonstrates a process of shedding fragments of one's self and leaving them behind in passage.

When put into conversation with one another these two dances illuminate the process of continual border negotiation that Latino immigrants and bicultural subjects contend with daily. My analysis considers the dual identities of these two choreographers; examining how their dances function to elucidate this experience in addition to the ways that such tension is resolved through staging. I view these works as autobiographical narratives that make private imaginings public and I look to grasp the ways in which these women struggle or succeed to reconcile two disparate cultures.

Ultimately I argue that while cultural loss is mourned in these two pieces, the invocation of cultural memory and the explicit naming of an identity that lies between

shores— both physically and psychologically— serves to claim a space for contemporary Latina consciousness. By detailing personal experiences of *nepantla* in the public space of the theatre, Manzanales and Gutierrez validate the experience for others and in doing so, build community, ultimately alleviating the isolation that characterizes an existence defined as neither here nor there.

The goal of this project is to highlight the presence and value of Latina dancers as active cultural practitioners and commentators within the U.S. dancescape, regardless of origin. The women of the *Latina Choreographers Project* have stories to tell; stories that illuminate the politics of race, gender, and belonging but which are not often afforded the space to be told. By acknowledging this exceptional body of work, I hope to ignite a dialog in both dance studies and Latino studies and destabilize the process of exclusion and silencing that has long held sway. Indeed, I hope to show how the *Latina Choreographers Project* dynamically challenges conventions of gender and Latinidad by encouraging women to take up their own stories and to represent their experiences and communities with an assertion of complexity that honors their identities.

Chapter Two: Deconstructing Ghosts

SPANISH NOSTALGIA AND THE MODERN LATINA

Illuminated in a crisp square of light, a lone male dancer stands on center stage. He begins to move to the hollow sound of industrial decay: metallic creaking and water dripping. His red heels flash against the ground with the speed of his zapateado while he executes the intense filigree of the flamenco arms. Although this man evokes the tradition of flamenco, his dance is hybridized with other contemporary forms of movement. At times, he cartwheels his weight onto his head and neck halting in a freeze more fitting of a B-Boy. The resonant strike of his clapping hands contrasts with the lyrical and elongated expressions that flow through his arms. Throughout the solo however, the dancer appears to be breaking down like an old machine, his body catching in strange, sticky angles before finding release and sliding back into operation again. Eventually, he collapses from exertion.

Groups of men and women have entered into the dark on either side of the illuminated soloist. They begin jabbering loudly amongst themselves until the soloist boisterously clears his throat— immediately the chatting ends. All of the dancers grow still except for one woman who releases herself from her cloister of friends. She approaches the collapsed man darting around him using her arms to quickly and efficiently sweep him together although she never actually touches him. When she has molded his body into order, she stomps her foot impatiently urging him to move. Her gesture is enough to activate the man and he springs to his feet once more. This time he

moves smoothly and consistently, increasing in speed and energy as the crowd cheers him on. The men gathered on stage eventually lift the soloist onto their shoulders to parade him around the stage in celebratory idolization. Meanwhile, the woman disappears back amongst the other women.

Imagining Latina concert dance as a site of cultural production is as much about claiming agency for the Latina body and the Latina story as it is about a larger process of Latino decolonization. In the scene above, from Colombian-Belgian Annabelle Lopez Ochoa's *Nube Blanco*, the dancers demonstrate problematic gender values while suggesting the decomposition of a traditional Spanish dance form. This process of breaking down European traditions, or decolonizing, is imperative to undertake as long as oppressive paradigms continue to fracture the Latino lived experience. How can the dancing body participate in this process? How can it begin to break down a colonial past towards a future of its own making?

For Ochoa and Nancy Turano, two choreographers presenting as part of Luna Negra's *Latina Choreographers Project* gala event, the point of departure commences with a deceptively simple question: What does it mean to be a Latina? The construction and presentation of the *Latina Choreographers Project* alone makes this question implicit if not explicit and the project simultaneously provides a platform from which to consider possible answers. Ochoa and Turano insist that through their encounter with Luna Negra they were allotted their first opportunity to personally investigate what it means to be a Latina within their choreography.

Strikingly, the location of discovery for both choreographers begins with strong emblems of Spanish ancestry. Ochoa weaves flamenco dance like a binding thread throughout her *Nube Blanco*, while Nancy Turano resurrects Georges Bizet's Carmen in her *Carmen Act I*. The icons chosen by these two choreographers, flamenco and the character of Carmen, are distinctly European – they originate with and are most closely associated with the colonizing body of the Americas. Evidenced by the both choreographers, a heavy draw to these figures of Spanish ancestry invaluable marks the contemporary survival of hegemonic practices that sway perceptions of Latino culture with self-aggrandizing notions of a *Westernized* Latinidad.

I am suggesting that flamenco and the figure of Carmen exist as particularly charged icons when staged as representations of a Latina experience. They embody tensions that are historically entrenched and entirely palpable in a contemporary world as substantiated by their employment in the dances of these two choreographers. The use of flamenco in Ochoa's work offers an opportunity to dislodge the distinct gender roles that the dance form traditionally maintains, thereby calling into question the other traditions that the form intones such as its colonial privilege within the Latino dance repertoire. Carmen, on the other hand, is a French take on a Spanish gypsy placed by Turano, an Italian-American choreographer, within the context of an American Latina experience. Considering these complications, the task of authenticating this figure as a Latina representation is sizeable. As I move to theorize the ways in which Ochoa and Turano articulate their chosen subjects I am struck by one final difference between their

choreographies.

What appears most significant in the presentation of these two dances is male absence or presence. In Turano's work, the masculine body is entirely absent. Turano's Carmen stands alone, never identified in relationship to a male counterpart. This is in sharp contrast to the traditional Carmen whose entire story revolves around heterosexual love, lust, and jealousy. Ochoa, on the other hand, uses flamenco dance to draw our attention to traditional gender divisions and stereotypes of Latino masculinity, specifically *machismo*. Where Turano eliminates the male presence allowing us to focus fully on her female protagonist(s), Ochoa draws attention to the masculine body enabling the audience to see the comical in the macho.

By drastically manipulating the male entities both choreographers begin a process of dismantling *machismo*, often a direct source of oppression for many Latina women. Each choreographer deliberately questions this cultural trope, ultimately suggesting possibilities for alternative roles for both women and men alike. Ana Castillo wrote, "When we speak of *machismo*, we immediately refer to a division of power between male and female, between a world power and colonized nations" (82). In other words, by recognizing and naming the authority of the macho figure we also come to understand traditional modes of oppression in a grander sense. I argue that by addressing the masculine in the context of these Latinized European iconographies, Ochoa and Turano unsettle the colonizing structures from within. They manage to locate and preserve their colonial icons as part of Latino culture, but their staging of them demonstrates a desire

for revision. Ochoa and Turano redeploy these figures as part of decolonizing project.

EXORCISING TROPES

Given their personal relationships to Latinidad, which are distinct and individually complex, and their membership within the concert dance community, it is understandable how these Spanish icons might serve Ochoa and Turano in their first site of interrogation. Their choreographic imaginings of these emblems provide a highly generative place from which to take up present questions of colonial manifestations in the Latino community.

Ochoa and Turano are both trained in the Western dance canon, and through this training they were both familiarized with flamenco dance via the figure of Carmen. Carmen is a character that reappears in many choreographic iterations over the past seventy years from Roland Petit's first ballet adaptation (1949), to Alberto Alonso's *Carmen Suite* (1967), and most notably Luna Negra's first evening length work *Carmen.maquia* (2012).⁶ As I argue, Carmen is a highly fraught figure. The version propagated through the dance world is a take on the French Bizet's creation. She is a fictional character, with a fictional Spanish nationality. Referring to Carmen as a Latina places her within an American context, which is cause for even further complication. Carmen is, however, often the closest thing to a depiction of a Latina that the classical

⁶ *Carmen.maquia* was choreographed by and produced under the most recent artistic director of Luna Negra, Gustavo Ramírez Sansano, premiering just three years after the *Latina Choreographers Project* showcased.

dance world has to offer.⁷

Whereas Carmen is a renowned caricature of Spanish culture, flamenco dance is a long-standing artistic practice formulated by ethnic minorities (Roma and Sephardic Jews) in the south of Spain beginning in the sixteenth century. According to Michelle Heffner Heyes, flamenco dance's contemporary presence in the U.S. is in large part due to a popular conflation of exoticized Spanish and Latina entertainment figures manifesting throughout the 1940s. Heyes contends that amid the pursuit of an emerging Latin American media market during WWII, and the implementation of a "good neighbor policy" between the U.S. and Latin America, these "Latina" figures received increased visibility and consequent popularity. Heyes points to a conflation of Hollywood's Carmen Miranda, with Carmen Amaya, a famous touring Spanish flamenco dancer, and Bizet's *Carmen* (148-9). She remarks that in the name of a "good neighbor" ethos, American audiences white and Latino alike, gladly overlooked differences in culture, national origin, and stylized artistic practices in order to formulate a new stereotype of Latin America prompted by its positioning by the media that was both entertaining and sensual, but also volatile. Importantly, Heyes remarks that "while dangerous and unruly, the feminized stereotype of Latin America could be seduced, encouraged in her subordinate position to the decidedly masculine authority of the U.S" (149). Flamenco dance, as very loosely characteristic of the three conflated Carmens, comes to symbolize

⁷ The exotic Spanish female trope reoccurs many times throughout ballet history. *Carmen* is one of the most notable iterations of this figure, but she also popularly appears as Chocolate in traditional stagings of *The Nutcracker*. For more information on the origins of this trope see Susan Foster's discussion on Fanny Elssler's *La Cachucha* (1836) in her book, *Choreography and Narrative* (210).

a beloved, and controllable image of an exotic Other.

The constructed alignment of flamenco with a colonialist agenda in the United States makes for complex inroads between flamenco dance and American Latino communities. Often the only link Latinos have to flamenco is through a commonality of language and/or a self-identification with Latino stereotypes that promote flamenco as a Latino practice. This is not to suggest that Latinos do not partake in flamenco dance but it does suggest that their cultural association to this dance is complicated and limited. More commonly, flamenco practitioners in the U.S. are positioned culturally within the mainstream rather than with the minority. Heyes claims, “the American flamencophile enjoys all the privileges of the stereotypical Western subject” (16). Here Heyes refers back to the colonial ideologies embedded in contemporary flamenco dance that romanticize, exoticize, and attempt to preserve static “pure” renditions of an art form initially formulated out of turmoil, adaptation, and change. Furthermore, contemporary practitioners of flamenco dance, many of whom are white, particularly in the U.S., do not tend to hold direct cultural ties to flamenco dance, they seek it out— appropriating culturally specific traditions for their own fulfillment. This relationship between flamenco and the colonial West allows this dance form to be exalted in ways that other Latino associated expressions are not. The practice of emphasizing flamenco dance as particularly sophisticated or worthwhile functions as a mechanism for the containment and erasure of that which is non-western.

Many contemporary Latinos find the conflation of European Spanish culture with

Latino culture troubling. Indeed the two cultures share a great deal as result of centuries of Spanish occupation in the Americas. Latinos recognize that many valued components of their culture originate from Spain like the widespread use of the Spanish language, for example, and the large presence of Catholicism amongst other things. Crucial, however, is the ever-present power dynamic between the conqueror and the conquered. It is germane to remember the violence through which Spanish culture was imposed on the indigenous inhabitants of the Americas who already possessed rich cultural traditions of their own. Furthermore, the cultural exchange between Spain and indigenous America, although arguably multi-directional, was hardly equal as a direct result of the power imbalance. Spanish culture is ultimately not the same as Latino culture. The discomfort in conflating the two distinct cultures, therefore, is due to the enforced surrogation of Spanish traditions on indigenous communities and the historical conventions that glorify Spanish elements of Latino culture over those that are indigenous. It is for these reasons that Carmen, the archetype, and flamenco dance are intrinsically tied to systems of colonial domination when they stand to represent Latinos. To break these images apart in order to elucidate and express a Latina/o identity, as Turano and Ochoa do with their choreography, is to challenge the constructedness of these icons.

CARMEN, MON AMOUR

Carmen first appeared as a novel written by French author, Prosper Mérimée, in 1845. Though a work of fiction, the novel was loosely based on Mérimée's own travels throughout Spain as a scholar of archeology. José F. Colmeiro theorizes that Mérimée's

depiction of Carmen as a free-loving, free-living Gypsy is more akin to a French bohemian lifestyle of which Mérimée participated rather than an anthropological illustration of a Gypsy woman (134). Colmeiro criticizes the novel as an exemplary display of imperialist ideology on the part of the white bourgeois author and a liberal exploration of the romantic notions of the orient indicative of the novel's time.

Nonetheless, or perhaps precisely so, the story acquired a great deal of popularity before composer Georges Bizet adapted it into *Carmen*, the French opera, which premiered in 1875. Bizet's opera further complicated Mérimée's narrative by adding characters and stretching the story to fit the entertainment driven conventions of the Opéra-Comique.

Bizet's *Carmen* tells the story of a young Gypsy woman, Carmen, who is arrested after stabbing a woman during a heated argument in an Andalusian cigar factory where she worked. Carmen is relinquished to lieutenant Don José who she manages to seduce as part of grander scheme to escape, and he obliges. José is punished for allowing Carmen to go, but after serving his time in detention he immediately seeks Carmen out, desperately in love with her. When Carmen and José meet again, Carmen convinces him to join her and her band of Gypsy smugglers and outlaws in the mountains.

When they arrive at the mountain encampment, Carmen offers to read fortunes in a set of Tarot cards and in them she sees doom— foretelling death for both José and herself. Hardly concerned by this revelation, Carmen lets José know that she has grown tired of him anyway and she taunts him by telling him to return home. José is not deterred in his love for Carmen. He stays in the camp to be near her but finds his position

challenged when Escamillo, the famous bullfighter, visits the camp to proclaim his love for Carmen. Eventually José must leave his post when he finds that his mother is ill, apprehensively leaving Carmen and Escamillo together in the mountains.

The final scene takes place at a bullfight in Seville where Carmen has come on the arm of Escamillo. In a fit of wild jealousy José corners Carmen begging her to return to him. Upon her refusal, José extracts a knife and stabs her. The crowd cheers in response to Escamillo's victory in the bullring at the very same moment that Carmen dies at the hands of José. The staging of these two events simultaneously suggests that the audience is also applauding Carmen's murder, commending her death as punishment for her betrayal. In the end, José gives himself over to the authorities, remorseful of his actions (Bizet).

This story has since been re-formed into a number of different performances from opera, to ballet, to Broadway, to film, and more recently to *Carmen: A Hip Hopera* (2001) starring Beyoncé Knowles. Carmen is known for her vibrant energy, her overt sexuality, her snappy mouth, and her explosive temper. Colmeiro describes her as “the seductive, colorful, exotic female body endlessly performing for male pleasure, an obscure, and ultimately disposable, object of desire and disdain” (143). Her popularity is directly related to her embodiment of total excess which is policed by her death in the final scene.

RE-ENVISIONING CARMEN

Unlike the other dance works discussed in this thesis, Turano's piece *Carmen Act*

I was commissioned for *Luna Negra* in 1998 and not underwritten by the *Latina Choreographers Project*. However, it was restaged as part of the project's showcase. In addition, Turano's point of view is distinct because she identifies as an Italian-American and is not a Latino. Nonetheless, Turano's contribution still explored what it means to be a Latina, albeit from the perspective of an outsider. As a principle dancer in Ballet Hispanico for nine years (from 1985 to 1994) and rehearsal director and faculty member for the company until 1998, Turano developed an interest and investment in Latino culture. She recalls her experience there as monumentally influential to her artistry stating that when she arrived at Ballet Hispanico at the age of twenty-one she immediately felt a "soul connection" to the work and the community (Turano).

Because of her consistent and close relationship with Ballet Hispanico, Turano notes how she is frequently mistaken for a Latina. Her self-identification as a non-Latina, however, is imperative within the context of my investigation. The inclusion of Turano's work speaks to Eduardo Vilaro's desire to elicit a conversation about Latina/o-ness that addresses the dynamism of the Latina experience in a diverse world. How might a non-Latina American create a dance about Latina/o identity for a Latino company?

Turano defines her work on *Carmen* as a deeply personal quest to grasp at an identity that she performed all throughout her time at Ballet Hispanico. She stated, "after all of those years of touring and studying flamenco and tango, and samba, and salsa, and everything, I decided that I wanted to really explore what it is to be a Latina" (Turano). Turano was seeking to understand what was beyond stereotypes and she wanted to

explore a more complex Latino image that demonstrates the sense of multiplicity that she had come to understand as an essential element of Latino culture.

For Turano, Carmen appeared as a particularly potent figure. “This [Carmen] is the quintessential character that I think I should try to understand,” Turano posits, “What characteristics does this woman have that caused culture to choose her for all these years?” Intrigued by the prolific interest that Carmen garners, Turano explores how this character fulfills an archetypal image that satiates American audiences’ desires for a Latino presence. Indeed, these desires may stem from hegemonic pre-conceptions that render Carmen exotic, alluring, even dangerous, but always entertaining and, ultimately, politically non-threatening.

It is questionable whether or not Turano grappled with authenticating Carmen’s cultural allegiance when formulating her own rendition of Bizet’s tale. When Turano refers to Carmen’s consistent presence as confirmation of culture’s approval, it is not clear if she is speaking about Latino culture specifically or [white] American culture more generally. Can Carmen be reclaimed by Latino culture? Or she is an icon associated with Latinos by virtue of the inability of American culture at large to distinguish between Spanish and Latino cultures? It is germane to understand however, that Turano, like Ballet Hispanico— where she first immersed herself in Latino culture, maintains a particularly liberal definition of Latino that does not match my own. While I limit Latinidad to the conquered body of the Americas, Turano includes all Spanish-speaking nations in her definition of Latino, which inevitably includes Spain, the conqueror. Even

still, Carmen classically represents an imperialist, Orientalized caricature of a Spanish subaltern.

I argue that the goal of Turano's work is not to uncover an "authentic" Latinaness in Carmen, but rather to deconstruct the figure from the popular imagination. Who is she? What makes her behave the way that she does? How can the stereotypical Latina characteristics like a sharp temper and actively expressed sensuality become characteristics formulated *by* Carmen rather than *for* Carmen? In this way she troubles Bizet's classic Carmen because while she maintains the image of Carmen, she gives Carmen agency.

When the curtain lifts on *Carmen Act I*, the stage is lit a deep blood red. Bizet's familiar score as arranged by Roland Marconi, indicates the narrative in play although the characters onstage remain veiled under a silhouette. The two female dancers pick across center stage perched in high relevé with their skirts held out before them. This posture is exceedingly feminine and prim but it shifts as soon as the dancers release their skirts. Their torsos become mobile and expressive with arms softly unfurling into space before finding punctuation with a strong forward jab of their pelvises. Rising throughout this scene is the disembodied sound of woman's laughter. The laughter is unsettling and unfamiliar, communicating that this story of Carmen will be markedly different.

A third woman enters the stage. She is clothed in a vivid red dress— is she Carmen? Was she the woman laughing? The dancers flanking her are similarly outfitted although one wears soft pink with a skirt more heavily layered, giving her a more playful

appearance than the woman in red. The third dancer's dress skims the floor forgoing the youthful A-line shape shared by the others for an elegant, yet solemn slip of black.

The woman in red, danced by Vanessa Valecillo, is not Carmen in the sense of a traditional, fully-realized character. This dancer embodies, rather, a compartmentalized version of Carmen; she portrays only selected traits that are mere fractures of the whole. Turano imagines that all three dancers are divisions of a singular Carmen, reasoning, "she's [Carmen] extremely complicated. She has the personality of a schizophrenic in the sense that she could just kill someone and then be a seductress and then be spiritual ... I see her as a multifaceted human being" (Turano). Turano's decision to stage Carmen through the use of three different bodies, as split and fractured and thusly pathologized, recalls a theme common in contemporary Latina consciousness. Cherrie Moraga speaks of this condition as a result of continued violence against the Latina body, she remarks, "the language of the Xicana [Latina] story — if it were to be real — is fragmented, it is the stutter, the garbled utterance caught in the silence between tongues, tongues literally ripped from mouths. It resides in the taboo languages of the body" ("An Irrevocable Promise" 53). Moraga alludes to the borderlander, one who does not have a language of their own with which to speak. Turano attempts to unravel the Latina story by taking up the body that Moraga positions as the site of knowledge and providing Carmen with three bodies from which to make visible the complexities of the Latina story. The harrowing laughter in the background is a referent to the Latina's inability to speak but it proclaims, unapologetically, the Latina's presence.

Fragmenting oneself is in many ways a mode of survival. In order to serve the numerous different functions demanded of the Latina from her community, the diverse components of her personality often cannot be presented simultaneously. When fragmentation is not fully attained and the Latina fails in her task by allowing more than one mood to present itself at once, the fragmentation is cited as hysteria. In response to traditional western methods of healing for such a pathology, Cherrie Moraga claims, “therapy is a privatized gringo concept that our illness is somehow individualized, as is our cure” (“An Irrevocable Promise” 49). Moraga, in essence, validates the Latina’s suffering but refuses to accept that it is the result of personal inability to cope; Moraga contends that the suffering is a response to hostile cultural and societal expectations placed on Latina women. Healing, therefore, must take place externally; addressing the social causes, not the personalized symptoms.

In more specific terms, the Latina is expected to exemplify *marianismo*. *Marianismo* can be thought of as the ideal counterpart *machismo*. Where as the macho male is territorial, overprotective, and always deserving, the woman is reserved, chaste, and self-abnegating. In principle, she dons the traits of the biblical Virgin Mary. Such a role not only supports the masculinized *machismo* but it ensures its permanence. When a Latina woman breaks out of this role as the virgin mother’s earthy twin by asserting sexuality or anger, there are social structures in place to police her. The cultural construct is one of dichotomy, if a woman is not the vision of *marianismo* then she is regarded a whore.

Turano's Carmen pushes back strongly against the concept of *marianismo*. Of course, the traditional narrative already positions Carmen as sexually available; she is certainly not an emblem of purity. What makes Turano's presentation remarkable is that her Carmen performs on stage with no one and for no one other than herself. She is nobody's lover, whore, wife, or mother. Sally Banes, in her 1998 book, *Dancing Women: Female Bodies On Stage*, remarks that historically speaking, concert dance is notoriously engrossed in staging heterosexual relationships. In particular, Banes details the prevalence of "the marriage plot" in both ballet and modern dance performance (5-7). Banes states, "to look at women's roles and the marriage plot is to examine kinship networks and to analyze how women fit in (or not) according to the community's rules" (7). By removing indicators of Carmen's kinship roles through the elimination of other bodies traditionally associated with the narrative, Turano's Carmen cannot be judged according to how she does or does not compliment social expectations. In addition, "by dancing solos without male partners," Banes argues, "they [women] categorically rejected the marriage plot entirely in their dances" (5-6). Turano's Carmen seizes autonomy of the stage, agency over her own sensuality, which she manages by displacing a sexualized physicality with physical objects of desire (using pears as props), and control over her own her story when she performs in the absence of a male counterpart. While the audience may watch Carmen dance, potentially fulfilling the absence of the male gaze on stage, Carmen refuses to engage it. She moves only to exchange gaze with the audience when she is putting forth a challenge of the phallus to them through her initial

iteration of Carmen.

The first solo presented is that of the Carmen dressed in pink as danced by Kristen Shelton. She holds a cigar in her hand— a referent to the original tale in which Carmen is a worker in a cigar factory. Shelton's feet are widely set and her posture is large and looming. Lifting the cigar to her nose she breathes it in. Her masculine deportment and the phallic cigar counter the femininity of her pale pink frills. Without warning she bites the end of the cigar off and her body plunges forward as she spits the broken bits from her mouth. She symbolically castrates the absent male in this action, not only reifying her rejection of his presence by spitting, but making certain to destroy it as well. Extending the remains of the cigar out toward the audience she dares them to challenge her as she crumbles the cigar into tiny pieces that wilt onto the floor.

The challenge that she poses in crumbling the cigar is about dissolving the disillusion of *machismo*. As the last piece of the cigar falls, Carmen doubles over with laughter. She laughs in the face of *machismo*, making visible its pretense as she wears it on her own body. Carmen's laugh is crazed, uncontrolled, and loud. At first it comes as a release against the tight conventions of womanhood. She cracks up realizing that she can behave like a man, she can crush the phallic cigar in her hand and she seems to be realizing her own power. But as her laughter swells in intensity the sound is unexpectedly displaced by the return of the omnipresent and unseen laughter heard in the introduction. Startled and frightened by the voice that suddenly grows beyond her own body and thus beyond her control, the pink Carmen begins thrashing across the stage trying to restore

her agency. Her hands splay with excess tension also visible in the awkward stiffness of her neck until a gentle shift in the music brings a moment for release. The tension drains from her limbs and she becomes limber, allowing her arms and spine to move fluidly and with a decidedly feminized flair.

However, before we can imagine that the pink Carmen is docile and tame, she sneaks downstage to a pile of red pears strewn across the ground that have lain neglected until this moment. She crouches down to her knees, checking over her shoulder to be sure that she is not being watched, and takes a bite. Just as she did with the cigar, she forcefully spits the mouthful across the stage. Carmen takes what she wants but she never fully ingests it, she controls what enters her body and in doing so, her body is reinvigorated. Again she thrashes across the stage, this time claiming space and declaring her authority. The pink Carmen expresses girlish exuberance but she also dances with a virility normally credited to men. While she has doubts and fears, the strength she displays assures us that she is prevailing nonetheless. She powerfully kicks her legs, defiantly upsets her skirt, she jumps, she charges, she spins, she absorbs the stage around her with abandon until at last, satisfied with her own sense of prowess defined both through the feminine and masculine, she releases herself to the floor allowing herself to rest.

Enter the red Carmen who dances the signature musical selection from Bizet's score, the "Habanera." Her movements are more sensual than the Pink Carmen but the sexuality is still subtle, not obvious. Her hips swirl and like a flamenco dancer and her

wrists and fingers carefully articulate around her body. These moments are indulgent and sumptuous but the dance is not sexy per say. The red Carmen is not dancing for our pleasure as viewers, she is dancing for her own pleasure. She seduces the air around her coaxing it to support her as she stretches through it. The way in which her desire speaks through her body does not necessarily conform to standard images of embodied sexuality. Instead of maintaining an emphasis on conventionally objectified portions of the female body like breasts, hips, the backside, or legs, the energy moves throughout her body, trailing off her hands and feet but also lingering in broken lines that are less classically alluring. Her focus remains trained inwardly as she moves around the stage often turning her back on the audience as if unaware or uninterested in it.

As in the first solo, the red Carmen also interacts with the pears. The pears evoke Eve's apple from the bible— the root of knowledge and evil. The red Carmen resists the temptation presented by the pears by reveling in her own decadent movement until finally allowing herself to succumb. She kneels behind a chair positioned directly behind the spilled pears and draped in a large swath of red satin duking her head beneath the fabric until her body is entirely concealed. Slowly Carmen emerges through an opening in the fabric situated near the top of the chair, suggesting a sort of re-birth. She unfurls her arms, undulating her elbow and fingers until she reaches her full height. The silken fabric has become Carmen's full-length skirt. Eventually she comes to rest in the chair, propping herself back and allowing her legs to float as freely as her arms. Her skirt is situated over the chair rendering it invisible so as to give the appearance that she is

suspended in the air— entirely weightless. “She’s floating in this place of ecstasy,” states Turano, “not caring about anything but her own pleasure and her own seduction.”

Carmen reaches toward the ground to lift a pear, she bites into it and revels in the taste revealing no remorse of guilt at her delightful indulgence. Her re-birth signifies a new understanding of her own sensuality, which through the pears, now extends beyond her own body. Importantly, however, the pears do not represent a masculine sexuality, if anything they are feminine: soft and round.

Unlike the pink Carmen who spits out everything she consumes, the red Carmen ingests her desires. And in taking the pear, the red Carmen remains unharmed; the pears are just pears, they do not bring about destruction like Eve’s apple. The red Carmen finds freedom in the indulgence, basking with closed eyes and utterly vulnerable to her unsurveyed surroundings yet unchallenged because she appears alone and unthreatened. She alternatively is neither whore nor self-abnegating. Her guiltless acceptance of pleasure on her own terms and for her own well-being is a profound statement of bodily agency for a Latina figure. She is without a male partner— or any partner for that matter— her sensuality is entirely independent of her reproductive capacities; the only birth is that of her own. She does not shy away, convey shame, or attempt to return pleasure elsewhere by exchanging gaze with the audience. This is most notably evident in the way that she rejects the audience’s objectification of her sensuality by moving in ways that are centered in experiential pleasure rather than visual pleasure.

The final iteration of Carmen, dressed in black and danced by Jessica Alejandra

Wyatt represents Carmen the spiritual. She lunges to the side forming a stark and statuesque profile. Her gaze is clear and deeply focused offstage to somewhere unseen. The black Carmen is glimpsing beyond the world in which she inhabits, accessing a supernatural world through her vision. She is overcome by the agitation in her belly and her body curls over with arms pressed to her sides as her hands palpitate over her stomach with trepidation. As if by mystical manifestation, a deck of Tarot cards emerges from her belly and falls through her grappling hands. The cards sail into the air sprinkling back down like windblown snow. This version of Carmen recalls Bizet's scene in which Carmen foretells her own dark future in the cards. The black Carmen surveys the cards as they lay on the floor and her reading of them becomes her somber dance. She exudes a heavy grounded strength not seen in the other two dancers indicating the bleak fortune she's received from the cards. Although the pears still lay across the corner of the stage, they do not compel this Carmen; she does not even see them because she is not concerned with the earthy delights of the body.

Of the three Carmens, the black Carmen is the most narratively driven. In Bizet's original version, Carmen's foretelling of her own death becomes a reality in the final scenes of the opera. Although Bizet's Carmen captivates viewers and her death is sorrowful, it is ultimately a punishment for her unorthodox behavior in regard to acceptable womanhood. There is no way for Carmen to have a happy ending without upsetting traditional structures that maintain her subordination. Turano's black Carmen predicts the same dark end, but does the end come?

The three Carmen's come together for the finale. They take on each other's movement motifs although they continuously break into solos. When they dance together Turano illustrates that indeed they are not so easily compartmentalized after all, and this inability to maintain separation is the instability of fragmentation. When all three Carmens finally fall to floor, it seems as though death has come, though, it is not to be final as it was in Bizet's version. The Carmens are resurrected and the three dancers slowly back away from the audience while the omniscient laughter grows louder and louder and the lights fade to black.

Where death usually delivers the final corrective intervention in Carmen's tale, there is no final intervention here. Turano does not punish Carmen for her misdeeds; she immortalizes her for them. By pushing against *marianismo* through the inhabitation of both feminine and masculine qualities, and the welcoming of indulgence through the pears, the Carmens are promised a death that does not find them. The laughter, still displaced from their bodies, however, again signals a loss of control as it did the moment that it left the pink Carmen's mouth. To contain that loss of sanity the Carmen's must continuously engage and exercise their mastery over their own choices. This final return of the laughter speaks to Turano's exploration of Carmen the woman versus Carmen the stereotype. Carmen the woman is always competing for her autonomy with the Carmen of popular imagination.

In taking Carmen up, Turano's project was to examine the qualities of a Latina archetype. When asked what came of her choreographic experience Turano reflected about Carmen:

It's very hard to tame her; it's very hard to pigeonhole her. In calling her schizophrenic, I don't think she's crazy but I think the whole story is so multifaceted and she represents that because she's complex. We love her because she's somebody that admits all of that which is true to her soul and she really doesn't care what other people think because she has her place in the world. She has passion and she is fiery and she's not afraid to be what she is. She's a heroine for all of us because in a sense she represents all of our repressed feelings about how we want to express who we are. She does it. (Turano)

Being able to adapt and embrace many ways of being is the essential marker of Latina/o culture for Turano. She recalls learning this in her body while she was dancing with Ballet Hispanico. She states that "when I danced with my Cuban partner they would dance on one rhythm, and then when I would be with my Puerto Rican partner they would dance on the other rhythm, I had to constantly be adapting and so that became part of my comprehension" (Turano). In *Carmen Act I*, Turano really attempts to peel away the layers and understand Carmen on a deeper level; on a level that challenges us to consider Carmen beyond her scorching temper and heated romances.

Turano positioned herself in alignment with a Latina subjectivity by using the inclusive "we," and it was apparent that her investment in Latino culture is ongoing. Her various artistic endeavors have surrounded her with a Latino community that accepts her as their own. She speaks about consistently passing as a Latina amongst those who make the assumption about her identity based on the context in which she is often found. Certainly I am reminded of the first moments of my encounter with her in which she

disclosed her Italian-American heritage and questioned whether or not I would be interested in continuing the conversation. I find Turano's choice to use Carmen, a Frenchman's vision of a Spanish pariah, as an archetype through which to explore Latina identity questionable and deserving critique. However, I recognize the need to address this character considering her longevity and the conflation of this Spanish figure with a Latina experience. Moreover, Turano's staging of Carmen makes apparent the ways in which she attempted to deconstruct the icon. By dividing Carmen into a trio of dancers, removing the male body, and abstracting the narrative, the audience is compelled to confront the limitations of the original icon and to see her in all of her complexity.

Part of that intricacy includes a struggle to maintain self-definition in the face of strongly imposed stereotypes. This reflects an experience that Turano would be familiar with from her time performing with Ballet Hispanico where she was asked, as a white woman, to portray a Latina. Turano had to decide how to embody a Latina in a manner that did not relegate itself to stereotypical depictions that could be considered offensive. *Carmen Act I* allowed Turano to experiment with levels of control and power that Carmen can exert, and the balance between maintaining an icon and presenting a multifaceted female figure that enjoys excess without punishment.

CRACKED SOLES

Four men form a tight line across one side of the stage. To the sound of their own zapateado and rhythmic vocalizations they charge the audience, powerfully drawing their crossed arms up over their heads, chests puffed full of air. They each personify the

dominant, macho flamenco lead until they break their commanding lines to shout, “Baa! Bada ba da baaaa,” striking their arms geometrically across their lower torsos in time with their musical vocalizations. This break ends in a parallel position with hands squarely placed over their groin and heads bowed in order that they might examine the framing of their hands. One by one they lift their heads to count off, shouting “Uno!” “Dos!” “Tres!” “Quatro!” They are asserting themselves, and by indication of their hands: their masculinity.

The dance grows more intricate and more off-kilter as it progresses with the men hopping from foot to foot, tipping their heads from side to side, and yipping in hyperbolically high and low voices while continually asserting their numbers in both English and Spanish. Although their movement is awkward and silly, the men are all thoroughly impressed with themselves and entirely self-validated in their manliness. Moreover, while the audience laughs at them, they also cheer them on, feeding the dancers’ energy and encouraging the bravado of their self-indulgent display.

In *Nube Blanco*, a piece designed to accommodate the entire Luna Negra company, Ochoa initially presents customary Latino gender roles wherein the male is celebrated for his vibrato performance and the woman remains available to assist him but is careful to remove herself from the spotlight when it shines— she wears *marianismo* well. Ochoa keeps the women and men divided on stage into homosocial groups, and when they come together it is always to form heterosexual pairings. Ochoa does not paint the women in this dance, however, as fundamentally subject to men. Instead she calls

attention to the ways in which women stretch and bend to fulfill their socially manufactured obligations, and the ways that *machismo* fails to support them, allowing them to express their frustration throughout. In contrast to the traditional gender divisions between men and women that Ochoa sets up in order to critique, she begins the work by immediately upsetting another sort of codified tradition: flamenco dance. In destabilizing the masculine flamenco body by making it laughable, as presented in the above scene, Ochoa makes apparent the construction of male gender roles in relationship to the women. Her choreography makes apparent the women's effort to support the men, allowing them to exude their own brand of strength in doing so, and the lack of recognition or reciprocation they receive for their efforts.

While the four men in the quartet flaunt their personal performances of strength and agility demanding attention and praise from the audience, the women in Ochoa's work are not granted such distinct personalities. Regardless, they are not lacking in strength and agility which they demonstrate by remaining perpetually sky bound, spinning and soaring and shooting upward by engaging their powerful legs against the ground. As suggested by their white billowing under-skirts beneath their black shifts, the women resemble clouds, or *nube blanca*. They fly through the air with light joyousness, but they are neither ethereal nor meek. Certainly, they are not inherently less deserving than men, but in accordance with their supportive role, they are less preoccupied than the men in their pursuit of attention. Moreover, like the men, they vocalize rhythmically and joyously throughout their dance, but unlike the men the women are not singular; they do

not get to name themselves with their voices. Like clouds, they pass by unnoticed.

Throughout the work, Ochoa probes into the dark recesses of her memory using autobiography to grasp a notion of her Latina identity. She comes out on the other end with stirring critique on the destructiveness of gender roles structured around *machismo* and religiously moderated facades that negate ugly realities. Ultimately, her dance is lighthearted given its inclination to mark the humor in the stories that her dancers tell. In the end the work is even hopeful; bright Nube — a single female figure and the white cloud in the title, remains onstage at the finish after all the dejected lovers have faded away.

Ochoa was raised in Belgium, the daughter of a Belgian mother and a Colombian father. Her position, that of a European Latina, brings a particularly unique perspective to the *Latina Choreographers Project*, which largely engages an American Latino experience. Ochoa now resides permanently in the Netherlands and does not advertise herself as a Latina. She claims that it was her last name that caught the eye of Vilaro at Luna Negra. Vilaro pursued Ochoa over a number of years before asking her to partake in the *Latina Choreographers Project*. Stating that although she doesn't particularly "feel" Latina, Ochoa says she rarely says no to an opportunity. Developing a dance for Luna Negra mandated that Ochoa dig into her own past to consider what role her Latino heritage played in her life and work.

Language became the essential element that most deeply characterized a Latino heritage for Ochoa. Spanish was the shared language of her parents; although it was not a

language taught to her and her sibling. Ochoa reminisces about the heated arguments between her mother and father, which were always conducted in Spanish. At the end of a fight, her father would storm off and her mother would console herself by playing the records of Maria Dolores Pradera, sulking in the drama of the leaden ranchero music (Ochoa). This is the soundtrack to Ochoa's childhood and she transforms it into the soundtrack of her *Nube Blanco*.

Fighting between the men and women, consequently, is a reoccurring theme throughout the work. Ochoa stages these encounters always in private spaces, demarcated by stage lights that illuminate couples individually. In one such scene, a woman enters with her red shoes in hand having removed her white crinoline from beneath the simple black overlay. Putting a shoe to her cheek she begins speaking into as if it were a telephone. She shouts in Spanish to her partner asking about his tardiness and reminding him not to forget to wear the white t-shirt or else her mother will be upset. Ochoa divulges that this dancer is a referent to her own mother. A male dancer enters the space while the woman on the phone continues to speak. His white t-shirt is removed and stuffed between his teeth. Despite all the domineering masculinity displayed by the male dancers to this point, this man is rendered speechless. The woman is angry about being made to look the fool by her partner who is late and unlikely to manage himself in the manner desired. She is represented as the nagging girlfriend/wife trying to fulfill external expectations, and in the moment he is the emasculated male, unable to fulfill his *machismo* whims when he is under the direction of a woman. This moment segues in to a

trio of arguing pairs each in their own sharply angled square of light. The men wield the soft and pliable T-shirt against the women, who duck and allow it to pass over them. In return, the women use their shoes to lightly tap at their male partners. Although weapons are deployed, the exchange of touché is always gentle, indicating a level of care between the fighters despite the tension. The short fighting sequence repeats as a means to emphasize such encounters as regular and mundane.

Ochoa is interested in critiquing the paradigm of private unease as exemplified by the fighting in cloistered spaces in relation to “put on” public faces. As seen by the woman with the shoe-phone, the pressure to project the desired façade falls heavily on the shoulders of the women who are responsible for the presentation of themselves as well as the presentation of their male counterparts. One male soloist gets a taste of this pressure when he considers stepping into one of the pairs shoes that the women abandoned onstage. He attempts to replicate the position of the shoes with his own feet and as soon as he does so, an unseen force overtakes his body. It pushes and prods him into various shapes pulling at his arm, bending him at the knees, and often returning him to the line of shoes although he cannot seem to hold the position. The force that moves his body replicates the experience of the women in the dance who shadow and address the needs and desires of their male partners. Eventually, the unseen force brings the man to a stop as he deeply lunges over one leg with the opposite arm extended out and head tucked in against it. He is stuck there like an inanimate object as a number of women enter from the wings carrying their black dresses in their hands dressed now in only their

bra tops and briefs. They use the frozen man's arm like a towel rack that they nonchalantly toss their black dresses over. The male soloist now inhabits the unrecognized, undervalued position of the subservient woman who gathers the dirty laundry without applause. The women move along to subsequently pick up their shoes, which they curiously sniff and indicate with faces of disgust that they do indeed stink as they continue off the other side of the stage.

This is a complete reversal of roles, where the women are no longer hiding themselves or concerned about "airing their dirty laundry" (Ochoa). They show no guilt in leaving the man to handle their wash and even though their shoes stink, they carry forward undaunted. The man is left holding the refuse. He thrashes about silently mocking them in irritation of his inability to respond to their lack of appreciation before exiting on the opposite side of the stage. Switching gender roles in this way functions to illuminate the complicity people have toward this power dynamic when it functions traditionally. When men become subservient to women, the inequality of the situation becomes visible as the roles become incongruous to our understanding of normal behaviors.

The final scene of this dance piece elucidates the total deconstruction that all of the dancers have undergone throughout the work. Together the cast hobbles onstage, everyone stripped down to their black undergarments and each wearing only one shoe. The men and women are no longer separated from one another, or dancing in pairs opposed to another, instead they are intermixed. With utter disillusion they flop over one

bent knee leaving their arms to dangle loosely from their shoulders. The flamenco motifs established in the beginning of the piece return but they are altered so as to appear rigid rather than elastic, disjointed rather than fluid. The dancers are dejected, hanging their heads and dragging their limbs while they clamber around the space unbalanced by the absence of the one shiny red flamenco heel. The fighting that has ensued between various couples throughout the piece and the persistent battle between the sexes has finally exhausted itself bringing them all level with one another, and all equally exposed. The binary of gender roles has been demolished in the face of total exhaustion.

Countering the deconstruction of the lovers is the appearance of the charming Nube. In a most delightful turn, she merrily spins onto stage into the midst of the broken down dancers. She looks like a cotton ball, or a white cloud, with all of the white crinolines belonging previously to the female dancers stacked over her body, her head and hands just barely peek out through the puff. The Nube lightly moves in and amongst the dancers hopping and turning as they perform their ragged, faintly flamenco fusion. She floats dreamily through, attempting to partner with select dancers of both sexes who always oblige but end up dropping her ungracefully to the floor unable or unwilling to support her. They are too broken to make a place for her. In the final moments, Nube climbs onto a dancer's back, curling up like a child sleeping while the dancer on whose back she sits gently rocks her back and forth. Ochoa divulges that this Nube is herself lying in bed at night listening to her mother play her records. Her bed was her safe place. Wrapped in all of her blankets and tucked into her cozy bed she was secure and

comforted, still unmarred— at least temporarily, by the stringent social regulations that directed her parent’s behavior toward one another.

Ochoa’s postmodern deconstruction of flamenco dance stems from her own relationship to the style. Ochoa studied flamenco in requirement of the basic curriculum at the Royal Ballet Academy in Antwerp, Belgium. Her familiarity with flamenco is extensive and she even recalls being singled out as a favorite in her flamenco class because of her Spanish surname (Ochoa). In choosing to utilize flamenco in this piece Ochoa makes use of its recognition as a Latino cultural artifact, complex as that relationship may be, although she subverts the form’s colonialist signification by using it as a fluid medium with which to better reflect on her own hybridized Latina identity. In this way flamenco moves out of the realm of folkloric representation, which purports imagined ideas of Latino authenticity, and into a personalized medium that speaks for a complex, contemporary Latina identity.

Ochoa remarks that although she did not feel close to her Latino heritage before working with Luna Negra she has become more aware of it and more invested in exploring it as evidenced in some of her subsequent work with Ballet Hispanico and The National Dominican Ballet. She does, however, remain skeptical about being identified as a Latina choreographer stating that when positioned as such there is a risk of always being patronized for her subject position as an artist instead of being evaluated on the merit of her work (Ochoa). This desire to negate a label is hard to swallow considering the historical precedent that the Latina Choreographers Project is making in the name of

Latina artists who have struggled so hard to gain visibility in the United States.

Conversely, each Latina has a unique experience that necessitates differing methods for identifying in the ways that they do. Ochoa feels confident that she has a voice in the world and although she is glad for the experience to explore her Latina heritage in her work, she does not largely consider herself part of a Latino community.

PONDEROUS GENDER ISSUES

Ochoa is by and large the most highly acclaimed choreographer featured in the *Latina Choreographer's Project* concert. Her work has been presented in multiple venues across the globe, and in April of 2012 she was invited to grace the cover of *Dance Magazine*. Her voice amongst the *Latina Choreographers Project* is undeniably the loudest because her success has garnered her a great deal of interest, not to mention that her *Nube Blanco* was the only world premiere in the final gala. The reviewer Zachary Wittenburg writes "Five minutes into *Nube Blanco*, I felt I was seeing Luna Negra glide confidently into its *quinceañera*, the belle of the ball" (Wittenburg). *Nube Blanco* is certainly a masterful work that is both thought provoking and funny in addition to being well executed by the company dancers. I find it ironic, however, that Ochoa's first foray into choreographing Latina from a European perspective exemplifies the maturity of an American Latino company. And perhaps it does; this compliment is most definitely a credit to Ochoa's ability as a choreographer, and her work is also easily recognized within the context of an American Latino dance company despite Ochoa's origins.

The same reviewer was less forgiving of Turano's work pointing to the

characters' "reckless opportunism," or marking the Carmens as "off-the-rails," or "maniacal." Whittenburg critiques the roles as "too thin," and ultimately writes the work off as a wash (Whittenburg). While I agree that the piece could benefit from some further development, particularly surrounding the implementation of the black Carmen, Whittenburg does not account for the range of complexity shown through each character individually, as well as through the compiled character. The versions of Carmen displayed throughout the work were extraordinarily varied. Turano makes visible the stereotypical, hot tempered, rash, super sensual Latina, but she also demonstrates an extreme range of tenderness, and measured care in her renditions of Carmen. In order to deconstruct an icon like Carmen, the stereotypes must be addressed so that they can be complicated and/or challenged. This is Turano's difficult task. For many viewers, like Whittenburg, the traits of Carmen are already seared into their cultural knowledge systems. He picks up only what he already expects to see, negating what is unfamiliar in the presentation. Within popular imagination, the icon of Carmen is already branded impetuous and "übersexual" as Sharon Hoyer of the *New City Stage* reiterates in her review of *Carmen Act I* (Hoyer). Perhaps, however, Turano's piece did not challenge the stereotypes with enough ferocity to undermine the audience's complacency with contrived Latina representations.

Turano's work, however, was one of the earliest in the company's repertoire, and ultimately it is the work of a white choreographer, not a Latina. Regardless of Turano's effort to invest in Latino culture, she participates in it as a visitor always reserving the

opportunity to exit. Does her piece lack the choreographic elements to make its message clear? Is she trapped under the weight of Carmen's legacy? Does her figure speak to Latinos in America? Could this be symptomatic of her subject position in relationship to the level of maturity Latina choreographer's have acquired and revealed through *Latina Choreographers Project*?

Both Turano and Ochoa excavated their concept of a Latina identity from the Spanish elements of Latino culture. Annabelle Ochoa's comic but dark *Nube Blanco* testifies to her own Latino upbringing and Nancy Turano's multidimensional exploration of the archetypal Carmen aimed to move beyond the surface as a means to assess her own role in Latino culture. Both broke their icons down, shifting them to see more clearly and revising them to define a more contemporary experience. By taking profound steps to unseat the dominance of the male body within Latino culture Turano and Ochoa ripped at the seams of Latina oppression, exposing the constructed-ness of gender and gender relations and giving agency to female bodies who find new way to speak through their dances.

These new Latina representations on the dance stage are not fully mature; they are just a beginning. They negate Latina silence, however, by attempting to modify and amend the old in order to develop a vision more fitting of their own current reality. When Sharon Hoyer advises in her review of *The Latina Choreographers Project* concert, "Don't expect Saturday night at the Harris to be a politicized evening that mulls over ponderous gender issues," she couldn't be further from the truth (Hoyer). Her comment

alone warrants the exploration of the work produced by these women who are making great strides whether Latina, white, or biracial to address gender and racial disparity in their community and to build a Latinidad with room for all of them to meet on their own terms.

Chapter Three: Dancing the Way Home

ALWAYS NEPANTLA

The nepantla state is the natural habitat of women artists, most specifically for the mestiza border artists who partake of the traditions of two or more worlds and who may be bi-national. They thus create a new artistic space - a border mestizo culture.

-Gloria Anzaldúa (“Chicana Artists” 37)

Two women lie on their sides against the floor as they are dragged across the stage by a partner who grasps them securely, but tenderly, by one arm. When the women manage to catch their footing along the ground, they are released. In tandem with their male partners, the pairs backtrack along the length of the stage until each woman extends a hand to her partner, tumbling back to the floor only to be dragged along once more. This cycle repeats three times. The women demonstrate a deep reluctance to move forward and a desire to return to their origin. Their partners, as gently as the situation permits, commit to supporting and mobilizing the women throughout their journey.

This scene recalls that of the border crosser, one who leaves behind everything to traverse into new territory where the pressure to forget their past is buttressed by the pressure to acculturate. Latina performance scholar Alicia Arrizón writes, “The adjudication of such binary-opposed sites is a continual struggle among cross-border subjects, whose movements are aimed at securing economic survival and, as a consequence, cultural survival as well” (100). Transference across a border elicits many costs— economic, political, cultural, and psychological. The heavy demands placed on the border-crosser invites resistance against forgetting and a desire for home. In the

scenes above, this negotiation is played out on the bodies of the dancers who must move forward even though they desire to return. Maray Gutierrez, the choreographer of this work, is herself an immigrant and the feeling of *nepantla*, or being trapped between one's memories of home and a new state of being, resonates throughout this piece.

Nepantla is a Nahuatl term that indicates an occupation of the middle, or the space in-between. For Chicana and Latina scholars like Alicia Arrizón, Gloria Anzaldúa, and Cherríe Moraga, for example, this concept of inhabiting an identity that is claimed neither here nor there is a primary condition of the Chicana/Latina. The term can denote an active process of passing through, a shift in nationality or geographic location, a change in social class or sexuality, and even a move from the obscure to the visibly pronounced (Anzaldúa, "Chicana Artists" 37). The process of transference produces disorientation and for many individuals the passing through is never complete.

Anzaldúa, in the introductory epitaph to this chapter, avows that *nepantla* is the case for women artists who locate themselves within a number of different cultural practices. She suggests that these artists "are engaged in 'reading' that *nepantla*, that border" ("Chicana Artists" 37). To partake in Latina/Chicana art making is to create outside of, and yet in relation to, the dominant model. The perception of the border as a demarcated and resilient boundary becomes blurry and porous for those who walk both sides of it; inevitably it demands attention. In this study of Latina choreographers working in modern and contemporary dance styles, the mediation between Western

modes of production and their colonized, subaltern status is a paradigm that maintains *nepantla*.

In this chapter I undertake close readings of Texas native Michelle Manzanales' *Azucar Cruda* (2007) and Cuban immigrant Maray Gutierrez's *Eterno Despertar* (2006). Manzanales' piece draws on personal memories and conceptualization of home. Her work reflects the imprints of her own Mexican heritage and American upbringing but it extends itself publicly through the inclusion of experiences shared by the performers in the piece. Manzanales' experience of liminality, of a private domestic culture and a public national culture, becomes a communal matter as it is relayed through different bodies and shared amongst distinct individuals. In *Eterno Despertar*, Gutierrez also explores memory. The work is developed around an image of water, recalling an ocean crossed in migration; it demonstrates a process of discarding splinters of one's self and leaving them behind on distant shores. The piece negates resolution, emphasizing instead the permanency and capricious state of being caught in-between two ends. I argue that these two choreographers explore the ambiguous dream space of memory, longing, and belonging.

I view both of these works as autobiographical narratives that make private experiences and memories public and I aim to explore the ways that these women reconcile two incongruent cultures. Inevitably, both dances explore cultural negotiation and a lack of place; it is germane to consider such themes in relation to the concept of *nepantla*. Gutierrez and Manzanales make explicit this no-lander state through the use of

abstraction, which speaks to uncertainty, lack of definition, and an inability to translate between two different cultures. The abstract narratives in the dances function to convey meaning about a Latina identity without racially marking the dances and signifying essentialized notions about otherness. I argue that these dances mourn cultural loss while invoking a lived homage that makes space for the substantiation of an equivocal experience.

The need to assert *nepantla* as a contemporary and viable life experience for Latina artists is very much an active challenge in the world that Manzanales and Gutierrez inhabit. In my interview with Eduardo Vilaro, former artistic director of Luna Negra, he posed that one of the company's perpetual challenges was to push against a conceptualization of American dance as either belonging to an American white artistic tradition or an American black artistic tradition. He spoke of a recent encounter with an African American woman directing a collegiate dance program who relayed that there are only two types of dance: black dance and white dance. Where is there space in the conversation for the Latina/o dance artists? Vilaro insists that this example highlights the depth of refusal within the dance community to recognize the contributions of the Latina/o choreographers. They are no-landers not only on a national and cultural level but also on an artistic level, claimed on neither end of the spectrum, left suspended, unrealized and unacknowledged.

Not only are Latina/o dancers lingering in some undefined space between black and white dance traditions, they are not always recognized within the Latino community,

further compounding the feeling of artistic *nepantla*. Michelle Manzanales shared a personal anecdote about touring as a dancer with Luna Negra and meeting with Latino audience members in post-show discussions. Audiences often expressed disappointment about the performances, stating that dances did not meet their expectations and that the dances were ultimately not “Latin” enough. Manzanales notes that while this sort of questioning proved highly generative by facilitating new conversations around the contemporary Latino representations staged, it was disheartening and even intimidating to encounter such disassociation time and time again (Manzanales). While these encounters illustrate the sort of dialog that Luna Negra strives for, the inability for Latino audience members to connect with the material onstage positions the company’s artistic practice outside of their own cultural community. Not even in the Latino community does their work currently have a home.

The silencing of Latina/o expression is grounded in a hegemonic understanding of power arrangements that situate the life stories of Latina/os as insignificant and unnecessary. Ann Cooper Albright in her book *Choreographing Difference* states:

For a long time in Western culture...only certain lives, those circumscribed by the gilt frames of public prestige and power, were deemed worthy of recitation...When others (particularly the women and men on whose subjugated bodies the empire of the bourgeois self was built) sought to use autobiography to document their own experiences, autobiography was quickly redefined as a “weak” genre. (123)

To tell the autobiography of one’s self as a subjugated being, a racialized woman for example, is consequently an act of resistance. The telling resists the petty determinism that constitutes autobiography as an anemic genre, or one that lacks rigor, once it is co-

opted by individuals whose stories pose a threat to systems of control and domination.

The telling disrupts silence and it claims space, demanding to be heard.

The formulation of Luna Negra's *Latina Choreographers Project*, while not requesting autobiography per se, was in large part intended to disrupt the cultural silencing of Latina women in a field that has historically accommodated the stories of white women and men. How would Latinas represent themselves through their choreography? How would they design movement to symbolize their own experiences? All three choreographers commissioned for the project rendered some aspect of autobiographical narrative in their final composition. For Gutierrez and Manzanales, however, autobiography serves a vehicle for the expression of an ambiguous existence and a life lived in the middle.

Although the choreographers are instigating an autobiographical approach in their choreography, the dances are set on and performed by bodies other than their own. Instead of reconfiguring the performances as *biographical* of the choreographer's positionality, I maintain the adherence to reading these works as *autobiography*. I do so considering Marita Sturken's theorization that "[Representations] are technologies of memory, not vessels of memory in which memory passively resides so much as objects through which memories are shared, produced, and given meaning" (9). As the choreographer's memories are transmuted through the bodies of the dancers in the shared cultural context of the *Latina Choreographers Project*, the dancers produce meanings of their own. The fractures between the performers' bodies and the choreographer's story

generate a rich forum to investigate cultural memory, shared experiences, and understanding.

What memories do the choreographer chose to invoke? How do these memories serve the artists' goals and how do they speak to the mission of the *Latina Choreographers Project*? How are the memories presented through the bodies of the dancers? What claims do they reify and what alternatives do they present? Through the remembrance of "where we come from" and the distant shores of our homeland both Gutierrez and Manzanales draw on their personal narratives to understand and represent a contemporary Latina experience (Manzanales). Gutierrez's dance explores the interpersonal systems of support and resistance throughout the passing between spaces both physical and physiological. Her dance weaves together emotional resonances of longing, apprehension, acceptance, and ambivalence reciting different stations of a border crossing. Manzanales on the other hand, focuses on drawing memories and the present together, mapping a community through shared experience and the dissolution of isolated entities. Her work arrives at a place of closure only through the exploration of the darker underbelly of *nepantla*; the no-lander. Both women use abstraction in their dances to construct a narrative that is as ambiguous and difficult to define as their own Latina identities.

DREAMING OF THE SEA

Gutierrez was the first choreographer commissioned for Luna Negra's *Latina Choreographers Project*. She is initially from Havana, Cuba having trained in the Cuban

National School of Dance and performing professionally with the National Contemporary Dance Company of Cuba for ten years. Gutierrez relocated to the U.S. immediately following her experience at the American Dance Festival in 2002, which left her curious to expand her artistic community. She settled in Chicago where she began dancing with Luna Negra (Gutierrez). Because she expressed an interest in and an aptitude for choreography, Vilaro invited her to create a new work for the *Latina Choreographers Project* in 2006 (Guadalupe).

The program notes for *Eterno Despertar (Eternal Awakening)* describe the work as revealing “the longing one has for the distant shore of home” and the feelings of “ambivalence” and “separation” that longing creates. Somewhat cryptically included alongside the program description is Gutierrez’s own lyrical avowal that stated, “That day we became aware of the light, words escaped us. Silence was bewitched.” The message, written both in English and in Spanish, does little to connect with the description of the dance (*Luna Negra Program Notes*). In order to find the connection between the eternal awakening of the title and the sentiments of longing, ambivalence, and separation it is compulsory to search within the piece for Gutierrez’s conjuring of “light.”

Performed by four dancers— Elise Drew, Ricardo J. Garcia, Louis James Jackson, and Rebecca Lemme— *Eterno Despertar* is set against the haunting melodies of Portuguese musician, Madredeus (*Luna Negra Program Notes*). Choreographically, the dance is staged as an uninterrupted series of duets between all four dancers who often

shift partners but remain together onstage for nearly the entirety of the work. The pairs are frequently consumed in relationships of close support and struggle. In one sequence a man drags another onto the stage. He is belabored in his journey by the dead weight of the man that hangs limply over the floor. Entering opposite are the two women, one clasps the other who is tightly folded around her waist as she runs backward and away, as if fleeing an unseen force. The partners continuously reverse active and passive roles with each other so that no one dancer becomes a dominant point of privilege, power, or sustenance for the other. The equanimity between the dancers, who are also dressed accordingly in glossy crimson, full floor-length skirts, creates ambiguity in terms of narrative. The relationships between the dancers persistently switch throughout the piece. They explore platonic and romantic partnering in addition to making connections that appear more familial.

Amplifying the opacity of the narrative is the doubling within and among the pairs. Indeed the dancers regularly express themselves individually as they function within pairs, and the pairs also at times differentiate themselves from one another. Often, however, they dance the same dance in mirror images of one another. In one example the two women meet in a tight embrace, burrowing their faces into each other's shoulders for comfort while the two men find stillness on the floor, curled up after fitfully tossing as though suffering nightmares. The women release their hold of each other and upon doing so turn around to recognize their new partners in the sleeping men. The switch is seamless. Together the two women stare down at their partners deciding not wake them.

They start to walk away from the men in tandem, pausing mid-step only to resolve to return. This very image of leaving and returning occurs throughout the work; it creates a cyclical pattern between two choices, recalling the unresolved nature of *nepantla*. Racing back to the men, the women stretch to reach them— sweeping their fingers down the men's arms helping to pull them upright. The two women sling the two men gracefully over their shoulders, supporting their limp weight as they move across the stage. Doubling between the pairs denotes a sense of shared experience; however, the four dancers are not building lasting connections while they move between partners. As the dancers share the same experiences onstage and continuously exchange positions of support with one another throughout the work, they do not find rooting in each other. Not only do they waver between staying and leaving, they do not form a mutually recognized community either.

As the dancers are un-rooted to one another, they are also un-rooted to a physical place. The stage space tumbles around their bodies as they perpetually move through the air: flying, inverting, and sliding to the ground only to be lifted up again. Further contributing to their spatial disorientation is a frequent gesture of hands reaching up to the face to cover the eyes. The gendering of this symbolic moment is curious in reference to the general disruption of heteronormativity in the work. Only the women lose their sight. Sometimes they use their own hands to cover their eyes, and in other moments their partner (male or female) will interject to shade them from seeing. The hindering of vision feels more protective than obstructive. When the eyes are covered the dancers do not

agitate against it and it is never permanent. In fact, the covering of eyes marks stillness in the dancers— perhaps there is respite in not seeing.

Ultimately this gesture is about a removal from the present moment. It allows the dancers to recede into their own memory space where they can remember home, rest from tiresome negotiations between worlds, or perhaps even imagine new ways to carry forward. Disassociation from the space through the momentary blocking of sight could conceivably serve as a method of coping when a feeling of *nepantla*, or ungroundedness, becomes overwhelming. Gutierrez does not make clear in her choreography the connection that the women have to this gesture. I move to propose that the connection suggest a generational responsibility women feel to be bearers of culture, particularly as stewards of the home where cultural practices are often exercised. For an immigrant, this burden would become heftier as they make decisions about what practices to retain and teach in the home and what practices to replace.

The autobiographical reference to Gutierrez's own immigration in this work is elucidated through the most powerful moment in the piece. Both male dancers lie facedown downstage stripped of their skirts, which lay abandoned upstage. Also freed from their skirts, the two women rush at the men, throwing their bodies to the ground with enough force to cause them to tumble over a number of times. Peeling their own bodies off of the floor, the men allow the women to roll beneath; as they do so, their bodies in tandem resemble a wave crashing against the shore. The image is compounded by the musical shift, which transitions into a naturalistic ocean soundscape. The reference

to water reflects Gutierrez's own journey from Cuba to the United States, although the reference is not specific enough to exclude the journeys made by other Cuban immigrants.

Both Vilaro and the underwriter for Gutierrez's *Eterno Despertar* are Cuban immigrants also. The underwriter, Maria Bechily, is a prominent businesswoman and patron of the arts in the Chicago area. Bechily traveled to the U.S. at the age of twelve as part of Operation Peter Pan, a project undertaken by the CIA in 1961 designed to remove children from Cuba whose parents actively opposed Fidel Castro's new government, out of concern for the children's safety. A total of 14,000 children were transferred to the U.S. through this initiative; this was only a small part of a larger migration of Cuban citizens fleeing to the U.S. during that time (Kapos). The contentious relationship between the U.S. and the Cuban government since that point has situated most Cuban immigrants from that period as permanent residents/citizens of the U.S.

Water literally recalls the voyage between Cuba and the U.S. but it also symbolizes the fluidity of *nepantla*, where one is churned between multiple modes of being without being able to anchor to anything concrete. In the end of the dance all four dancers lay sprawled and lifeless, washed up along the shore. Their fullness, represented in their lost clothing, is left behind. They arrive on the shore incomplete, and in contrast to the vital, sometimes even frantic but always constant motion of before, the dancers are instable, calculating as they try to recompose themselves. They stand up, turning their backs to the audience to create a modest bit of privacy. Bending down to scoop at the

unseen waves splashing against their feet they lift their cupped hands up over their heads, and as though their hands are filled with water, they wipe them over their heads. This self-baptism implies a new birth on the shores of a distant land, a new birth that is quietly and privately accepted although it is performed simultaneously by all four dancers. In the final moment, the two women fall like tired trees back into the abyss. Their partners extend quickly to reach for them, catching them under the shoulders as they near the ground. There they stay, the women gently rocked by their support as though floating aimlessly as the lights fade out.

Gutierrez's notion of "bewitched silence," which she introduced in the program note, is the most compelling aspect of her work. Although the music is significantly rich and fully audible as is the continuous movement and breath of the dancers, there is a sort of melancholy quietude that is entirely palpable. The dance evokes a surrealness that emphasizes the isolation and despondency of the journey from shore to shore. The end does not provide closure, instead it haunts, requiring the audience to ponder whether or not these figures will move forward or if they will remain suspended and without an impetus to continue on.

The eternal awakening summoned in the title is about coming to terms; the light that Gutierrez speaks of is not an illumination of jovial resolution rather it is about accepting the conditions of *nepantla*: of always existing in between. Albright suggests that, "In order to retell a life in performance, one must also stage the history of one's own body. That double discourse reverberates within the representation, at once asserting the

somatic reality of experience while also foregrounding its discursive nature” (120).

Double discourse in this instance refers to the constructedness of autobiography in relationship to the simple play-by-play of life events, both of which are present in the performance of one’s own story. Gutierrez’s dance functions precisely to stage the corporeal experience of her own life, making connections to a physical process of transference between cultures, but more evidently revealing the necessary cultural negotiations of *nepantla* that make the journey complex.

I REMEMBER HIM PATTING THE MASA

The full company of dancers gracefully enters from the wings in tiers, spreading across the stage and sliding to the floor, each dancer occupying an individual pool of light. Lying on the ground they all begin to squirm as if the floor cannot provide enough friction for them to manage to stand against it. Eventually however, each dancer locates his or her legs, and with gentle caution and in turn, they press upward against an invisible force that attempts to weigh them down. On occasion, a dancer manages to stay upright long enough to perform a short vignette. Some of the choreography is gestural, as when one dancer scoops a small item off the ground keeping it safely tucked in the palm of her hand, while other moments are more abstract, angular and rigid, or soft and fluid. When all the dancers have managed to stand, they begin telling personal stories. Uncontrollably, however, the hands of the dancers keep jumping up to cover their mouths, stilling their bodies and ending their stories. They are unable to finish speaking and their silence and seclusion from one another ultimately leaves them defeated. The pressure that held them

to the floor initially vanquishes them yet again, and each in turn is pressed downward. Instead of struggling, they lay curled tightly into a fetal position, the energy to fight extinguished.

While the choreography in Manzanales' *Azucar Cruda* suggests that the individual dancers represent different experiences, the force that acts on each dancer equally molds them into a unified form. The assimilationist quality of this force speaks volumes about the ways in which individuals from varied [Latino] backgrounds are pressured to maintain a conformity that allows little room for the expression of distinct experiences. The dancers are blocked from speaking and pressured to uphold an air of silence around their own personal stories, causing them to outwardly espouse a tame and homogenized identity. The entrapment between conformity and discrete expression leaves these individuals neither part of a functional community nor able to express their personal identity. They are stuck in the middle space, neither here nor there, living in a *nepantla* state.

For Manzanales, community is first and foremost in her work. This dance piece is designed for the entire Luna Negra company, and while not collaboratively-devised, the work was highly inclusive of the input from the performers throughout the choreographic process. Manzanales' relationship to the company dancers is markedly more intimate due to her long relationship with the company as a dancer as well as her employment as the company rehearsal director at the time that the work was created (Manzanales). *Azucar Cruda* captures what she was after from herself and the performers— the optimistic

possibilities that arise from exposing the imperfect. She wanted to create a shared space where individual dancers felt comfortable and compelled to be themselves and to tell their own stories without having to polish the edges or make their stories fit together. She wanted to build a home for those who by virtue of their racial and ethnic backgrounds do not always feel as though they have a place to belong.

In the making of this piece, Manzanales requested that her performers answer the question: Where do you come from? For some, like Manzanales herself, this question spoke to more nostalgic images of childhood, family, and locality. For others this question stimulated memories of experiential trials that proved generative of personal identity (Manzanales). Each dancer contributed a small selection of choreography to the final production representing his or her own cultural experience. Dancer Veronica Guadalupe reflected on the personal nature of this experience stating that it gave her and the other performers an opportunity to learn about one another personally within the context of Latina/o culture, thusly expanding their sense of shared community (Guadalupe).

The *Latina Choreographers Project* also invited an exploration of self. Its mission to promote contemporary Latina voices is a strong call to search for what such voices, previously lacking a designated platform, might say. Participating choreographers are granted an opportunity not only to develop their own sense of selves in a culturally defined space but to converse with others attempting the same undertaking. Michelle Manzanales claims (with excitement still detectable in her voice) that when ask to

participate in the project “it was a little daunting because I feel that it is a huge thing and what does that mean— contemporary Latino/Latina?” she continues, “The conclusion that I came to was that it’s in me, I’m not producing it... and the more honest that I am in my work then that [Latino] culture will come through.” This reliance on self-definition rather than external definition is what differentiates Luna Negra artistically from its predecessor, Ballet Hispanico. The company does not try to present Latino-ness rather it just *is* Latino. Manzanales determination to depend on innate personal knowledge and experience to communicate her Latina identity is reflected in dancer Guadalupe’s explanation of how she reconciled her Latina identity with the goals of the company. Guadalupe stated “This was a place where it [Latina] wasn’t a role, it was just who I was” (Guadalupe).

Manzanales’ piece for the project, *Azucar Cruda*, like the work of Gutierrez, explores notions of home and liminality with a presentation that trends toward an optimistic sense of declared space for the border-crosser. The dance does not define Latina/o identity in terms of stereotypes or theatrical renderings of Latino traditions or cultural practices. Instead the piece functions to illuminate the minutia of the everyday experience of Latino/a life through different moving tableaux. Some tableaux depict individual performers going about daily tasks through abstracted movement, while other dancers are arranged in pairs to illustrate different encounters. Each image is distinct: in one circle a lone woman hurriedly scrubs at the floor, while in another a male dancer repeatedly attempts to garner the support of his male companion although the support

continually fails him. Each vignette emerged out of the autobiographical reflections and contributions of the dancers in rehearsal. They abstractly reference the patting of masa, or the gathering of freshly dropped pecans in a grandmother's backyard, among other treasured or tumultuous past moments.

Manzanales' personal presence in her piece stems from the mourning of her grandfather's passing. To Manzanales, her grandfather, who served as the primary caretaker in the family, was also the primary source of cultural knowledge. She recalls a strong generational pressure to assimilate into white culture by relaying her mother's experience with the public school system which assigned citizenship grades to students, deducting for "anti-American" offenses like the use of the Spanish language. She recognizes the detrimental effects of such practices through the loss of her grandfather's generation. Furthermore, Manzanales directly employs the term "no lander," in reference to her Mexican-American identity expressing anxiety around her inability to fully pass on either side of the border (Manzanales). Her Mexican-American identity differentiates her from U.S. culture but her American-ness prevents her from participating fully with Mexican communities, particularly those who include fluent Spanish speakers.

The negotiation of culture for Manzanales is thus a negotiation with the memory of her grandfather. She stages this negotiation through two dancers standing in pools of light adjacent to one another. They stare at each other across the empty black space between them. One tosses an imaginary line to the other who reacts to the illusory cast, rippling to the floor as it strikes her. These two are remembering one another and

affecting each other in the process though they are still unable to breach the solitude of their own memory space. In this instance there is no differentiation between remember-er and remembered— any concept of the present moment in relation to a moment past is washed out. The dance marks the ways that histories are inscribed on and remembered through the body. Time is of no consequence, and the isolation of these memories from each other, as indicated through the lighting, makes it difficult for a cohesive narrative or experience to emerge. For Manzanales, memory is a place to go to find grounding; the immateriality of memory however ensures that such grounding is never secured. The negotiation between memory, longing, and belonging is a negotiation that may never be resolved. Manzanales moves to build a community around this shared experience of the no-lander as an alternate place to ground herself.

By the end of the dance the audience witnesses a fractured and estranged group of individuals, their paths crossing only momentarily, ultimately leaving them in solitude yet again. This sense of isolation is developed throughout the work. There exists an isolation from memories past, an isolation from others nearby, and even an isolation from one's own desire to speak. The dancers are all caught in a space between telling and remembering, a middle space that conjures *nepantla*. Such middle ground is instable, tiresome, and lonesome. As the boundaries of the light between the dancers melt away, they experiment through the space by gesturing out between more pedestrian explorations until the ensemble is gesturing in tandem. Able to acknowledge one another, they come together finding support, suspension, and companionship in one another.

The sweetness of this sanguine finish, as indicated by the title, is moderated by the rawness of the stories presented. The accounts given throughout are lyrical and beautifully danced although not always pleasurable or gratifying. Many dancers in their vignettes express rage, frustration, yearning; some even fight, while some must rely entirely on others to carry them. Manzanales affirms that “when people are that forthcoming it is so precious— and that to me is that sort of sweetness... We desensitize and cut off the ugly parts but I was embracing those parts more, those to me are actually very beautiful.” For Manzanales, the crudeness of our autobiographies is exactly what makes them worthy of being told and loved.

Moreover the personal autobiographies in Manzanales’ work are attached to the real bodies on stage. The bodies are clearly raced, encompassing all variations of skin tone from fair to dark. Albright suggests that through performance of autobiography:

The audience is forced to deal directly with the history of that body in conjunction to the history of their own bodies. This face-to-face interaction is an infinitely more intense and uncomfortable experience which demands that the audience engage with their own cultural autobiographies, including their own histories of racism, sexism, and ablism. (121)

As positioned under the *Latina Choreographers Project*, race and ethnicity become an entirely unavoidable component in the reading of this work. Moreover, the stories presented in actuality belong to the bodies telling them. The audience is explicitly asked to contextualize their visual experience through a racialized lens as they look upon the differently shaded bodies moving across the stage. While Manzanales’ abstracted choreography refuses marking the body with conventionally racialized movement, the

stories told by the individuals, like the dancer who pats masa between her palms, or the woman scrubbing the floor, each recall real life Latino bodies. The dancers' bodies on stage are referents to the dancers' experiences off stage.

Although the staging of *Azucar Cruda* for the *Latina Choreographers Project* culmination concert was not composed entirely of original cast members, the dancers throughout the multiple iterations of the work both come to know one another through overlapping residencies in the company as well as through the embodiment of each other's stories. Most profoundly realized in Manzanales work is the community that she creates in the arc of her choreography which is doubly reflected through the creation of a community that lives beyond the dance. By allowing the dance to represent the human stories present onstage, the stories consequently become known in and amongst the performers. The somewhat "easy" ending portraying a joyous and happy community might be construed as "trite," to use Manzanales' own word, but instead it is made significant because it is made real. Her work is the performative utterance that renders into being what it claims to present.

Manzanales' piece epitomizes the ambitions of *Luna Negra* through her employment of a methodology designed around inclusivity, communal values, and attention to personal agency. The final image of *Azucar Cruda* is an address to the audience in which the dancers blanketing the space enact the sign of the cross, completing the gesture with their hands held to their hearts. This ritualized gesture is offered as a blessing of peace but also as a prayer of protection. The space becomes

sanctified in a shared moment between performers and audience, and all present are implicated in an imagined future that proposes mutual recognition and support.

ON AMBIGUITY AND THE UNREMARKED

Like Gutierrez's piece, Manzanales' avoids the marvel of individual and artistic spectacle. Dance critic Zachary Whittenburg calls the work "a rich visual experience with a sensory residue that stays firm in the mind even without any anchors of image or shape" (Whittenburg). This commonality of approach between both works discussed in this chapter speaks to what Ananya Chatterjea finds in the choreography of Jawole Willa Jo Zollar, particularly in reference to her work *Nyabinghi Dreamtime*. Chatterjea observes that along with a politic of resistance "there is also a deliberate attempt to move the piece away from a sense of spectacle, or the sense of a "tradition-on-display" (147). She references Zollar's work in conjunction to the earlier work of Katherine Dunham who used a more overt approach in staging traditional ritual as spectacle.

As contemporary women of color Gutierrez and Manzanales, like Zollar, are "talking back," to coin a phrase from bell hooks. Their work gives them voice, breaking the silence imposed on them through colonial and neocolonial enterprises that render them unworthy of speaking. In doing so, they are careful to not invite the audience to imagine that their performance of Other is for the purpose of entertainment by marking their work with spectacular demonstrations of racialized authenticity. They are instead speaking to the audience, implicating them, and promoting a dialogic intervention that negates a politically neutral exchange between the performer and the viewer. The

“unremarkable” moments when offered as personal testimony become “remarkable” without the need to doctor the exhibition for aggrandizement. The women of the *Latina Choreographers Project* are thusly positioned to push the challenge of visibly beyond cultural spectacle and into a more reflective and contemplative space that calls into being the very story that it tells.

This active space-making is about substantiating a place for the no-landers, border-crossers, and those whose cultural positionality leaves them stranded in the middle. The lack of visual indicators that signify totality and absolution, for some, constitute a lack of choreographic distinction. About Gutierrez’s *Eterno Despertar*, Lynn Shapiro, a critic writing for *Dance Magazine* comments that “She [Gutierrez] mirrors Madreus’ music with flowing sequences that, while pleasant to watch, never crystallizes into a central idea” (Shapiro). Crystallization is a quality not only desired but also expected by Shapiro who disregards the work as the “least distinctive” of the evening. I argue that a lack of definition is exactly the substance of Gutierrez’s work— it drifts suspended and unrealized, unable to translate into concrete answers. Shapiro occupies a social position of privilege, different from that of the choreographer and many of the dancers on the stage. She does not read the work in terms of its cultural location, focusing instead on the work’s value in purely technical terms, finding only the execution of the dancing worthy of mention. Instead of “crystalizing” or waiting to be claimed at either pole, these choreographer’s claim themselves as they are in their work; ambiguous and untethered.

Though their dances are in many ways autobiographical, they are not exclusively owned, allowing for others to share in the emotional dissonance and tenacity of the work. They repaint and make explicit an imagined future. Is the future one of uncertainty as Gutierrez suggests with her abstract figures and abstract movement, or is it one of perseverance as posed by Manzanales? Ultimately the divergent choices indicate that there can be no knowing, or perhaps no singular way forward for any one individual. Manzanales' talisman of the cross sends the audience and the work in to the unknown with only a simple spiritual invocation to guide it.

CONCLUSION

The Chicana border writer/artist has finally come to market. The problem now is how to resist corporate culture while asking for and securing its patronage; how to get the dollars without resorting to "mainstreaming" the work...The access to privilege that comes with the bucks and the recognition can turn the artist on her ear in a nepantla spin.

-Gloria Anzaldúa ("Chicana Artists" 37)

When Eduardo Vilaro set out to establish the *Latina Choreographers Project* by bringing in female underwriters to support new work by Latina artists, he envisioned the effort as part of a holistic attempt to shift the dance field toward the inclusion of minority voices. By developing a platform for the voices of women, he also created a shared location for their expressions of Latina consciousness to spark dialog through communal reflection on their markedly different works. Through the arrangement of fiscal support by female benefactors from the Chicago arts community, Pamela Crutchfield, Maria C. Bechily, and Sondra Berman Epstein, Vilaro made a great stride to sidestep what

Anzaldúa poses above as the next challenge to the Chicana [Latina] whose work has entered the main stage arena of artistic exchange. By assuaging these artists of masculinized authority throughout the creation of their work, Vilaro tempered the traditional power dynamics between commercial exploits and artistic autonomy.

Represented in the project was Cuban native/Chicagoan Maray Gutierrez; Michelle Manzanales, a Mexican-American from Houston, TX; Colombian-Belgian Annabelle Lopez Ochoa; and on the project's fringe, Nancy Turano, an Italian-American. Importantly there are a number of overlapping themes between the dance pieces although these women have exceptionally disparate relationships to Latinidad. For some, the deconstruction of icons provided the most compelling exercise in the process of excavating beneath quintessential Latino facades. For others, the strong recollections of home and the feeling of not being able to assert a defined location characterized their investigations of cultural identity.

Because the specific autobiographical details that I have collected for the purposes of this study are not always readily available to audience members, it important to consider the role of cultural memory as it is constituted through these dance works. The umbrella notion of the *Latina Choreographers Project* already situates the pieces within a narrative of cultural specificity regardless of what is put onstage by the choreographers. The framework demands that these dances be considered in regard to cultural representation. While the choreographers draw from memories of the past to formulate their representation of Latinidad, the dancers enact and dispense new revisions

of those memories in the present. These enactments, viewed as cultural moorings, signify a continuing dialog between past and present. Deborah Paredez posited that “both memory and performance defy traditional notions of temporality by simultaneously repeating *and* revising cultural scripts or scenarios” (8). By reliving past moments through a corporal re-visioning in the public space of the theatre, memories are reconstituted by the agents that fulfill them for the witnessing of the audience.

By analyzing the dances staged by these artists, I partake in the dialog Vilaro intended to activate around the contemporary Latina body. In solidarity with a Latina dance community, I claim these choreographers and their work as part of my own cultural memory. My investment in their stories, and the return of my interpretation of their choreography, ultimately becomes a site of cultural meaning making between the embodied representation, my witnessing, and the bodily experience of writing. Through all of these progressions: from the initial cultural explorations of the choreographers, the rehearsal process and the creation of the pieces, the dance performance, the public reception of the work, interviews and interactions with those individuals involved in the project, archival recording, and my tactile response to their work on these pages, the conversation about what is it to be a contemporary Latina is undergoing a continuous re-articulation. This passing through, characterized by the ambiguous *nepantla*, helps to realize the diachronic nature of Latina identity thereby refuting the antiquated notions of essentialized Latina icons.

Each choreographer managed to present an alternative way of imagining the Latina dancing body. As Vilaro exclaimed, “I am not *West Side Story*.” In multiple interviews, the artists that Vilaro commissioned supported that notion by rejecting the “Ole! Ole!” — a tired trope that functions to anachronistically locate Latino culture as a would-be obsolete stereotype (Vilaro; Lopez Ochoa; Turano). The emphasis in this project focused on personal reflection and self-definition in a manner that positioned the Latina as culturally distinct within a North American context. A naming device such as Latina, which differentiates regardless of its proclivity for inclusive membership, is a resistive mechanism set against assimilationist practices in the U.S. Through this project the choreographers name themselves, draw their own representations, and in the process start to rewrite the possibilities of political inclusion. The radical politic of the *Latina Choreographers Project* seeks to intervene in the telling of Latina stories. Ana Castillo announces that “Until we are represented, respected, and protected by a society and the laws that govern it, the status of the Chicana” and if may interject: Latina, “will be that of a countryless woman” (41).

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