

ABSTRACT

Title of Thesis: **STAGING SONGS OF MY LIFE:
FIVE APPROACHES TO
CHOREOGRAPHIC EXPLORATIONS**

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This written project explores five approaches to the dance performance event “Songs of My Life.”

The five approaches are based on developing the practical process, deriving from personal experiences, engaging women’s perspectives, reorienting spectators and defining the role of art.

This written work engages the performance event from a Women’s Studies, Critical Studies and Cultural Studies perspective. The project works on deriving theory from the practice of dance and art, as well as using the existing theoretical models as a lens, to gain new perspectives on the choreographic process.

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By

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Thesis project submitted to the Faculty of the Graduate School of the University of Maryland,
College Park, in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of
Master's of Fine Arts in Dance.

2004

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Thanks to Brian Haile, for encouraging me to audition at UMD three years ago and for his continued support. You are my rock. Thanks to Shawn O'Reilly, for putting up with three years of hell as I went through school and for always being there for me. Thanks to my committee members Elizabeth Smigel, Meriam Rosen, Anne Warren, and Alcine Wiltz. Thanks to Caroline Eades and Ted Bain for their support and guidance through out this work. Caroline and Ted's critical expertise was vital in completing this project. Thanks to David Freivogel, Marie Visosky, Phyllis Crowther and Alvin Mayes in the Dance department. Thanks to Katie King, Lynn Bolles, Ryan Shanahan and Bianca Laureano in the Women's Studies department. Thanks to Steve Wamhoff, Lisa Bernstein, Andra Schnabolk, Matthew Huy, Jeremy Pine, Ray Frazier, Emily Berry Bodoh, Harriet Moncure Williams, Julie Miles, Sheila Riley, my friends, my family who have been my backbone through out this tenure. For my family of colleagues at AAC&U, without whom this would not have been possible. For my mother, Violet Rachel Doraisingh, who taught me the value of education and my Father, Swamidoss George Doraisingh who encouraged my love for the arts. For all my friends without whom I would not have been able to complete this degree, Thank You. For my collaborators Brent Lawrence, Rob Chappetta, Kaarli Sundsmo, Danielle Fisco, Javier Varela, Shawn Malone, Molly Sue Welch, Emily Berry Bodoh, J.R. Russ, Talia Dvorah Bar-Cohen, Aaron Jackson and Ludovic Jolivet. For Pamela Matthews one of my first dance instructors, who helped me begin this journey in dance.

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Introduction

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At the still point of the turning world. Neither flesh nor fleshless;
Neither from nor towards; at the still point, there the dance is,
But neither arrest nor movement. And do not call it fixity,
Where past and future are gathered. Neither movement from nor towards,
Neither ascent nor decline. Except for the point, the still point,
There would be no dance, and there is only the dance.

...

T.S. Eliot, Excerpt from "Burnt Norton"

This written work serves as a complement to my MFA final performance project “Songs of My Life.” I trace the journey of the project from conception to the actual performance event and continue to the questions and new threads that came alive through the performance itself. What began as a quest to stage club dance or to create a simulation of a club experience took on some of the larger questions of social justice both within the academy and in our society. As this transition occurred, I realized that analyzing the trajectory of this project with multiple viewpoints would give me tools to add to my palette as an informed and engaged choreographer and dancer. In this written exploration, I use multiple perspectives such as personal voice, critical theory, choreographic processes, and audience participation to address the larger social justice questions that work alongside my interest in dance.

In the first chapter, I explore the personal and practical process of bringing a concept to life. I address some of the challenges, the solutions and the compromises that were made both by me and my collaborators to reach our end goal. In the second chapter, I address some of the influences that changed my artistic process and approach and helped me to redefine my role as a choreographer and dancer. In the third chapter, I delve into the Women’s Studies framework to look at issues of gender, sexuality and power in the club scene at large and specifically in my choreographic process as well. I examine my role as a male choreographer working with female dancers in terms of some of the power differences and also look at the ways in which my thinking could still be filtered through the mainstream definitions of women’s roles. In the fourth chapter, I look at how categorization simultaneously serves as a way of meaning-making and as an oppressive system to perpetuate the dominant and elitist structures particularly within the academy. I frame my definition of art as a participatory experience, one that is immediate and alive as opposed to elitist and removed theater experiences. In the concluding chapter, I look at how art, particularly popular art forms such as club and social dance can serve as an alternative to gendered and oppressive

language systems. I offer dance as a strong alternate to language that allows for this possibility and serves as an agent of change. Dance is able to circumvent language and to connect via a kinetic, visceral and organic means that does not separate or privilege the mind or the body. I posit that this union of the mind and body will allow us to navigate the societal and political systems within academia and society in ways language cannot. Thus, I argue that dance is one of the key tools to social change.

Chapter 1: Developing the practical process

“It was a high counsel that I once heard given to a young person, ‘Always do what you are afraid to do.’”

Ralph Waldo Emerson

“Songs of My Life” took shape from my frequent visits to the local-area nightclubs in the last few years. During these visits, I would participate in and observe the events on the dance floor, in regard to the movement, the relationships, and the communal feeling throughout the space. I was enthralled by the sophisticated level of movement that the club dancers elicited from their bodies and from each other. They would often create long dance dialogues that were very intricate and beautiful, engaging to both participant and spectator. As I began comparing the club movement with the movement vocabulary in the MFA program at the University of Maryland, I began seeing similar themes emerge between the academic and communal dance forms.

These communal movement themes ranged from personal experiences, signature movements, idiosyncratic gestures and habits to the shared experiences of friendship, love, and the struggles of life. Popular songs had offered a cultural bridge for me when I arrived as a recent immigrant to the United States. Similarly, the popular songs, the steady dance beats, and the subdued lighting of the club scene provided a way to blend into the collective movement, or, if one wished, to emerge from it and take center stage. I was also heavily influenced by the Indian Bharata Natyam concept of dance as a fusion of theater, music, and movement, and I began wondering what the combination of popular music, popular dance and post-modern dance would look like. Additionally, my visit to Cuba was critical in shaping a view of dance that was participatory and popular, while serving as a strong social and political tool. All these experiences came together to inform my project “Songs of My Life.” Once this concept was initially established, I moved forward to consider the set designs, music selection, and movement choices that could be as close to the real experience as possible.

I wanted the performance space to be a fluid environment. Therefore, I considered the lobby area as well as the dance theatre space as I developed the concept for the set. I wanted to influence the mood of the participants from the time they entered the Clarice Smith Center. I

wanted them to be in the mindset of going to a club, of being privy to relationships in the clubs. I used texts from the popular love advice column “Advice For The Under 30 Crowd” in *The Washington Post* so that participants could read these letters while they were waiting to enter the space. It was my intention that participants would recognize themselves or someone they knew in the letters before the concert event and then make connections between the advice columns and the performance later on. To create the club effect, we worked on creating a space that was not demarcated as stage/audience space. I hung empty beer, wine, and liquor bottles from the ceiling to reinforce the presence of art in unusual or heretofore unconsidered objects or forms. Similar to the notion of bottles as set design, I expected the communal setting would allow participants a new appreciation of the signification of club dance. I was also aware of the role that alcohol played in allowing people to relax and dance at the clubs. To simulate this sensation of freedom, I worked with the Clarice Smith Center to have a functioning bar in the event space. The alcohol put the audience at ease and also enabled them to get up and participate in the communal sections. Having a live pianist at the “bar/club” also helped add to this effect of a social/communal gathering. The few chairs we had were arranged cabaret-style on the periphery of the space and set in such a way so that no particular space was given special focus. Thus, I created a simulation of the club by fusing the elements in the set design. The lighting also was subdued to strengthen this effect of club space.

With regard to music, recognizing the connections most people have to popular songs, I created a staged club experience that incorporated popular songs as the score. I picked songs from the Top-40 lists in the past ten years with the intention of tapping into participants’ memories associated with these songs. The public is able to translate their use of language into theater easily but often does not make the same association between everyday movement and the movement in post-modern dance. I used the narratives in the songs as a background or counterpoint to the movement to provide an entry point into the dance. I developed this entry further by audience

participation in the club dance section so that they could then begin looking for the narrative in the movement based on their movement experiences and not have to rely on words anymore. [Please refer to the program notes in Appendix A.] I used Spanish-language popular songs because I wanted the participants to experience my journey from disorientation, to understanding and finally to enjoyment of the Salsa and Merengue musical and dance structures. To prevent too much uneasiness, the Salsa and Merengue sections were interspersed with several American popular songs throughout the evening. Thus, I created a situation where the participants would be able to enjoy themselves, yet were forced to consider new experiences periodically whether it was in the form of music, interaction, or dance.

In creating a movement structure, I chose not to create a hierarchy between the club dance sections and the choreographed sections. The challenge was to create a narrative that was clear but did not overpower the participatory sections. Initially, I had a hard time figuring out how to do this. After I worked for several weeks and had a sizable chunk of movement, I invited Meriam Rosen to discuss what I had created until this point. Her responses and questions helped me clarify my original goals and helped me to look at the work I had done to this point with my original goals in mind. I discovered that I had created a traditional post-modern dance vocabulary and that I had set it up in a separated and demarcated stage space that was mostly frontal in its spatial orientation. Returning to my original goals, I set out to rework the movement toward evoking the club scene in a much more communal, non-hierarchical way. Her clarification also helped me realize that these “relationship dances,” whether in the club or in life, do not occur without interaction with the community that surrounds the relationships. Thus, I began looking at what the whole group was doing at any given moment in the evening in relation to the focal point of the dance. For example, even when one duet was foregrounded, the other dancers had to stay in character and continue to interact with the members of the duet and the other participants around them. Simple suggestions

such as interaction between the dancers and participants began tightening and clearing up a lot of the confusion in the choreography. This shift was also better aligned with my experience of dance in Cuba as an interactive medium. The litmus test, of course, would come later with the introduction of the unknown element: the participatory audience.

I focus on a few specific sections of movement within my project to trace the journey from conception to the finished product. The particular sections that I wish to focus on are on the opposite ends of the spectrum ranging from detailed choreography to guided improvisation. The duet “Hey Pretty” between Aaron Jackson and Molly Sue Welch was originally choreographed for Connie Fink and Daniel Singh in a typical proscenium setting. When I began working on the concert, I had thought of performing in the role but decided that I needed to step out of the work to examine its structure better. Jackson agreed to perform the role at the last minute, and I worked with him for a long time on the movement and the structure of the first section. After working with him for a while and getting frustrated, I realized that I was trying to impose my performance preferences on him rather than freeing him to interpret for himself. That was a strong transitional moment in which I realized that I had to not only let go of the duet, but now that I had sketched the work out, I also had to trust my dancers to make informed choices. The strategic necessity of this revelation became increasingly clear as all the dances were done in the round so the dancers were surrounded on all sides by audience members; I therefore needed to trust each night that the dancers could adapt to the variability of the audience’s arrangement. Not only did the space and interaction change the movement in the duet, but wearing street shoes changed the movement as well. (Originally, “Pretty” was performed barefoot.) Thus, the intent of the movement became more important than the specificity of the movement. I worked with Jackson and Welch on the intent of the duet and let them make choices as to how they would accommodate the space, the audience and their new personas.

In the end, the duet was the richer for granting this personal and creative freedom to the dancers, particularly during the moments when they pierced through the duet space into the communal space. I also brought in some of my colleagues in the Women's Studies program to help me look at movement as text and to gain their perspective on the duets in this section. They raised some interesting questions about the ways in which I had handled the movement as a male, and this helped me refocus the movement with Welch and Kaarli Sundsmo's input. Their probing helped me shape Welch's persona as a stronger character, but one which is still aware of the price of being independent. Their guidance also allowed me to create an intimate duet between Welch and Sundsmo that did not tokenize lesbian relationships. As this was developing, I worked with the other cast members so that they could react at times to try to stop the movement, at times to ignore it, and at times to show that they realize what was happening but could not do anything about it. Thus, what began as an isolated duet on the proscenium stage, became an orchestrated ensemble work in the round theater space. The work had the potential of begin interrupted or changed by the audience members as well. Choreographic intent became more important than specific steps.

The rope duets "Ingénue" and "Come Away with Me," that took place at the periphery of the space as an example of structured improvisation and was my attempt to reverse the center-margin duality by moving the performance to the margins of the space. Anyone who wanted a good look at the dance on the ropes had to stand in the center or they would only get a partial view based on where they were in the theater. The ropes themselves constrained the movement and the space that the dancers could explore. For this section, I decided that the best approach would be to figure out what was comfortable and possible for the dancers rather than choreographing the section. The dancers improvised for several weeks on the ropes, and from those improvisations we extracted little sections that worked well. We collected these sections and began creating a loose movement narrative. Of course, we had to work with a fluid structure because we were aware that the audience

members would be very close to the performance space and the dancers needed to be able to accommodate that.

This section was particularly influenced by my observation of the “wallflowers” in a club setting. While these people may be quieter and subdued, the movements and the relationship that they are experiencing are just as beautiful and interesting to watch. This was one of those “light-bulb” moments for me when after a long spell of dancing in a club, I stopped in the middle of the dance floor to just look around and see what was happening. It was a surreal moment when I felt like I was the eye of the hurricane, with the stillness at the center and all the activity and the motion was at the periphery. I wanted to capture some of the motion of these “wallflowers” and have the audience members pause to look at the subtlety and the beauty that was happening in the outskirts.

I also realized that the two different couples had different potentials and strengths. Therefore, I gave the first section, which was more complicated and involved, to Talia Bar-Cohen and Brent Lawrence and created a simpler, quieter duet for Danielle Fisco and J.R. Russ. This worked out as a good compromise in which each couple could bring out the tensions, beauty, and fun in their relationships in different ways. Along with the improvisation of the movement, and with the loss of control of the space, another element where we had to give up control was the ropes. Because of various things such as gravity, motion, and weight, the ropes themselves were improvising during each performance. Sometimes they would get tangled in unexpected ways allowing the dancers to come up with creative ways to untangle the ropes through movement much like what happens in relationships in social interactions and in real life.

The closing image to this section was particularly important as it exemplified the sense of feeling caught in a space, relationship or time-frame to me. The image was that of Fisco spinning endlessly on one of the rope swings, and I used this as a way of setting up the end of the performance as well. This sense of being bound by one’s friends, relationships, social encounters

and life in general is brought out throughout each section and the performance ends with Sundsmo in the same spiraling of the rope swing. The very things that ground and anchor us in life also act as the boundaries and cages that we have to negotiate in order to grow and make new connections. I used my post-modern dance training as an anchor and guiding structure when I needed it, but I was also able to find the freedom and newness in club dance. Because of the involvement of the peripheral space and the ropes, these sections were much less structured than the first section that had detailed steps and orientations in space. This section was an improvisation between the dancers, the ropes, and the audience in the periphery, in limited space and turned the focus to the margins instead of the center.

The movement that was almost completely unscripted and unstructured was the club dance sections in which the audience could participate. This was the leap of faith I made when I conceived “Songs of My Life.” I decided that instead of showing the joy of the communal feeling in Salsa, Merengue and club dance forms, I would have my audience members experience it. At this point, I was making a very strong choice as the director of this show. Realizing that audience members typically come with the expectations of observing, I created a situation where they were forced to dance. I had to be careful when crossing this line, and my dancers and I worked through several possible scenarios. I also took my dancers to various clubs on different nights so that they could get over the fear of asking a stranger to get up and dance with them. I wanted them to be able to figure out how they could be in character but still continue to engage the audience members. Because dancers do not typically break the fourth wall, this was challenging for all of us, as this was the most vulnerable a dancer could be. We were open to rejection when we asked someone to dance with us. The experience in the clubs was crucial for my dancers to get over some of their inhibitions and to learn to make eye contact when they performed instead of having an impersonal gaze. Ultimately, what made the performance more human and personal was the ability of my

dancers to put themselves in a vulnerable position, to interact with the audience, to make eye contact with them and to ask them to dance.

Because I also realized the valuable performance qualities of my club dancers and wanted to bring some of those abilities to the surface as well, I had some of my club dancers teach the dance majors how to Salsa and Merengue. Similar to the switching of the center/margin, the role of expert/novice was flipped in this experiment. From the pedagogical viewpoint, I shifted the hierarchy of an academic training and created an equal footing between communal dance forms and academic dance forms. This was informed by my use and application of Women's Studies, where, for example, oral histories and popular culture are mined for social, political and artistic strategies. The community dancers' ideas of what makes a good dance partner or a good dancer also were eye-opening experiences for my dancers and me. Because academic dancers have such a strong stage presence, they often have problems ceding control and allowing another person to lead them. Some of the feedback we got from the community dancers was: "Go where I lead you; don't hold back. Trust me. Don't be stiff. Listen to the music, but don't let it take over the dance. Go have a beer and come back." The last comment was particularly important because it showed how some people needed alcohol to relax and trust their body. As someone engaged in movement studies, I found this an interesting observation on how much our society has succeeded in subordinating the body and our instincts.

Academic dancers and community dancers both counter the superiority of the mind and language, and thus function on the fringes of society: they do this by choosing to use movement instead of language as a communication tool. Movement is a powerful tool and often is a revolutionary strategy for undoing the oppression of language. I realized that the themes and the underlying principles of movement are similar in both academic dance and communal dance even though the venue and the vocabulary are different. The themes of performance, enjoyment,

communication, personal gestures, and signature styles all work in differential tensions in either environment. Therefore, my ultimate goal was to tap into these possibilities and similarities of club dance and to do so without trying to “purify” club dance. Although I was still only creating a simulation of the club experience, I expected the simulation to create a new lens for the participants to see dance in all its forms as a valuable asset and as an alternative to language as a cultural artifact. By experiencing the movement rather than watching it, I hoped that the audience would then be able to translate this kinetic experience to absorb the post-modern dance sections as well without reverting to a linguistic entry point. I wanted them to enter dance through the same visceral, experiential means that I use, and I did as much as I could to create that instinctual kinetic connection. Dance then became the cultural artifact, just as valuable as language. However, this was enabled by the words in the popular songs, in the advice columns, even in the casual vernacular that was used in the biographies of the dancers in the program. I started where the audience members were able to absorb this material and then moved beyond to a deeper, non-linguistic and kinetic understanding of dance and the body as medium of communication.

I believe that dance has an untapped power to act as a tool for social justice, because it is able to fill the gaps that language cannot bridge and because it is not bound or gendered like language. The syntax or semantics for movement systems is a more fluid one, based on lived experiences, as opposed to something that is transmitted like language. This fluidity has allowed dance to survive so many iterations of change, and this fluidity allows dance to manifest itself as an academic and a communal entity simultaneously. Most importantly, dance allows for the individual voice to speak its part and to contribute to the fabric of society at the same time. Dance refuses to accept the mind-body split and instead situates intellect in the body and the body as a source of knowledge. Thus, dance is in direct opposition to language, which tries to silence the body. As a dancer, I find this aspect of movement the most important and interesting—movement is able to

subvert the effects of language and to give marginalized bodies more societal weight and agency. Movement begins to speak for itself; language is no longer needed as a mediator.

In conclusion, what began as a look into the similarities between popular dance and academic dance turned toward implicit issues of social justice. By framing the evening as an entertainment, I attempted to raise deeper questions about hierarchy, the performance space, and the role of alcohol in enabling movement. The culmination of this project is a beginning of my journey toward equity and social justice, not just in life, but in movement, choreography and performance. I did not want to think about social justice issues abstractly; I wanted to engage in them through my movement. Women's Studies, because it is in theory grounded in the body, allowed me to begin working in the body for social change. Dance, therefore, becomes the revolutionary tool in my developing journey in choreography and performance. Dance itself becomes the framework for looking at societal structures as well as the means for undoing the structures of hierarchy in society. Dance serves as both the content and the form through which we are able to examine our lives critically. Revolution is change. Change is movement. Movement is dance.

Chapter 2: Deriving from Personal Experience

“Said a whiting to a snail ... come and join the dance. Will you, won't you, will you, won't you, won't you join the dance?”

Lewis Carroll, Alice in Wonderland

As I conceived “Songs of My Life,” I wanted to create an event that would bring together my various interests in dance, theater, performance studies, literary/cultural criticism, film studies, digital media, Women’s Studies and queer studies. My own involvement with Bharata Natyam, an Indian classical dance form that is interdisciplinary, the years of observing and participation in club dance forms, and finally my recent experience in Cuba where dance has become a way of life have all helped shape my orientation towards dance and theater. De-stratification of dance, art, disciplines, and forms became the framework under which I began assembling this project. Categories, including the ones mentioned above, serve in multiple ways, often making systems invisible just as much as they render visible heretofore-undiscovered ideas. By blurring the categories of participation/reception, social identities, and the notion of dance as art versus social dance, I hoped to frame questions and dialogue, not just in the content of my narrative, but wanted to do so within, among and through the various artistic forms that I was morphing into an event. I also wanted to render visible the issues of power that categorization brings with it.

In her letter acknowledging and refusing the National Medal for the Arts, Adrienne Rich, the well-known feminist and social justice advocate wrote, “Like government, art needs the participation of the many in order not to become the property of a powerful and narrowly self-interested minority ... Art needs to grow organically out of a social compost nourishing to everyone.”¹ Rich’s construction of art as a social endeavor vital to and necessary for democracy was a key concept that served as a catalyst for my own work. “Songs of My Life,” was an evening-length project that combined dance and theater, and came together through the participation of the technically trained modern dancers, self-taught community dancers, and the unknown but intentional element—the audience members themselves. The project incorporated text, music (recorded and live), visual media (recorded and live), and dance performances (recorded and live) intermingled with

¹ Adrienne Rich, “Why I Refused the National Medal for the Arts,” Los Angeles Times, 3 Aug. 1997 Book Section.

participatory performance sections in which the audience members joined the members of the company in dance.

One of my goals was to have the participants come away with a personal connection to the text, music, or movement that they were a part of, were creating and were witnessing. Using the noted cognitive development and learning theorist, Howard Gardner's multiple learning models as a framework, I incorporated several entry points.² Textual entry points were based on several popular relationship advice columns such as Carolyn Hax's "Advice for the Under 30 Crowd," Dan Savage's "Savage Love," and "Dear Abby." The musical entry points were mapped using popular songs from the Top-40 lists both in the American and the Latin radio stations. I used songs that were recognizable to the audience members to create a narrative thread. I tapped into the associations audience members had with some of the songs to create a personal connection to the narrative. These songs included "With or Without You" by U2, "Shadow Boxer" by Fiona Apple, "One is the Loneliest Number" by Aimee Mann, "Come Away with Me" by Norah Jones, "Shake that Thang" by SeanPaul, "La Negra Tiene Tumbao" by Celia Cruz, and "Living la Vida Loca" by Ricky Martin, to name a few. The dance entry points were formulated using taped club dance sequences with both community dancers and trained dancers, choreographed modern dance sections, and participatory social dance sections that included the audience members. Visually the participants could watch themselves and the dance directly, in the exposed mirrors of the theater and on the manipulated digital images projected on the screens.

To set the atmosphere, I converted the whole dance theater into a club for the evening complete with bouncers, cabaret tables, posters on the walls, and a functional bar. We invited several community members to be a part of the performance ahead of time by going to the local dance clubs and "auditioning" our potential performers. When the house was opened, the audience

² Howard Gardner, Multiple Intelligences: The Theory in Practice. (NY: Basic Books 1993) 48.

members walked into a space that had enough “clubbers” in random places to prevent any clumping of people. Some of the modern dancers and community dancers had drinks in their hands in order to encourage the audience members to notice the bar and to get a drink if they wanted to do so. I also hoped that having a non-traditional performance with dim lighting would allow the “audience members” to feel less inhibited. The lighting designer worked with me to make sure the performance/participation space did not create any barriers through lighting, such as designating certain spaces for the audience and certain spaces for the performers.

I videotaped both the modern dancers and the community dancers ahead of time in various clubs to use as part of the evening’s visual media. A visual media artist was also recording the live performance in the space, manipulating it, and re-broadcasting it interspersed with the taped club sequences. One of my other goals was to go beyond the time and space continuum that live performances bind us in, and having the visual artist there helped us inhabit and use several different narratives at the same time. Our memories and imaginations are key components in any artistic endeavor, and I used them to make everyone participating in the evening tap into those realms using the text, music, dance, or images as entry points. In particular, I envisioned this happening in two ways. First, when the audience members danced as part of the club scene, they could see themselves projected on huge screens, much as in a real club. Simultaneously, sequences that showed our dancers at various clubs were shown on other screens to create a seamless visual narrative that deftly folded in the past and present with a personal connection to everyone in the space. To continue the narrative while starting new threads, we continued to show the club scenes that included both the taped shots along with the more recent shots with the audience members dancing during the modern dance sections. The power of new media in influencing people has become an accepted category, but what happens when a category is accepted without questions? What happens to the power structure when the media choose sides but relay information as unbiased and impartial?

These are some of the questions I hoped to seed in the event by having multiple cameras showing different perspectives of the same event.

Similar to the boundary crossings taking place in the media and across performance / reception spaces, I wanted to transcend the constraints of age, gender, sexuality, and class labels and to have the event be a liberating and intensely personal experience for everyone. The narrative weaved relationships between the different members in the performance space and challenged stereotypical notions of the perfect couple by having same-sex couples as part of the narratives. I also incorporated texts that challenged these perceptions of the perfect couple—in the posters, in the tablecloths, in the lyrics of the songs, and in the advice columns. By blurring the boundaries between the club sections and the modern dance sections, I wanted the audience to begin to question the need for boundaries and to take a fresh look at stratified social, artistic, and personal events. By creating a communal space in the Dance Theater, where both club dance and modern dance was occurring, I wanted the audience to reconsider definitions of art, art production and art consumption. Is a club dancer who spends weeks and months perfecting her/his signature moves, buys outfits that accentuate those signature moves, and knows that he/she was being videotaped qualitatively different when compared to the trained modern dancer who takes dance classes and puts on a costume for a performance? Is life imitating art or is art imitating life? Our goal was not so much to answer these questions as to create a dialogue that would encourage participants to think about these questions in their day-to-day encounters after the event. From the feedback I received from the audience, faculty, and the dancers, I knew we had achieved this goal.

Indeed, several audience members came up to us after the performance and spoke about how much the experience resonated with them. One young woman was originally born in Latin America and had been adopted early in her life in the United States. She experienced this mix of Latin and American popular songs in an uncomplicated blend that allowed her to make peace with

the two different cultural heritages that she had inherited. Another young audience member mentioned that the performance was a culmination point and served as a catalyst—enabling him to accept his sexuality and to come out as a gay man. Others spoke of how they will definitely be looking at dancers in clubs with a new lens and newfound appreciation.

In Gardner’s learning theory, the ideal learning environment allows learning and teaching to occur simultaneously.³ My modern dancers spoke about the vulnerability they felt when approaching the audience members and the audience members, spoke about those same feelings. Our trained performers grew in unexpected ways. One dancer remarked, “I’ve never had to work on acting while dancing,” while another said, “Now I realize that my face and my hands are very much a part of any dance I am in.” By creating feelings that were mutual as well as personal, the event was transformative in that the collaborators learned from each other and learned to trust each other. The trust and risk-taking would not have been possible in a typical theater format with the “fourth wall” intact. The audience members could watch a modern dancer pretend to flirt, be hopeful when meeting someone for the first time and pretend to experience the pain and fear of rejection, or they could experience all that and more when the dancer walked up to them and asked, “Will you dance with me?” I believe that the latter leaves a lasting impact on the audience member by incorporating their feelings and reactions into the work rather than having them watch a similar scene passively. I could blur boundaries just on stage, or I could cross the boundary of the stage into the lives of the participants and blur the boundaries in a meaningful and personal manner. Reinforcing Gardner’s model, I wanted to use both the form and the content to serve my boundary crossings. I wanted the participant to experience as close to the actual feeling as possible, so that the event has intentional, personal, and lasting meaning for them. Ultimately, I will not survive as a choreographer and dancer without the social compost and investment of my community. I wanted

³ Howard Gardner, Multiple Intelligences: The Theory in Practice, (NY: Basic Books, 1993), 128.

to create this personal connection to and ownership of my company with each one of the participants, so that they will return to challenge my dancers and me to grow mutually.

Chapter 3: Engaging Women's Perspectives

“Women must write through their bodies, they must invent the impregnable language that will wreck partitions, classes, and rhetorics, regulations, and codes, they must submerge, cut through, get beyond the ultimate reserve-discourse, including the one that laughs at the very idea of pronouncing the work ‘silence,’ the one that, aiming for the impossible, stops short before the word ‘impossible’ and writes it as ‘the end.’”

Helene Cixous, The Laugh of Medusa

In this section, I explore how Women's Studies influenced my definition of a praxis where form and content come together as a cohesive whole to help shape my dance concert.

The fusion of theory and practice is key to Women's Studies, and it was also a vital part of my approach to my event in that we tried to look at the complex interaction between the multiple texts that were embedded in my narrative. Some of the issues that were specifically drawn from the Women's Studies work I engaged in were: 1) surfacing silenced voices, 2) questioning the notion of compulsory heterosexuality, 3) countering the dominant mono-narrative with multiple perspectives and countering the male gaze with a feminine perception, 4) interrogating the artificial separation of private versus public—particularly in terms of pleasure, 5) exploring the issues of voice and representation. The discipline of Women's Studies was key in helping me connect the various texts that occur simultaneously and figuring out the tensions and relationships between them.

I apply the related perspectives from Women's Studies and Cultural Studies and methodologies as a way of understanding the marginalization of popular dance forms and how this marginalization is similar to the subordination of the semiotics of the body. This is important to me as a dancer because, by dismissing the body and its contribution to knowledge production, patriarchal systems have managed to push the performing arts to the periphery of the academy. Womanist approaches were particularly helpful in developing my narrative and this event because unlike other theories, the womanist framework grounds theory in the body without essentializing it. Womanist approaches allow for differential tensions and contradictions to inhabit the same space and do not operate in the either/or limited binary scope of the patriarchal model but instead embody a both/and approach. This both/and approach allows traditionally excluded groups a chance to voice opinions that are not always simple or easy. It is not that the end goal is comfort, but it is about working through the discomfort and allowing discomfort to be the grain of sand that allows pearls of discussion to form and be refined.

Virginia Woolf's examination of how women are kept out of the systems of language by restricted time, space, and education gave me a new perspective on the resilience and political nature of women's poetry. This perspective on marginalized voices affected my view of the lyrics in songs, particularly women's songs. It made me question who has time to write his/her socio-political messages in essays, lectures, and books—all prose formats that require time and resources that have traditionally been denied to women. It made me realize how lyrics work by subverting the marginal positions accorded them, by being accessible, and by using language to undo the effects of systems of language itself. This was even more so the case in Latin American popular songs that function as cultural mediation, political messages and boundary crossings in the United States context. For many Latino groups, popular songs are what enable the crossing-over, which in turn raises the question why should they be forced to cross over? This crossing-over ranges from acquiring language, assuming dress codes, and changing movement and body patterns to ones accepted by the mainstream. Why the need to assimilate? Is there is an underlying issue of domination and discrimination? For Latinas, this issue operates both as sexism and racism in the mainstream society, whereas it becomes an issue of sexism within their own communities. They are either forced to become highly sexualized, eroticized fetish objects, or they are forced to contend with images of whiteness and relegated to the lower rungs of the "classical" beauty standards in the mainstream depictions. Within their own community, Latinas are forced to subordinate themselves to patriarchal structures through ideas that center race problems as bigger and as more important than the gender problems. Thus, when I chose the songs in my event, these concerns led me to women artists who used their position—marginal in the mainstream yet central in their communities—and worked on changing the stereotypical perceptions and definitions of the mainstream ideologies. In my chapter on categorization, I discuss Celia Cruz's ground-breaking work and life of dedication to this matter starting from her early recordings where she questioned

the absence of black angels in the paintings, etchings and stained glass work of churches to her more recent reclamation of “la negra” and “la candela.”

Similar to the way in which women’s voices are written out of language, their bodies are mutilated, sexualized into objects, and often denied pleasure or representation except when serving the dominant ideologies. This happens more so when women are able to garner a small portion of power to weaken patriarchy’s reach. Historically, Joan of Arc is an example where a powerful woman dies a violent and brutal death by fire at the stakes. In the United States the Salem witchcraft trials were another example of how societal power was directed against women who did not conform to societal mores. Rape has been used consistently as a means of controlling women whether by conquering armies, or in its more recent manifestation of date-rape. Domestic abuse is one of the leading problems within societies, yet this problem is often relegated to the private sphere where society supposedly does not intrude. I posit that society’s silence on these problems intentionally and tacitly approves the violence against women and their bodies as a means of controlling them and of maintaining power structures.

In “Songs of My Life,” I worked on undoing some of these issues by creating a strong character that is not afraid to create her own definition of sexuality and womanhood. This person, who was played by Molly Sue Welch was able to create an inclusive relationship that did not retreat from intimacy, sexuality and relationships between women. This character did not tolerate the violence that is inflicted on women, their bodies, and their sexuality, and she grapples with the tension generated by being an independent, strong and beautiful woman. In their opening duet, “Once My Lover, Now My Friend,” both Kaarli Sundsmo and Molly Sue Welch explore the violence that is done to women, particularly lesbian women in literary texts and in real life, because of a dominant heterosexuality that is widely perceived as compulsory. By the end of the duet, the societal violence is represented as the physical violence and abuse these women enact in their

relationship with each other. This compulsory heterosexuality is further examined in the duet “Hey Pretty” between Aaron Jackson and Molly Sue Welch, where Welch counters and ultimately overthrows Jackson’s abuse. The dancers then explore how all three of them are embedded in the socio-political structures in “With or Without You,” where they are torn between notions of love couched in the dominant ideological vein or being alone but safe and complete. Ultimately, Welch decides that it is better to be alone, if “alone” means being free of the abuse and pain of the dominant definition of “relationship.” This moment is particularly nuanced because Welch as a dancer-actor worked hard to portray the pain and disillusionment that often accompanies strong women in our society. The persona of this dance is not a glorified, mythicized heroine who rides off into the sunset alone; rather, this persona is a “real” one who decides to stand her ground and looks at the options that independence gives and takes away in the same stroke. The event does not simplify relationships as black and white that begin and end cleanly; instead Jackson, Sundsmo and Welch continue their connections in an underpinning narrative throughout the evening as different relationships are brought to the forefront. Finally, the evening ends with the focus on these three dancers—and the audience is given the choice of completing the narrative by choosing whether to define a heterosexual, lesbian, polyamorous or asexual relationship.

Ideologies, whether real or abstracted, are typically presented as a mono-narrative that often silences other voices, perspectives and viewpoints. In my event, I used a projection screen that captured the dance narrative from four different angles and varying perspectives. I intermixed this with pre-existing video footage of our dancers at local clubs to foreground different perspectives in real time along with the live dance event. I wanted to break the temporality of the event and create a definition of time and narrative that is fluid, non-linear and shifting instead of the familiar linear and fixed definitions. This juxtaposition was intended to counter the idea of “a single truth” and to have the audience consider how multiple truisms can exist side-by-side. Without denying the power

differences or the tensions between these viewpoints, I explored the boundaries where these tensions come face-to-face and used boundaries as sites where new knowledge is produced because of this tension. I hoped to build on Foucault's notion of the panopticon by using the cameras to create the multiple viewpoints to both foreground the notion of surveillance of the feminine body and to counter a mono-narrative that ideologies try to create.

The surveillance of and the violence done to women's bodies is particularly pertinent to dance given the historical position of women's bodies as men's properties. Until the last century, men were often invited to the dressing rooms to watch the female dancers dress before concerts and undress after concerts, humiliating the female dancers and denying their right to privacy. A few women were able to use this intimacy as a means of entering the powerful male world, but for the majority of women this was a burden to be endured for financial or artistic goals. The female body has always been under surveillance in society, particularly in dance. I used a screen that was larger than life and projected the voyeuristic images of the camera, which in turn provided an entry point for larger conversations about women's rights to their bodies and to their pleasure. Issues of surveillance of women's bodies were also explored by the use of the camera's focus on the women.

The next myth that I filter through the womanist lens and try to "re-vision" in Adrienne Rich's rhetoric is the separation of private and public aspects of women's lives in political discourse. Women's right to their bodies and voices is often removed from the political debate by situating them in a seemingly private environment in which the public professes not to interfere. When we look at this fallacy, it is important to consider the ways in which the institution of family often replicates the power and (re)production structures of the capitalist society. Thus, control of women's bodies and voices happens in the larger context in socio-political institutions that naturalize the subordination of women and minorities. Within the family structure this control takes on the shapes of the dutiful wife, mother, sister and daughter. Most of the identities associated with these

roles relegate women to an identity based on women's value in extending the male privilege. And most importantly these definitions of women posit that their only access to pleasure is through service to men or by means of a second-hand experience from their men's pleasure.

I created female characters in my event that refused to buy into this ideology and challenged the status quo by taking the "will to pleasure," as Friedrich Nietzsche frames it, into their own hands. I introduced violence in the dances as counterpoints to the moments of intimacy and pleasure to foreground the violence that occurs against women's right to pleasure in societal and familial relationships. Date rape is often discounted as "she wanted it," "she shouldn't have dressed that way," or "she wouldn't be here if she didn't want it." I argue that when women are physical, it is considered a threat to patriarchal ideologies, particularly because it situates pleasure in a feminine body, moves it from the private and hidden family institution to the public and social club setting. By doing this women are able to take control of their bodies and their pleasure and are no longer dependent on the male prerogative. Thus, the social setting becomes a site where women's right to pleasure is brutally denied and even erased by the privileging of male pleasure even at the price of pain to women. The violence against women serves as a catharsis for the male power that is troubled by the ways in which feminine pleasure weakens their dominant position.

I used the scenario in "Seven Nation Army," in which a group of female dancers are dancing with a male dancer, where suddenly mob-mentality takes over and the women brutalize him and rip his clothes off. This violence served as the "Alienation Effect" to make the audience think about the violence that is sanctioned against women in socio-cultural settings. I use the "Alienation Effect" in a non-traditional manner, that is to create situations where the audience is able to take a critical look at quotidian events. I connected both the violence that is done to women in the societal and familial institutions and homophobia and gay bashing to sexism. Through witnessing the danced violence, participants might examine the ways in which violence against minoritized groups

manifests in society. I used violence against women in my event to challenge the narrow focus of the dominant narrative and to serve as an entry point to explore ways in which this violence morphs itself against other minoritized groups in society.

Finally, Women's Studies has taught me to examine issues from multiple perspectives which has given me an insight into my own methods and assisted me to scrutinize the ways in which I work with or work against the dominant ideologies. I had to examine my position as an outsider in the Latino community, my position as a male in a chauvinistic society, and finally as a male exploring issues of social justice through the lens of Women's Studies. I had to address the notion of voice and representation in the dance event and in my methods. While the majority of dancers were female in the event, I had to consider how my feminist and womanist perspectives would play out in my work with women who did not self-identify as feminists or particularly had any notion of what feminism was. While I worked hard to make sure their voices were heard as part of the collaborative choreographic process, I had to consider how elements of internalized patriarchy might become a part of their voice. When we came across such biases we developed a group process that was led by Emily Bodoh, my rehearsal mistress, to come to consensus on how they could be resolved from a womanist perspective. This was particularly important in looking at how homophobia and traditional definitions of family were perceived as *modus operandi* by most of the dancers. I had to consider how the pieces of technologies played out in the narrative. The video cameras took on the feminine gaze as one with multiple perspectives. Having a female pianist as the storyteller, connecting the different layers of the multiple narratives together was an additional bonus—particularly in light of the fact that she began the event and ended it—a feminine touch, a feminine use of the body became the vehicle for the site and interrogation of the socio-political constructs. She replaced the “master” narrator writing “his story” and instead examined the stories that were unraveling through the evening.

Women's Studies allow for the exploration of the semiotic language of the body in ways that other frameworks do not. Women's Studies also helped our group take a look at issues that are personal to us such as gender, race, sexuality and explore it in the social forum to gain a better understanding of ourselves, our work and the community of practice that we work in. Adrienne Rich's push to situate the arts as the site of contestation for social justice issues made a deep and lasting impact on me and helped me begin to address these issues in my work. The fusion of theory and practice is key to Women's Studies, and it was also a vital part of my approach to my event in that we tried to look at the complex interaction between the multiple texts that were embedded in my narrative. As it helped me with the social justice issues in relation to gender and the consequences of power on gender, I became more sensitive to the power differentials and I hope that the participants in the event also have the seeds of questions sown in their minds.

Chapter 4: Reorienting Spectators

“Consequences are the thing to look at in any argument—not ideal logical antecedents. Thus, while categorization provides an orientation towards the world, each standard and each category valorizes some point of view and silences another.”

Bowker and Star, Sorting Things Out: Classification and its Consequences

The communities of dance I work in range from highly stylized, distinct and seemingly closed forms such as Bharata Natyam and Ballet, to the evolving and seemingly looser forms such as modern and post-modern and to the structured, colloquial and popular forms such as Salsa, Merengue, Two-Stepping, Line Dancing, and finally the fluid, locational and constantly evolving “club” dance forms. I draw on personal experiences from these varied dance communities to examine effects of categorization and the relationships between the seemingly discrete forms created by categorization. I use the communication specialists Bowker and Star’s study of categorization, along with Women’s Studies and critical studies to obtain perspectives on the dynamics between the various dance forms, and how they operate, replicate and subvert systems of power.⁴ I am particularly interested in the ways in which institutions—academic and societal, function in the dance world and how the margins and the center shift relationships and tensions in the discipline.

Bowker and Star posit that none of the disciplines or social movements has systematically addressed the pragmatics of the invisible forces of categories and standards in culture. They write that “Foucault’s work argues that an archaeological dig is necessary to find the origins and consequences of a range of social categories and practices.”⁵ The critical point Bowker and Star make about classification work is that “each standard and each category valorizes some point of view and silences another.” This is instructive to how power operates. I explored some of the invisible, naturalized classificatory systems in the dance world. By surfacing the classifications, I hope to create a better understanding of the systems of power within the discipline, and the tensions between marginalized and centralized dance forms. Specifically, I considered the roles of Salsa and Merengue and looked at Latino and Hispanic social movements and their political agendas. Art, as we know it, does not occur in a vacuum; it informs and is informed by socio-political constructs.

¹ Bowker and Star, *Sorting Things Out: Classification and its Consequences*, (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2002), 5.

² Michel Foucault, *The Order of Things: An Archaeology of the Human Sciences*, (New York: Pantheon Books, 1970), 45.

Within these constructs, categorization serves as a method of meaning making and provides an orientation towards the world. While categories function to make sense of the world, they also necessarily create margins and centers, categories developed by people in power maintain the status quo. While similar research has been done in cultural studies, it is my opinion that dance can benefit from such an “archaeological” dig.

While Sally Banes’ definition of post-modern dance includes “the use of vernacular materials, the continuity of cultures, an interest in process over product, breakdowns of boundaries between art forms and between art and life, and new relationships between artist and audience” this only seems to be true when post-modern dance is appropriating other forms into itself.⁶ Within the Unites States’ context, perhaps what is happening in post-modern dance is a variation of the post-imperialist idea of the “melting-pot,” in that difference is tolerated as long as it is assimilated into the dominant structure. In this framework post-modern dance takes on the dominant, appropriating role, where as the marginalized forms are forced to assimilate and even then discounted as a valid form within the discipline of dance. By institutionalizing socio-political difference and thereby creating power differentials between the forms, the arts are forced to operate in and perpetuate the systems of power. Derrida’s notion of “differance” gives us a framework to look at some of the tensions within our community, where meaning is made by what a system is not as opposed to what it is.⁷

Building on this notion of difference, meaning and societal weight, Pierre Bourdieu, a French social anthropologist writes,

In the case of activities like the visual arts, which presupposes a cultural capital generally acquired outside the educational system and (relatively) independent of the level of academic

³ Sally Banes, “Post-Modern Dance,” *The Twentieth Century Performance Reader*, eds. Michael Huxley and Noel Witts, 2nd Edition (New York: Routledge, 1996), 39.

⁴ Jacques Derrida, “Differance,” *Literary Theory: An Anthology*, eds. Julie Rivkin and Michael Ryan, (Malden: Blackwell Publishers, 1998), 458.

certification, the correlation with social class, which is again strong, is established through social trajectory.⁸

This connection between cultural capital, social class and social trajectory is one reason that modern and post-modern dance perpetuate institutionalized, oppressive ideologies. Academic settings end up creating oppressive structures similar to the ones found in the dominant mainstream society.

I posit that post-modern dance is solidifying its position of power by appropriating cultural forms as necessary, while always simultaneously distancing the forms it has subsumed. Derrida, the French philosopher and literary theorist writes,

We ... give the name *differance* to this *sameness* which is not *identical*: by the silent writing of the a, it has the desired advantage of referring to differing, *both* as spacing/temporalizing and as the movement that structures every disassociation.⁹

It is by always differing itself from other forms that modern dance gains its weight and institutionality.

Let us examine one example of simultaneous appropriation and distancing. Paul Taylor's 1997 "Piazzolla Caldera," uses movement motifs with a slim connection to the tension, angst, sensuality of the movement we associate with Tango. A sound piece of modern dance that displays both the depth of Taylor's craft and the beauty of his technique, it nevertheless, serves as a good example of appropriation. The majority of the movement is definitely in the Taylor style, and the only connections to the Tango's origins in the bordello are achieved by the lighting and décor. Ballroom dance may be one step closer than Taylor's attempt at incorporating the essence of Tango,

⁵ Pierre Bourdieu, "Distinction," *Literary Theory: An Anthology*, eds. Julie Rivkin and Michael Ryan, (Malden: Blackwell Publishers, 1998), 1031.

⁶ Jacques Derrida, "Differance," *Literary Theory: An Anthology*, eds. Julie Rivkin and Michael Ryan, (Malden: Blackwell Publishers, 1998), 461.

but the position of Ballroom dance as high art in comparison to Paul Taylor's work would be a polemical in most communities of practice within dance.

Further one could argue that Ballroom is also “staging” of cultural dance forms. A cultural studies reading helps us track how movement is sexualized—given its origins in the bordellos, and desexualized in ideas such as “good women don't dance the Tango”—or racialized—as in the difference between the indigenous, fluid forms of Tango in Argentina versus the stylized New York Ballroom version. Thus, this gentrification of the Tango dance form presented by Paul Taylor or the Ballroom venue strips Tango of its racial and sexual identities in its various encounters with the “high” art of America. It is offered in a white-washed, clean version in the Ballroom floor, and appropriated to reify the Taylor style of movement in modern dance. What happens when “staging” the Tango—changing it from social intercourse to something watched voyeuristically? A change from the enjoyment–tension between dancers in a communal, often participatory setting, to something removed from the imminent experience. Staging cultural forms, which changes the perspectives of participant and watcher, contributes in some way to hierarchy, the sense that the watcher is the more important element, that the staged performance couldn't be happening without the audience. The king watching his subjects, all for his pleasure. This hierarchy still happens when we stage the vernacular dance, especially in a proscenium setting. How has the power shifted, particularly in terms of the gaze? Does the gaze differ in a night club setting? In a Ballroom setting? How are gender, race, sexuality, and ethnicity performed differently in movement texts, whether they are situated in a centralized theater or in the margins of the night club?

I grappled with some of these issues in my work and in my research on and use of Salsa and Merengue. I realized that these dance forms worked within the space of the margins to subvert power in revolutionary ways. I will discuss some of the questions I had to struggle with, when resituating Salsa/Merengue within my work in the theater a bit later in this paper.

First I contextualized the socio-political connections of Latin art forms. The music, lyrics and movement in Salsa and Merengue work similarly to those cultural forms such as theater, literature, and poetry that articulated the Chicano nationalism and sustained the Chicano movement in the 1960s. Delgado (1995) and Jensen and Hammerback (1982) frame cultural forms such as music and dance to be one of the means through which the Chicano movement was motivated and sustained by ideographs. Cultural forms typically conceived as entertainment or art have also been used by Chicano activists who seek out powerful and effective means to disseminate their ideology—particularly as these forms were marginalized in the dominant culture and thus possessed characteristics and traditions open to politicization. Cultural forms and political content co-existed and articulated an ideological framework for the Chicano movement. Dominant institutions charged with maintaining social order and mainstream values are repositioned as the transgressors and the violators of rights, civility, and justice in these forms. Thus, as cultural forms, Salsa and Merengue’s marginal positions give these forms a unique perspective into the interconnected yet divergent categories of race, class, gender, and sexuality. Their popularity among youthful audiences makes them all the more appropriate and appealing as an outlet and means for social movements.

Salsa and Merengue dancers use their positions in the margins by subverting power and in Adrienne Rich’s rhetoric “re-visioning” popular art forms. Systems such as language, body semiotics, and dance negotiate the boundaries of the margins and centers. One means by which this occurs is by their reclamation of language. In the historical context, one way the minoritized populations oppressed by the Spanish gained social agency was by taking over and subverting the most powerful system of domination—the language of the Spanish conquistadores. Yet, in adopting the oppressor’s language to subvert it, several indigenous languages were lost in the bargain and therefore this argument comes with its own problems. Within the context of the United States, the adopted Spanish language of the minoritized cultures is dealt a second death with the denial of a

sanctioned bi-lingual education or culture. Thus, language becomes the site of intentional, critical commentary on the socio-political systems of power for the Latin American community. Bourdieu writes, “A work of art has meaning and interest only for someone who possesses the cultural competence, the code, into which it is encoded.”¹⁰ Bourdieu is concerned more with language in its traditional sense whereas the semiotic language of the body is more complex, polysemic, and often is not processed completely by the dominant class. Using the marginalized positions, Salsa and Merengue performers thwart the systems of power by encoding the text in the lyrics, by encoding the body into the text and/or by encoding pleasure in the body and thus countering the dominant code of language. Capoeira is another example of how a dance form tapped into its marginal position and served as a counter resistance tool through movement and parody.

I am attracted by and therefore used the Salsa songs and lyrics of Cuba’s vocalist Celia Cruz because of her explicit reclamation of the body as a site of pleasure and power. When we consider her lyrics as the social text, Cruz counters the “mulatto” depiction of the island Cuban woman as eager to please and satisfy the white man by reclaiming the identity of “la negra” and “la candela.” Together, the women described as “la negra” and “la candela” take pride in their dark-skinned and sensual beauty and resist the passive “mulatto” stereotype depicted in mainstream media. The women in Celia Cruz’s songs have broader social agency and power in their bodies and choose to express and experience the beauty and pleasure of their bodies, rather than subscribing to the de-sexualized or hyper-sexualized identities given by the mainstream culture. Let us consider Cruz herself as the social text: she is known for what is considered a garish fashion sense that included blond, red, and at times even blue wigs with extravagant and elaborate costumes. Her fashion style is often discounted as her idiosyncratic. Perhaps another explanation, one of parody, is applicable here. By countering the mainstream in her lyrics (work as text) and by parodying them in her

⁷ Pierre Bourdieu, “Distinction,” *Literary Theory: An Anthology*, eds. Julie Rivkin and Michael Ryan, (Malden: Blackwell Publishers, 1998) 1029.

fashion sense (herself as text), Cruz politicizes her marginal position and counters the power systems. Her lyrics situate the body as the location of pleasure, and reframe the dark-skinned, sensual woman as a positive, independent and strong site of resistance to mainstream depictions. This coded message is appropriated by the marginalized communities, such as the queer Latino community, in which her music is played and translates into strong, positive definitions of racial, ethnic, sexual and cultural identities. Minstrelsy is a useful analogy for the ways in which Latin music and dance in general and Cruz in particular use parody as a means of subversion and empowerment, and thus, become revolutionary tools.

I used my concert to examine the ways in which tensions between the margins and the center morphs in its travels between languages, movement and cultures. I incorporated sections of post-modern dance, Salsa, Merengue, Hip-Hop and (for lack of a better descriptor) “slow dancing” into my narrative. I had to work with cognizance of my position of power and my position as an outsider. I worked very hard on not privileging one form over the other by any specific lighting, costuming or spacing cues. I chose to work in a black box theater that did not separate the performance and audience space. I was interested in surfacing the dialectical tension between “high” art and “low” art. I wanted to explore the ways in which Salsa and Merengue are informed by the performance qualities of the stage and was interested in trying to create a similar setting. Hence “staging” Salsa in a traditional theater was not an option for me. In addition a black box space allowed the audience members to be a part of the dance floor. By creating an illusion of a dance club, I wanted the audience members to question performances of gender, sexuality, culture and art, during the concert and thereafter in their day-to-day existence. These performance choices did not duplicate/approximate an “authentic” club experience, but it was as close to one as I could simulate given limitations of funding and logistics. In addition, I used the queering of dominant culture that is common in marginalized Gay Latin clubs where same-sex couples dance together and

switch between leading and following roles, as a means of exploring the queer texts that confront stereotypical models of gender, sexuality and performance. I hoped that traditional “isms” would be recast for the participants through non-traditional and participatory theater experience. I also included specific sections of post-modern dance that were deliberately set in the margins: several dances occurred at the periphery of the space, against the theater walls, whereas the Salsa and Merengue dancers used all of the space available including the periphery. The community dancers who were often self-taught, whose training included elements of oral-tradition and communal learning spaces, collaborated with the dancers in the traditional academic dance program. The dancers worked on creating a space where there was no “artificial” fourth wall, and the audience could and did interrupt the flow of the performance and thus were subsumed into the event. I examined gender, race, and sexuality as performances and all performances as text. I used popular music as the score for the post-modern dance sections, to maintain the continuity between the popular sections and post-modern dance sections and to see how the lyrics as text informed the post-modern dance text. I was interested in using popular culture as it mimes or parodies the mainstream. The majority of the popular songs were by female vocalists as well because I wanted to examine the role of lyrics, a variation of poetry that has been discounted both as feminine and because it doesn’t have the institutional weight of prose. The marginalization of poetry, lyrics, and folk songs raised questions of class and privilege immediately, such as—who has time to write prose, whose history is passed on via oral traditions. How has this social/cultural phenomenon morphed in current social and movement texts?

Similarly, “popular” dance forms are dependant on the legitimacy afforded them—however little—by means of their association with the institutional weight and power of “classical dance forms.” “Popular” dance forms gain agency in their use of their marginal positions when, as in Audre Lorde’s framework, the dancers use the master’s tools to dismantle the master’s house by

subverting the systems of language and movement to resituate pleasure in the body.¹¹ What was stripped, de-racialized, de-sexualized is written back into the text and thus onto the body, in an empowering move. Lee Edelman, a leading scholar connecting gender, sexuality, power and politics, points out the mutual dependency of the dominant and the resistant systems. His view reflects the queer theory model when he writes,

Like writing, then, homographesis would name a double operation: one serving the ideological purposes of a conservative social order ... and the other resistant to that categorization, intent on de-scribing the identities that order has so oppressively inscribed.¹²

Homographesis or the queering of the dominant text in the marginal spaces and the institutionalization of dominant ideologies are thus mutually dependant and reinforce each other. Consider the terms such as “popular,” “mass,” “vernacular,” “colloquial,” “indigenous.” Part of the “high” culture, whether in art or in language, is the way in which there are rules, codes if you will, which make “high” culture less attainable, needing mediation and translation for perfection. “Popular” carries the inherent notion that it can be easily imitated, that its form is less complex. If this were true in actuality, I would not have had to spend weeks trying to teach my modern dancers how to Salsa. But myths abound: that the social dances, the “popular/mass” ones, can be learned by watching and practicing and that “popular” language, colloquial language is unrefined. Hierarchy suggests refinement—by birth, by education. Thus the high and low art forms reinforce the other by means of social, cultural, and political locations. What happens when these cultural readings are subsumed into the educational rhetoric as well?

Pierre Bourdieu writes,

The educational system, an institutionalized classifier which is itself an objectified system of classification reproduces the hierarchies of the social world, with its cleavages by “level”

⁸ Audre Lorde, “Sister Outsider: Essays and Speeches,” The Master’s Tools Will Never Dismantle the Master’s House, (Freedom: Crossing Press, 1984), 111.

⁹ Lee Edelman, “Homographesis,” Literary Theory: An Anthology, eds. Julie Rivkin and Michael Ryan, (Malden: Blackwell Publishers, 1998), 1031.

corresponding to social strata and its divisions into specialties and disciplines which reflect social divisions ad infinitum, such as the opposition between theory and practice, conception and execution, transforms social classifications into academic classifications, with every appearance of neutrality, [this is the particular danger—with every appearance of neutrality] and established hierarchies which are not experienced as purely technical, and therefore partial and one-sided, but total hierarchies, grounded in nature, [naturalized] so that social value comes to be identified with “personal” value, scholastic dignity with human dignity. The “culture” which an educational certificate or degree is presumed to guarantee is one of the basic components in the dominant definition of the accomplished man. ...¹³

As academicians, practitioners and members of this community what can we gain from this perspective? In light of dwindling funding, resources and societal capital, perhaps we should explore a fluid strategy that uses an exclusive, inclusive or mutually dependant definition of dance forms, based on the particular socio-political parameters in which we find ourselves operating.

From a pedagogical standpoint, we can best serve the interests of the students we teach by presenting the different styles of dance with an awareness of our institutional or personal biases and by allowing the students to create their own aesthetics and critical viewpoints and interests. In terms of training, perhaps somatic and whole body techniques that are not limited to western perspectives should be included in the learning experiences, along with more specific systems such as Ballet, Graham or Limon. How can we create experiential learning situations in academic settings that allow exploration and do not privilege one form over another? Is it possible to create educational models in which descriptive systems are used to explore new ideas, relationships, and tensions without becoming a prescriptive institutionalized methodology? Institutions tend to promote prescriptive curricula that use a how-to manual instead of how-to-understand model. These models build skills, instead of seeding ideas or enhancing critical thinking. Teaching should range from giving some principles and concepts to beginners while freeing advanced learners of the rules that restrict them. As practitioners and choreographers, it is also crucial that we acknowledge the origins

¹⁰ Pierre Bourdieu, “Distinction,” *Literary Theory: An Anthology*, eds. Julie Rivkin and Michael Ryan, (Malden: Blackwell Publishers, 1998) 1034.

when we state that our work has evolved from, has been influenced by or has been inspired by other styles. Forms come with context. Is it possible to use the form without keeping the context? What is lost in that process? With abstract pieces, acknowledging the object of abstraction would contextualize the abstracted movement. Defining our scope of research, intentional use of supplemental tools such as program notes, and collaborative consultants from the genres, in which we are experimenting can clarify research, choreography and performance. And is it too daring to consider our sister disciplines? English and Women's Studies have both broadened to address issues related to women of color, global perspectives and traditionally excluded voices. What was once the discipline of English has become Literary Studies. What began as the Feminist movement has become Women's Studies. Do we make the leap from the once narrow focus of dance to Movement Studies?

Chapter 5: Defining the Role of Art

“That is the mission of true art—to make us pause and look at a thing a second time.”

Oscar Wilde, On Art

In his definition of the role of arts in our society, Leon Botstein, an educator who believes that art is a powerful educational tool wrote, “You have to be convinced that art and its controversies have some relationship to improving a free and democratic world. Free and uncensored art creates tension in society”¹⁴ The tension created at the intersection of art and social issues is one I find interesting and useful. In addition, I am interested in examining how art functions as a tool to circumvent language systems that have inherent qualities of the dominant ideologies. Some of the questions I hope to address are as follows: 1) Why use art? 2) What is art’s responsibility? 3) How is art influenced by mass culture or popular culture? 4) How can we use the arts as an educational tool both in and out of academic settings? 5) What is the unique role of dance within the arts? Botstein writes, “In a democracy, art is about protecting extreme dissent, the dissent of the marginal individual to whom nobody wants to listen” a statement that informs the threads in “Songs of My Life.”¹⁵ Maxine Greene, the noted thinker on the relationship between the arts and social justice, points out that art functions as a way of de-familiarizing the troublesome issues of social justice that have become naturalized. To see, hear, experience more than the scope of our lives and to become “conscious of what daily routines have obscured, what habit and convention have suppressed” is one of the vital contributions of the arts.¹⁶ Similarly, the French philosopher and existentialist, Jean-Paul Sartre argues, “For this is quite the final goal of art; to recover this world by giving it to be seen as it is, but as if it had its source in human freedom.”¹⁷ Thus, issues of social justice, politics and human freedom are intimately connected with art as medium and in our experience of art within this framework.

¹ Leon Botstein, “What Role for the Arts?” A Light in the Dark Times: Maxine Greene and the Unfinished Conversation, eds. William C Ayers and Janet L. Miller (New York: Teachers College Press, 1998), 69.

² Leon Botstein, 69.

³ Maxine Greene, “Art and Imagination”, Releasing the Imagination: Essays on Education, the Arts, and Social Change, (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass publishers, 1995), 123.

⁴ Jean-Paul Sartre, “The Work of Art,” Jean-Paul Sartre: Basic Writings, ed. Stephen Priest (New York: Routledge press, 2001), 292.

In chapter four, I looked at how art is often co-opted by various factions to work with or against the socio-political structures. Art is also able to adapt to varied strategies such as pedagogical, sociological, and critical analysis of itself to examine naturalized power in language systems. While art has come to be mediated by language, the potential exists within art to use non-verbal acuity to avoid the gendered, racialized and discriminatory aspects of language. Art can function as a counter-resistance tool or as an alternate system of meaning-making in relation to language systems. As such, it plays a pivotal role in the perpetuation of or resistance to the power structures. The role of art is important because art potentially gives an individual a means of expressing the self even without the sanction of the society. It allows the ordinary person to create and to experience new ideas in a variety of media, and thus it becomes a challenge to the power structures that try to maintain control of ideas and experiences in languages. In the next few pages, I examine the role that art plays in our societies and how dance functions within the arts to give us an alternative orientation and tool to understand the institutions of power in our societies and lives.

Art occupies a unique position in that it has the ability to provide pleasure while simultaneously working as a critical voice in society. As pleasure is typically associated with the body and therefore disqualified in relation to the “superior” mind, the arts counter this devaluation of pleasure and make it a resistance tool. By extension this also allows us a means of using pleasure of the body as a means of knowledge production. Instead of denying the pleasure of the arts, I examine some of the reasons why pleasure is controlled and how this control serves political purposes. Pleasure and politics are interwoven and reinforce each other in the arts, in society and in culture. This is particularly evident when we consider how often pleasure of the human body is sacrificed for the advancement of the mind. A Marxist perspective can help us understand the complex issues of pleasure, the body, and the mind in their relationship to the market economy.

From a Marxist perspective, the body is only valued for the production aspects within the institution of capitalism and for reproduction aspects within the institution of the family, which in turn augments the commodity value of the family. Thus, anything that does not contribute to the accumulation of capital is considered useless and unnecessary. Following feminist theorists, I argue that pleasure thus moves from the private realm to the public sphere because of the control exerted over pleasure by the societal power structures. This paradigm is particularly important because the pleasure of minoritized bodies is often denied in order to continue production. This oppression of pleasure is repeated across various minoritized bodies by notions such as feminine, queer, primitive, and sinful to control the body and channel the energy into labor. Furthermore, when it comes to the feminine body, cooption of pleasure by the power structure implies that women are dependant on men for their pleasure and denies the victims their rights to pleasure.

One of the problems of the technological age in which we function is that it is hard to separate how mass culture influences even the thinking about art, so that even aesthetic experiences that should ideally be outside the influences of language and mass culture come to be mediated by and filtered through language and societal structures. Thus, because the reception of art is mediated by mass culture and language, sometimes the arts lose their most valuable assets—the voice of difference and the critical lens that steps outside of language and mass culture. In my work, I use the arts as a social lens to examine the problems that are created by oppressive ideologies. Art is particularly useful because it is a lived experience in most cases as opposed to a theorized and abstracted concept that lessens experiential learning. And since art is not bound by the rules and problems inherent to language, it is able to create unique learning opportunities for participants.

In my work as a choreographer, I find ways to use language as the entry point and then move to ways of understanding the lived experience of the body that is inexpressible through language. In my dance concert, I incorporated several entry points such as the lyrics in the songs,

the texts in the posters, on the tables, on the walls, and the visuals projected on screen to use alternates to language for conveying information. The lyrics in the popular songs accompanying my dances functioned as an entry point to question linguistic domination—one way this happens in the United States is by the refusal to recognize other languages such as Spanish. By questioning the visible disparity of languages, the choreography is intended to help participants begin questioning other ways in which discrimination manifests itself, be it the stereotypical caricatures of recent immigrants where the body becomes the site of contestation and assimilation or the erasure of their own cultural artifacts such as language, dance, music, and theater. A group's facility and use of language translates seamlessly when they read literature or watch a play. Yet, even though our bodies are in constant motion and are constantly engaged in recognizing and registering information outside the scope of language, this ability doesn't seem to transfer to dance as one would expect. Instead of encountering dance at the body level, audiences often seem to try to find language to process this kinetic experience and therein lies the disconnect. If one considers how language is the signifier of the absent writer's body, it is arguable that language will always be inadequate to express the kinetic and aesthetic elements of dance.¹⁸ I am interested in how one can navigate and explore the power of the body without reifying the mind-body split or essentializing the body.

Another problem that is common to performance art is that ritualistic, cultural, communal experiences such as music, dance, and theater are usually represented in a "staged" environment that robs the medium of its power to communicate through participation. With the erection of the fourth wall, the audience often reverts to language instead of experiencing theater through non-linguistic methods. I tried to circumvent this problem by having a non-traditional space for my event with no boundaries between the participants. In addition, by including participatory club dance sections the audience members were already sensitized to their bodies and it was my intention

⁵ Jacques Derrida, "Differance," *Literary Theory: An Anthology*, eds. Julie Rivkin and Michael Ryan, (Malden: Blackwell Publishers, 1998), 387.

that this sensitivity would help them assimilate information via the body and the mind simultaneously. Thus, the club dancers and the audience participation prevented some of the distancing and allowed the audience members to use their body as a kinetic lens to understand the movement without language.

Often, art systems work by communicating via the semiotics of the body and thus they are able to undo some of the damage of oppressive ideologies built into language. The arts serve as a catalyst that allows us boundary crossings between language and society, and they help us make sense of the contentions and the interplay between language and society. Roland Barthes, the French philosopher and linguist who examined the somatics of language and its relationship to the body, writes that it is at this site of contention that culture takes form and it is possible to make new meanings of existing hierarchies and power differences.¹⁹ Cynthia Ozick writes, “A culture which does not allow itself to look clearly at the obvious through the universal accessibility of art is a culture of tragic delusion, hardly viable.”²⁰ Along with them, it is my opinion that the arts serve as a lens into cultures, at least within micro-cultures that have similar origins and experiences. According to Maxine Greene, the arts broaden our perspective beyond our culture by allowing us to “see ... what I might never have seen in my own lived world.”²¹ Similarly, Botstein argues that “real time, can be expanded by sensibilities of time that are generated by different experiences within the arts and not with the usual framework of everyday life.”²² In my dance event, I achieved the connection of different time spans through several methods, such as the dance narrative itself, but also through the narrative in the lyrics of the songs, and most importantly by the narratives created by the films of the dancers that were obviously from previous recordings. By taking the participants to several

⁶ Roland Barthes, The Pleasure of the Text, trans. Richard Miller, (New York: Hill and Wang, 1975), 10.

⁷ Cynthia Ozick, “The Selfishness of Art,” Quarrel and Quandary: Essays, (New York: Vintage, 2001), 129.

⁸ Maxine Greene, “Art and Imagination”, Releasing the Imagination: Essays on Education, the Arts, and Social Change, (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass publishers, 1995), 128.

⁹ Leon Botstein, “What Role for the Arts?” A Light in the Dark Times: Maxine Greene and the Unfinished Conversation, eds. William C Ayers and Janet L. Miller (New York: Teachers College Press, 1998), 68.

places in time simultaneously, the design of the event was intended to introduce the participants to new possibilities in thinking.

Art also functions as the social mirror, in that it allows participants to look at and question the inequalities and social justice issues prevalent in our society. In my view, along with expressing the artist's viewpoint, art should ideally allow the participants a chance to pause and look at the things that are taken for granted, at the ways in which power is naturalized. Because of art's connection to people in direct, simple and real ways, it is able to generate such an interaction. Also because of this very connection, art and politics are intimately connected. This is one of the main reasons that in places of political turmoil, the arts of the people often become the first targets to be destroyed, as well as the first choice as a strategic tool for revolution. The destruction of the Native American arts is an example of how the colonizers used the arts as a tool to assert power. The use of dance and music in Cuba is an example of how the people use the arts to resist power. I believe this effect is created because of the inherent quality of pleasure in the arts that is harder to achieve in other pedagogical strategies. Recognizing the subversive nature of pleasure, artists use it to question political denial of pleasure. And hence, popular art forms have that much more potential to create change because of their accessibility and appeal to the masses.

As I considered the connection of pleasure within the arts, I was struck by the recurring question of whether art should or could entertain. The Marxist view of agency and hegemony offers a broader understanding of how art can be a site of revolution and how it can serve as another instrument of ideologies. By giving a momentary release to the tension among the classes, art can diffuse the potential energy required to create change. So, the role of entertainment in art is a debatable one, and it is my opinion that while it is possible to entertain and create change it is important to avoid letting the entertainment become what solely drives the agenda. I use the distinction between art as entertainment and art as political discourse as an example to differentiate

between mass culture and popular art. Mass culture, in my definition, ends up serving the dominant ideology in its reincarnations as the “attainable” American dream of a specific aesthetic: de-sexualized, de-racialized and silenced. Popular art, on the other hand, as I wish to use the term here, is able to take advantage of the connection between the popular forms in order to contest the issues of power. So the more relevant question to my work was not whether art could entertain—which it can, but how to begin at a place of entertainment and arrive at a place of critical discourse. Because I work in the body, it was important for me to ensure that this journey to critical discourse did not reify the false mind-body split but that it allowed the body to be an integral part of the knowledge production process. I hoped to question issues of domination and control of pleasure by using popular music and dance, which are often relegated to the “primitive” or “subordinate” position because they also function as entertainment. Control of pleasure occurs in the hierarchy when art that also provides bodily pleasure is moved to the bottom rung of the ladder and the art that lifts us out of the body and into the mind is given an elite status. I countered this idea by creating a participatory, pleasurable dance event that was also educational and worked against power structures. In this paradigm, art becomes a participatory experience rather than a removed distant observation.

John Dewey, Walter Benjamin, John Berger, and Maxine Greene all argue about the danger of creating divides using the arts. Collectively, they see the arts as lived experience, one that is informed by and addresses the issues that are relevant to everyone, but particularly the marginalized groups. John Dewey, the American philosopher and educator, argues against the elitism prevalent in the arts and points out that the arts serve the interests of social power if they establish a hierarchal structures. He denounces practices that set art forms on pedestals because they are removed “from the scope of common or community life.”²³ Walter Benjamin, the German critic, builds on Marxist

¹⁰ John Dewey, “The Common Substance of the Arts,” *Art as Experience*, (New York: Perigee, 1980), 192.

theory and dismantles the ideas of eternal value and mystery that are associated with art and questions the problems caused by the “aura” of distance, uniqueness and tradition all of which end up creating elite barriers.²⁴ Berger goes a step further and connects the dangers of institutionalization whether of art or religion when he points out that works of art are “enveloped in an atmosphere of entirely bogus religiosity. Works of art are discussed and presented as though they were holy relics: relics which are first and foremost evidence of their own survival.”²⁵ Berger also points out that the arts have existed in a removed location from the community whether by their magical aura or sacred association with religion and that this seclusion becomes a social one. He writes, “The preserve of art became a social one. It entered the culture of the ruling class, while physically it was set apart and isolated in their palaces and houses. During all this history, the authority of art was inseparable from the particular authority of the preserve.”²⁶ Greene extends these connections when she argues that along with the preserve, commodification, esotericism, false claims of realism, artificial mystifications that excluded women, people of color and the poor all work to separate the arts from the people and thereby restrict its effectiveness as a social justice tool. Her most important point is that the arts are also closed to young people who are systematically demeaned and excluded from what others value as art. Thus, the different theorists point out that this chasm between “high” art and “low” art is similar to the Cartesian mind-body schism that works to control and oppress instead of providing access and freeing body and minds.

I offer up dance as a means to address this fissure between art’s possibilities and its realities, because dance uses the semiotics of the body as opposed to the semiotics of language. Therefore, I maintain that dance is a key tool not only to society at large, but even within the arts because of its abilities to resituate and reground the theories in the body and counter the Cartesian mind-body

¹¹ Walter Benjamin, “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction,” *Illuminations*, (New York: Schocken Books, 1988), 222-223.

¹² John Berger, *Ways of Seeing*, (New York: Penguin Putnam, 1972), 21.

¹³ John Berger, 33.

split. If art functions as a societal mirror, then perhaps one can use the body as the societal prism, one that takes the dominant mono-narrative of power and splits it apart to explore the multiple hues of lived narratives that are suppressed by ideologies. This is possible because we see that the dominant narratives often fall apart when they are refracted through the body and its lived experience; a lived experience which is often different than the ones predicted by the socio-political structures. As such, dance and the body, function as a way in which we can separate out the layers of struggle between power and resistance into the depth of their complexity rather than trivializing the effects of power. Berleant writes,

In establishing a human realm through movement, the dancer, with the participating audience, engages in the basic act out of which arise both all experience and our human constructions of the world. ... It stands as the direct denial of that most pernicious of all dualism, the division of body and consciousness. In dance, thought is primed at the point of action. This is not the reflection of the contemplative mind but rather intellect poised in the body, not the deliberate consideration of alternative courses but thought in process, intimately responding to and guiding the actively engaged body.²⁷

Thus, we see how the body as a medium and dance as a discipline offer a means of engaging an embodied experience in critical ways that is not possible with the artificial separation of the body and mind. The kinetic semiotics of the body combines with the known semiotics of language to bring us as participants to a new level of understanding, appreciation, and enjoyment.

Botstein is useful when he defines art and movement outside the scope of language. He writes, "It is the creation of things that defy easy reading that also permit the most freedom ... Just as art creates language, it cannot always be reduced to language."²⁸ The power of art lies in being able to circumvent language and the power of dance is in using the body as a medium for this escape from language. Barthes also explores the spaces between language and other forms of communications when he writes,

¹⁴ Arnold Berleant, *Art and Engagement*, (Philadelphia: Temple UP, 1991), 167.

¹⁵ Leon Botstein, "What Role for the Arts?" *A Light in the Dark Times: Maxine Greene and the Unfinished Conversation*, eds. William C Ayers and Janet L. Miller (New York: Teachers College Press, 1998), 69.

It is this displacement that I want to outline ... the very precise space (genre) of *the encounter between a language and a voice* ... something is there, manifest and stubborn ... beyond (or before) the meaning of the words, their form ... something which is directly the cantor's body, brought to your ears in one and the same movement from deep down in the cavities, the muscles, the membranes, the cartilages, and from deep down in ... language, as through a single skin lined the inner flesh of the performer and the music he sings...The "grain" is that: the materiality of the body speaking its mother tongue; perhaps the letter, almost certainly significance.²⁹ [Emphasis by Barthes]

While Barthes is exploring the power of the voice as a medium, this connection of the semiotics of language and of the body applies just as powerfully when the dance is the medium—the body speaks in the spaces that language finds impenetrable. “Isn't the final goal of writing to articulate the body?” asks Chantal Chawaf.³⁰ Then, following Barthes and Chawaf, dance offers itself as the perfect medium that is able to articulate the body but is not encumbered by the limitations of language. John Martin writes that “movement, then, in and of itself is a medium for the transference of an aesthetic and emotional concept from the consciousness of one individual to that of another.”³¹ What is built into society through language is undone and exposed in the body through an aesthetic and experiential system that allows for multiple meanings rather than the closed language system.

As I look back at my work, I realize that the themes of categorization and marginalization and their links to social justice issues were lenses that helped me shape my work. My goal was to create an opportunity for dialogue that was critical and meaningful to the participants. Botstein was key in shaping my work, particularly when he states, “What the products of the aesthetic imagination do is create realities in our social experience about which we ultimately have to talk.”³² The next level was not just to talk, but to engage social justice problems with a critical analysis that goes beyond the

¹⁶ Roland Barthes, “The Grain of the Voice,” *The Twentieth-Century Performance Reader*, eds. Michael Huxley and Noel Witts, 2nd Edition. (New York: Routledge, 1996), 51.

¹⁷ Chantal Chawaf, “Creations,” *New French Feminisms: An Anthology*, (New York: Pantheon Books, 1987), 177.

¹⁸ John Martin, “Characteristics of the Modern Dance,” *The Twentieth-Century Performance Reader*, eds. Micael Huxley and Noel Witts, 2nd Edition. (New York: Routledge, 1996), 298.

¹⁹ Leon Botstein, “What Role for the Arts?” *A Light in the Dark Times: Maxine Greene and the Unfinished Conversation*, eds. William C Ayers and Janet L. Miller (New York: Teachers College Press, 1998), 67.

surface level. Bertolt Brecht, who connects Marxism, Theater, and social justice work, frames such dialogue as the ultimate power of the arts when he writes,

Criticism of society is ultimately revolution; there you have criticism taken to its logical conclusion and playing an active part. A critical attitude of this type is an operative factor of productivity; it is deeply enjoyable as such, and if we commonly use the term “art” for enterprises that improve people’s lives why should art proper remain aloof from the arts of this sort?³³

The critical dialogue that was created by “Songs of My Life” within my ideas, among the collaborators and in the participants was the ultimate goal of my work. This production empowered the audience to be critical of and to engage in art in ways that I had not explored before. And I expect that this experience in “Songs of My Life,” will translate into social justice questions as the logical progression of critical thinking—from the arts to the larger societal problems.

In conclusion, I used “Songs of My Life” as vehicle for practice and theory to come together, for form and content to coexist and at the same time function as a critical lens into society. I believe that “Songs of My Life” was particularly effective in that it was able to convey the struggles of youth and minorities to the participants by a visceral, lived experience. I was able to create an event that was enjoyable while functioning as a social commentary, and it is my goal to create future work that will pick up the threads of this concert and build on the strengths and explore the questions that this event produced. Through this event, I was able to work with multiple pedagogical, societal, and aesthetic ideas simultaneously. I was also able to create a mixed-media work in which theater, music, dance and activism came together as a cohesive whole. The interdisciplinarity that I gained through Women’s Studies and the dance department was vital in informing and shaping my personal artistic choices and goals. As I continue to work in the arts and

²⁰ Bertolt Brecht, “A New Technique in Acting,” The Twentieth-Century Performance Reader, eds. Michael Huxley and Noel Witte, 2nd Edition, (New York: Routledge, 1996) 103.

in the medium of dance, my goal is to find ways to explore this stratification that happens in the arts as a means of exploring larger social justice issues. Art serves as an able and adaptable medium that is enjoyable but at the same time can serve as a critical lens. It is this synthesis of art and social justice that I wish to pursue in my future work as a dancer and choreographer.

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APPENDIX A

program		program	
Section I		Section III	
Shadow Boxer	Fiona Apple	More Than Words	Extreme
<i>Dancers: Kaati Sundino, Molly Sue Hitch.</i>		<i>Dancers: Rob Chappetta, J.R. Russ.</i>	
Hey Preety	POE	Open Dance Section	
<i>Dancers: Aaron Jackson, Molly Sue Hitch.</i>		<i>Audience members are welcome to participate in this section.</i>	
With or Without You	U2	Section IV	
<i>Dancers: Aaron Jackson, Kaati Sundino, Molly Sue Hitch.</i>		Life in Mono	Mono
LA Song	Beth Hart	<i>Dancers: Talia Dvornik Bar-Cohen, Dantelle Fiso, Brent Lammire, J.R. Russ, and Company</i>	
<i>Dancer: Molly Sue Hitch.</i>		Come Away With Me	Norah Jones
Open Dance Section		<i>Dancers: Dantelle Fiso, J.R. Russ.</i>	
<i>Audience members are welcome to participate in this section.</i>		One is the Loneliest Number	Aimee Mann
Section II		<i>Dancers: Company</i>	
Get Busy	Jean Paul	Open Dance Section	
<i>Dancers: Talia Dvornik Bar-Cohen, Dantelle Fiso.</i>		<i>Audience members are welcome to participate in this section.</i>	
Seven Nation Army	White Stripes	Section V	
<i>Dancers: Rob Chappetta, Crystal Kelley.</i>		Open Dance Section	
Open Dance Section		<i>Audience members are welcome to participate in this section.</i>	
<i>Audience members are welcome to participate in this section.</i>		<i>This recital is being presented in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the Master of Fine Arts in Dance. Dantel Phoenix Singh is a student of Caroline Eades, Miriam Rosen, Elizabeth Singel, and Aimee Hritz.</i>	