

ABSTRACT

Title: RE/LIVING: EQUITY AND INCLUSION, BECOMING
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This document is the graduate research developed from *re/living: equity and inclusion, becoming*. As a choreographer, educator, performer, and researcher, Gabriel Mata-Ortega develops through a notion and process of decentering, an extension of decolonizing. The focus of the research lies in personal experiences, the body of work from Limón technique, and western concert dance. The work is expanded by theoretical and practices from work by dance writers, researchers, and choreographers in modern dance and disco culture. Engaging the idea of intersectional dialogue, the varying identities of Mata create pathways to connect, bridge, interrogate, and develop.

RE/LIVING: EQUITY AND INCLUSION, BECOMING

by

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Dedication

As a quote, to think about the bodies:

The world is black and white to those caught in the middle.

By Gabriel Mata-Ortega

Acknowledgements

I hold space for the instance that connected me to my body and this journey. Being told I was not able to dance was the paradigm shift that would impact by body, mind, and life. I would like to acknowledge the continuous awareness and attention from Eve Kikawa and Joel Smith. My husband, Joel Crespo, as he has provided the constant encouragement to get me through the process.

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Lastly, I want to recognize the bodies that I do not name and those that I cannot name because I never met. I am able to live the way I do because of your movement and progression. I aim to charge and be of support of creating justice and inclusion in our world, through all acts of motions.

Table of Contents

<i>Dedication</i>	<i>ii</i>
<i>Acknowledgements</i>	<i>iii</i>
<i>Table of Contents</i>	<i>iv</i>
<i>Introduction</i>	<i>1</i>
<i>Chapter 1: My Body, Bodies, and Embodying</i>	<i>3</i>
The Mold	<i>5</i>
The Talking Dancing Body	<i>6</i>
The Bodies in the Space	<i>8</i>
Limón 's Body	<i>11</i>
Our Bodies	<i>14</i>
Thinking and Moving, Redoing	<i>17</i>
The Body in Academia	<i>19</i>
Undoing the Body	<i>21</i>
<i>Chapter 2: Making and Moving Through Mediums</i>	<i>26</i>
Moving with the Movement	<i>30</i>
The Body as Central	<i>33</i>
<i>Chapter 3: Disco, Jazz Disco, and Ballet in the Space.</i>	<i>36</i>
The Bodies Making	<i>39</i>
Why do I Move Like This?	<i>40</i>
<i>Chapter 4: reliving, collaboration, and designers</i>	<i>43</i>
<i>Chapter 5: Becoming</i>	<i>54</i>
<i>Bibliography</i>	<i>60</i>

Introduction

This research is articulated through an approach of personal reflective response and action.¹ I draw from experiences and am in an experimental process of developing practices of undoing and decentering dominant notions in western concert dance.² The body that began this graduate program and research has discovered resources and active dialogues that have been able to support processes of equity and inclusion.³ I draw support from artists and academics of color who work through a system of undoing predominantly white influence in concert dance. I look into the performing body and into creative development as a point of practice into embodying the research. The graduate teaching assistantship has afforded me an opportunity of course development through an egalitarian and humanistic approach in instructing modern, ballet, disco, and jazz disco.⁴ My own choreographic investigation has resulted in the creation of six dance works, two collaborative group pieces, five dance films, an evening length solo, and many choreographic drafts for future exploration. I have developed the agency and an explorative inquiry when discussing as a researcher and dance historian. Additionally, this process has been able to shape my mind and sharpen my tongue, incorporating

¹ Reflective response as an approach of recognizing my body as a space of examination and experimentation. Action approach and process as response and developing egalitarian and humanistic process to investigation. Additionally, action research: studies carried out in the course of an activity or occupation, typically in the field of education, to improve the methods and approach of those involved. (Oxford Dictionary)

² Concert dance recognized as a predominantly white art form.

³ I will articulate this further in the writing.

⁴ I will define egalitarian and humanistic further in this writing.

research and the “academic” body in the dance field.⁵ This has developed a deeper examination into the ideas and identity of queer, femme, immigrant, marginalized, person of color through my body; intersectional dialogue. I do not see this work as radical, but as the necessary incorporation into the academic narrative that has been cultivated by an imposing narrative. This is the effort, research, and art towards a just world, where all bodies are recognized, leveling off the playing field.⁶ It is because of the personal and intimate elements to the work that I approach my thesis writing voice this way. Finally, attending to a practice of distance and dissecting of my learned knowledge from training in classical modern dance has created space and a journey of unknowing.

⁵ I am decentering the idea of an academic from its hierarchical viewpoint.

⁶ An act of decentering, I do not visualize perfect equity but as an approach and as developing steps.

Chapter 1: My Body, Bodies, and Embodying

With my body, I take to the stage space.⁷ Moving in and out of various degrees of being. From the active focus of the performer to the elaborate mind of the choreographer, engaging the reflections of my lived experience. My body creates and moves, finding ways to connect to audiences through a sense of shared humanity and community.

This body was born in Mexico, to a mother who would birth three children and raise them on her own. In my body there is a story of migration, from being born in the native lands of the *Mexihcah* and *Nahua* (*Huitzucó de los Figueroa*, Guerrero, MX) to being raised in the lands of the *Tongva* (Santa Ana, California). Spanish is this tongue's native language, the language learned from an impoverished community and not from an educational system, later on conforming to a dominant and foreign tongue. This body grew up and was stumped at trying to understand how not to roll the letter “r” and later on stumped trying to understand what an undocumented status meant, an alien. Prayer guided my community's spirit, its practices neglected mine. I stumbled through the complexity of being undocumented, later on I would argue, Mexican American is my identity. That brought up the question: What should I hold onto? The notion of the “American Dream” resulted in the voluntary loss of cultural inheritance and conformity to a dominant white heteronormative culture. First-born and first-generation, there were

⁷ I will deliberately be using the term *body* broadly. To mean beyond the physical and into ideas such as the body of the past (resonating experience) and the body of the future (prospective thoughts). Additionally, in referring to other bodies, recognizing their body of work such as dances, technique, and theory. I use this approach to broaden the scope of thinking by connecting to how my own identities have been able to generate a spectrum of meaning. With this, I will navigate through abstraction of the use of the term and recognize that it does not have universal meaning. Finally, I use this approach to make room for what I have yet to define or contextualize as the research I am working through is both embodied and sensed.

no bodies to guide my body. I was uninformed and queerly insecure, this body was unknowing and unguided, it was learning to learn and relearn the modes of moving.

My body was told that it did not know how to dance. At the same time the barriers in my life were growing. I was developing inner turmoil; my sexuality had come in question and I did not know how to respond nor was secure of my sexual identity. In terms of a career path, my aspirations of being a nutrition major with a minor in history had been turned down because of my undocumented status. I could not have a job in the United States nor afford to invest in higher education. It felt like there was no way out of this devastating downward spiral. I had to fight an overwhelming and turbulent paradigm shift. And so, this body started to learn patterns of movement, unknowingly diving into a system of hierarchical notions of ballet and transitioning into a mixture of contemporary modern practices.⁸ Fortunately, I found footing in an opportunity which offered me an investment in contemporary Limón technique.⁹ ¹⁰ Through my path, I also leaned towards

⁸ By the end of my sophomore year, a friend told me that I did not know how to dance during a dance team audition that another friend of mine decided to invite me to. I took it upon myself to show her that I could learn; I did not make the dance team. I started taking a beginning dance course at Santa Ana High School during my junior year. I studied with Barbara Noel and was mentored individually by some teaching assistants. By the end of the year, I auditioned again for the dance team and made it into the team for my senior year.

⁹ Modern dance pioneer José Limón was born on January 12, 1908, in Culiacán, Mexico. His family immigrated to the United States when he was a boy, and he grew up in Los Angeles, California. A move to New York in 1928 brought Limón into contact with the modern dance world. He trained as a dancer and became a major performer and choreographer, eventually founding his own dance company in 1947. He was internationally celebrated for his powerful and influential style. From: <https://www.biography.com/performer/jose-limon>

¹⁰ Through a scholarship that paid for my tuition I was able to transfer from Santa Ana College to San José State University. Aside from the scholarship, I was hired as a performer for the local contemporary modern dance company, sjDANCEco in San Jose, CA. At the university and in the company, I received training in Limón technique from Gary Masters and Raphael Boumaïla. I received a Bachelor of Fine Arts in dance in 2015.

a curious appreciation for the Cunningham technique.¹¹ The ideas of humanity, virtuosity, fall/recover, the impossible, and form, captivate my mind and body through movement.¹²

Currently, this moving thinking body is taking on different environments, it is immersed in a sense of change. While this body stands, bruised, scarred, and traumatized, it also straddles varying identities. This body discovers the idea of being a fabulous body while working through layers that can and cannot be seen.¹³ The act of undoing and redoing is where my body researches, experiments, and questions. Hierarchies dictate cultural norms, and my intersectional body does not fall in alignment. I use the term alignment within a Western concert dance tradition, to not align indicts the tension between who I am and what I do. This is the body that comes into the space, the choreographic, performative, and academic space.

The Mold

Guided by educational mentors in my undergraduate studies, the choreographic act was defined as a sacred ritual of movement. “You have to love it, if you’re not possessed by it... you aren’t going to survive.”¹⁴ This statement was meant to inspire but

¹¹ Cunningham started his own dance company in 1953 and created hundreds of unique choreographic works. Defined by precision and complexity, Cunningham's dances combined intense physicality with intellectual rigor. He challenged traditional ideas of dance, such as the roles of the dancers and the audience, the limitations of the stage, and the relationships between movement and beauty. Cunningham's embrace of an expanded possibility of dance, music, and visual arts reads like a how-to for pushing the boundaries of culture for subsequent generations. From <https://www.mercecunningham.org/about/merce-cunningham/>

¹² I use the term humanistic navigating jointly between the Limón technique’s humanistic as a direction towards creating dance work based on the human condition and as defined by Wikipedia: Humanism is a philosophical stance that emphasizes the value and agency of human beings, individually and collectively. How this comes together is in a continuous working process and conversation. In process, through the dance and dance film work that I will articulate further.

¹³ I will develop this further in the writing.

¹⁴ Fred Matthews, Interview on video. October 16, 2012.

it was distressing to me. My mentor's experiences and teaching of modern technique engaged me in movement, but I sought distance as I started experimenting with my own body and an approach to choreography. *The Intimate Act of Choreography* was the required book for the undergraduate choreography courses.¹⁵ To me, the word intimacy ignited visualizations of connecting and expanding on my movement making. I imagined seeing my story taking shape in a space where I was not bound by the world.¹⁶ However, despite my imagining, this course on creativity was not expansive. I recognized, in my dancing body and in the dances I wanted to create, I needed to stray from what seemed to me like a very structured process. What about the voice? What about the specificity of the narrative that I wanted to drive? How could I create and share an experience that was not just embodied but also heard and felt? These questions left a sense of desire and persistence in my choreographic approach. My instructors' mentorship from a privileged perspective rooted in classical modern dance structures of an earlier era did not connect to my marginalized body.¹⁷ It is through that experience that I continue to think about the bodies not seen through a predominantly white art form.

The Talking Dancing Body

Talking dancing is the approach to making and performance that I employ.¹⁸

Thinking about my upbringing, this is a shift from the quiet and reserved body that I once

¹⁵ From the book's website: "A comprehensive book that covers all aspects of choreography from the most fundamental techniques to highly sophisticated artistic concerns."

¹⁶ Imagining an intersectional body in the white hetero world of the United States.

¹⁷ My mentors in undergraduate studies were cis white males, which disconnected me from my intersectional identity. They talked at ease about being involved in the art, I did not see that environment being able to involve me as easily.

¹⁸ This nontraditional training by Los Angeles based dance choreographer and performer Joel Smith.

was. I reflect on how growing up my undocumented and queer identities had questions and thoughts that needed to be voiced. I found resistance and inhospitable environments through my community, relationships, and the cultures I live through. I now investigate those suppressed thoughts and inquiries through my newfound freedom of talking dancing. With the introduction of movement and dance making, I take to the space. The creative process affords me a reflection to the past, the development of present inquisitive research, and possible forms of engagement. I work through improvisation, creative writing, fragmented narrative, voice, and movement exploration while being receptive to new generative practices. Engaging research and creative visualization, I task myself to navigate through a fluid approach that aims to develop context by employing movement and talking. The voice and body work through a symbiotic relationship. Thinking about just the body, it navigates through the known technical training and virtuosic abilities. In present research I think about how my performative body connects with the community, engaging pedestrian qualities to work to disrupt apprehension of understanding and to engage with audiences who do not have experience of dance viewing. Taking voice into consideration I engage using the artistic tool with auditory dimensionality. I think about my voice as my own while also considering it as a way to disconnect from myself. Discovering the ways that I can work with the sounds emanating from my voice has the effect of expanding my performative qualities. The voice and the body work with each other as well as disrupt each other. This relationship continues to unfold as I work through my research. Through talking dancing I am in conversation with myself, the audience, and community. With that in mind, I experiment and am challenged with an artistic vision that aims to create in a humanistic and egalitarian process.

The Bodies in the Space

In the fall of 2019, I was a guest artist at the Festival of Latin American Contemporary Choreographers (FLACC) in San Francisco, CA. I shared an evening program with Miguel Gutierrez and *Primera Generación* Dance Collective.^{19 20} The festival's theme was *bridges and bones*. The program articulated: “Bridges & Bones is replacing ideas of borders and walls that separate and erase Latinxs in the US, by creating cultural bridges, honoring ancestors and building artistic alliances.”²¹ Months before, I read through the invitation and was engaged by their mention of the makeup of the program, “featuring resistant, queer, indigenous, and hybrid choreographers of the Latinx diaspora who cross cultural, physical, and aesthetic borders of tradition to abstraction.”²² That phrasing was both welcoming to my body of work but also to other bodies within the expansive identity of *Latinidad*. The festival was a space to the marginalized bodies, I then thought about how not only was performance my world but how the audience was entering with preconceived ideas on what to expect.²³ However, this sense of expectation did not feel like an experience which I may pass or fail, it was more like a communal gathering to share, observe, and expand on. This performance did not live in such a linear notion but in observance, reflection, and inquiry with my Latin American community. I

¹⁹ Miguel Gutierrez is a choreographer, composer, performer, singer, writer, educator, and arts advocate who has lived in New York for over twenty years. He is fascinated by the time-based nature of performance and how it creates an ideal frame for phenomenological questions around presence and meaning-making. From <https://www.miguelgutierrez.org>

²⁰ *Primera Generación* Dance is a collaborative group based in Riverside, CA formed by Alfonso Cervera, Irvin Gonzalez, Patty Huerta, and Rosa Rodriguez. (facebook) *Primera Generación* means first generation.

²¹ View the program ad at: <http://www.flaccdanza.org/flacc-2019-bridges--bones.html>

²² FLACC, Acceptance Letter. September 19, 2019.

²³ A space to the marginalized bodies as recognizing the POC in a predominantly “white” space.

investigate and reflect on this as someone who trained in a college setting, where my learning and performance was centered around the notion of a grade. This culture has been maintained even as I develop into the graduate work that I am currently navigating through and that I was in before, during my undergraduate work. I am having to make space where it is not made for me, where success and failure is the binary that navigates the act of embodiment on stage and in the classroom.

My performance presentation was a solo from an excerpt of an evening-length work *This is where/I Begin...* and a restaging from José Limón's 1952 duet *The Exiles*.^{24 25 26} *This is where/I Begin...* explores fragmented narratives of growing up in various homes, my immigration status, and challenging the definition of citizenship. The work afforded me an outlet to expand on ideas of living in the United States and to bring up how bodies grow roots in a country without citizenship. This work was a motion memoir, which I am developing as it is a reflection of the past with present consciousness through movement. Using it as a tool to represent in the space, connecting the themes of humanity while navigating an egalitarian mindset. Duration was a theme that came up, exploring and exposing that the growing absence and connection to the birthplace leads to a conformity to a dominant culture. In the choreographic process, I recognized complexity in the varying identities of immigrants and was concerned at the possibility of hostility by exposing my identity as living and working with an undocumented status. Through this

²⁴ Visit <https://youtu.be/Zjt-5FYqLLw> to see the 2019 performance of "This is where/I Begin" (excerpt).

²⁵ Visit <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nAx5HGRnGZQ> to see the 2019 performance of "The Exiles" at the Kennedy Center's Millennium Stage. Time signature: 17:38 – 35:38.

²⁶ The twenty-minute work set to music by Schoenberg is considered one of the great classics of American modern dance, and one of Limon's signature works.

work I made spaces for the undocumented body as a part of this nation even when it is not recognized as one. I thought about my experience as well as my mother's and my US born sister, and the ways the three experiences of one small family were vastly different. That is a possible form of exploration that I am curious about for the future.

Local dance writer José Alfaro wrote "Tiempos Desmadrosos: Dancing Latinidad to the beat of Grief" for their personal blog.²⁷ Alfaro writes

Gabriel marks time and space by creating a starting point to his memory and sticking the tape there, to which he unravels the roll of tape to an end on the other side of the dance floor. But the neat line of memory, once the tape falls to the floor, betrays him. The adhesive twists and his neat line is gone. But the straight line is not the point, nor is the beginning or the end of his memory. The resistance of the tape matches his Latinx body, which refuses to adhere to a rigid line or any national border. It's the choreographic migration and movement that happens around the tape, around the memory, around the location that is the point. When Gabriel ends the performance, he gathers all of the adhesive onto his body. The tape marks an exchange between his body and space.²⁸

I find that the poetic form of the writing creatively and generously complimented my work, exploring the relationship between what I move through and what I can explore with. The bodies in the space that were also guiding the performance were my body, my voice, the tape, and the stories, each of those expands into the performance space. In the ways that I did not introduce other personal identities into the work, I found myself introducing other elements that incorporated the dimensionality of my being.

"The resistance of the tape matches his Latinx body, which refuses to adhere to a rigid line or any national border." This specific part from Alfaro's writing resonates the most with me. He was able to interpret and unearth the core of my intention while

²⁷ I will continue to address José Alfaro with lower case letters, their personal wishes. Even if it is not the way it is done in academic English writing.

²⁸ Alfaro, "Tiempos Desmadrosos."

focusing on the dimensionality of my marginalized body. This body is not just Latino, it is Latinx. This body is not just Mexican but an undocumented immigrant Mexican American. This is not just a male but a queer cis male with “he/him and el” pronouns while in a fluctuating space of identifying with pronouns of “they/them” and the culturally used gay male queer “she.”

I now turn to the process of making the work. In the early stages of the rehearsal process, I placed markers of painter’s tape on the floor. It was this act that prompted deeper curiosity into the way the choreography would take shape. Would I give in to the superficial thoughts? Can I attend to the spacing and how this tape could direct and confine the motion memoir? How can I recognize the dimensionality of the space and narrative? In meaning making, how can I direct the interpretation and leave space for the audience to engage? It was this constant trail of thoughts that sequenced into the work and my mind. This investigation required another layer of processing from the introspective and physical. It was about the shaping of time and space and how that played out in my creative visualization. I found the process to be loaded with questions on where my body has been and what it is presently attending to. I directed and explored through a sense of relatable themes, the use of unpredictability, and in creating an intimate space.

Limón’s Body

The second work of the evening was commissioned by sjDANCEco, Limón’s *The Exiles* was restaged by Gary Masters. *New York Times* dance reviewer Gia Kourlas wrote about the work in 2017,

The Exiles is one of those dances that slip in and out of datedness. It ended on a poignant note as the pair, crossing the stage laboriously in low, grand pliés, faced each other, each with an arm stretched out to the side as they inched their way to the wing. Here, they seemed utterly displaced: as somber and as desolate as refugees.

Dance writer for the *New York Times* Pauline Koner Guest wrote about the premiere of *The Exiles* on December 5th 1952,

If one may attempt a programmatic interpretation after a single seeing of a long and difficult work, it would seem to be the immediate aftermath of the expulsion from Eden when the two exiles from Paradise are faced with a new and complex world. It is keyed high emotionally, and if it is not altogether clear in its intent, this is due partly to the fact that it has not yet had time to achieve that formal security in which alone is to be found complete communication, and partly because one seeing is not enough for any work of these dimensions and this importance.

The responses to the work attract me to the dance worlds and conversations that Limón's creations engage in. By reading these, I interpret that there is a narrative involved and yet there is so much more to unpack. What attracts me to this duet is something that I identify with my own form of movement making, it is that humanistic sense. As a viewer, I do not feel apart from the work but a part of it.

Thinking about myself in relation to modern dance choreographer José Limón, brings me to a curious contemplation. Limón was born in Mexico and migrated with his family to the United States when he was a boy. He was raised in southern California and faced adversity as an immigrant. An experience of being teased about how he spoke English made him determined to adapt to the language and to know it exceedingly well.²⁹ It was Limón who I gravitated to not just because of his work but because no other artist had reflected my experiences so closely. In the choreographic act, I make connections to

²⁹ Limón, Garafola, "An Unfinished Memoir."

how I think that Limón was receptive and responsive to the bodies in space. Gary Masters recalled stories from his experience of dancing in the company. He mentioned that as Limón restaged choreography, he adapted the performers abilities to the work and the restaging was not about fitting a mold. I often wonder if this is a response to his own marginalized identity.

Limón's dance theater works have left resonating imagery. For example, I think about *Carlota*, one of my favorite works of Limón's.³⁰ I saw the work while performing in 2015 at the Joyce Theater for José Limón's 70th anniversary celebration, I was a guest performing artist for sjDANCEco. *Carlota* is a work done in complete silence and it is about Maximilian's wife, Maximilian being the Hapsburg Emperor of Mexico - installed by Napoleon III of France.³¹ He was shot at the orders of the Mexican leader, Benito Juarez in 1867. After that Carlota lived on into grief-stricken insanity. It is this performance that remains vivid in my memory, I recount the themes of tragedy and war along with the percussive movement, the engaging character development, and the many turns by Carlota that close the work. I come back to think about Limón's portrayal of bodies in performance, meaning making, and of his cultural inheritance. In *Carlota*, I can easily give in to how I enjoy the work but at the same time I leave space to wonder about Limón as an artist and person. How was he portraying Benito Juarez and Mexico? Was he playing to the whiteness of eurocentrism with his dances? What were his audiences asking of him and was he giving in? Was Limón benefiting from a sense of victim art?

³⁰ Seibert, "Review: A Festival Invigorates José Limón's Legacy."

³¹ The dance takes place inside Carlota's grief-addled mind. In silence save for the scream before the lights first rise, she remembers Maximilian's final days amid treacherous court ladies and stamping guerrillas. (Seibert)

What was his point of access into the narrative of the work? Additionally, I think about the pervasive whiteness that modern dance came to be known by. What about his work may have combated that succumbing to a hierarchical sense and what played into it? I think this because that contention plays out in my embodiment and dance making. It is through my work that I am trying to develop an awareness that confronts and interrogates succumbing to modern dance in the way that it has continued to support the ideology of whiteness as its foundation.

Our Bodies

Our paralleling experiences of conforming to the norm expose the dominance we grapple with. Together, our bodies are thrown into turmoil, we do not live unbothered.³² Where we differ within our experience is that I wrestle with how I am a body of color that has invested and creates work within a predominantly white art form while Limón contributed to the foundational structure of it. As I see him as an immigrant and person of color, I wonder about the work that he could have done to further push the boundaries and engage in a process of decentering. I am curious about identity politics during Limón's time and how he would engage today's environment. It is not easy for me to think about this. I shift between trying to understand the breakthroughs that Limón's body offered and how he may have given in to whiteness. I also shift between how

³² Tarik D O'Meally, Interview. 2020.

In awareness to how we do not access the benefits of white privilege. As marginalized bodies, we navigate through identities of marginalization. From a conversation with Tarik D O'Meally during the Black Light Summit planning meetings over Zoom.

similar our bodies and experiences are, as well as how they are not. It is then that I work through the body that we are left with, his repertoire.³³

Returning to the performance at the Festival of Latin American Contemporary Choreographers, Masters wanted to pay attention to the bodies. He cast Kelisha Gardeen (she/her) and me, both artists of color with immigrant backgrounds.³⁴ The portrayal and intention of the work was to place the bodies and the narrative in conversation with the socio-political conversations going on.³⁵ The political tension from inhumane immigration policies directed by a Republican administration engaged the idea of investigating the evolving interpretations and meaning from Limón's work. How does it reflect and connect with what we are experiencing? Although this was not in my definition a talking dance, because there was no text, vocalization, or voice elements, this work retained a narrative and was inspired by poet John Milton's work *Paradise Lost*.³⁶ To me, this was a humanistic work and I feel that it attempts to speak to the audience. The work attends to themes of being exiled, such as Adam and Eve. As a performing artist, my reservations were on the hetero-partnership and the religious implications of the work. However, the connections to social awareness and representing my own cultural inheritance connected me beyond my physical identity. It is in this negotiation that I bring inquiry on how dancers' bodies are portrayed and how I came to appreciate working as part of a restaged classical choreography. As I look at the choreography and

³³ I will touch on this later on page 18.

³⁴ Gardeen's pronouns.

³⁵ Timeframe specified March 2019 - October 2019 and the political atmosphere.

³⁶ *Paradise Lost* is an epic poem in blank verse by the 17th-century English poet John Milton (1608–1674).

as an artist who prioritizes my own identity in performance, I am tasked with making compromises and gauging how I would participate as a performer.³⁷ The story of Adam and Eve, in my view, is saturated in hetero and gendered embodiment. With *The Exiles* and previous performance experiences, I am aware of how I performed and was choreographed, the superficial identity markers makeup generalizations about my body and my experiences. The identifiers of male, of color, and even of a certain height have been used by choreographers to typecast my body. I performed and generated movement for dance makers who did not ask me for the type of embodiment that I felt comfortable performing but assumed that I would. These characteristics along with general assumptions do a disservice of recognizing the body in the space, the performing body. In my research and choreographic practices, I engage the movement artist first. Making dances has been a collaborative effort with dancers.³⁸ I make space in a way that supports agency over performers' own movements and that they do not succumb to a hierarchical notion of me as a director. The heightened consciousness is something that I am asking for in my own dance culture and environment. This act is an effort towards decentering the process in choreography from the choreographer and also uprooting linear viewing of bodies and how they embody. In the role of choreographer, I recognize the absence of such agency through my experiences and am putting into practice the questions and process of making with an awareness of the bodies in the space and their lived experiences. With this, my focus is on developing artwork that is about the bodies.

³⁷ For restaged choreographies or for works by other artists.

³⁸ In a humanitarian and egalitarian approach, this manifests in all facets of the artform.

Thinking and Moving, Redoing

Looking into Limón's work and thinking through a process of restaging affords me a space to consider how I think about rediscovering classical modern works. A constant question that arises is, what and why do I hold on and revisit dance works? I introduce the idea of how classical choreographies can engage present and social awareness by making connections to our current living experiences. *The Exiles* was able to facilitate that. Through this research I take into consideration what was the world and historical view when these works were created in relation to the present. As artist and researcher, how can I interpret and incorporate the work in my own dance making practices? I am attentive to the world and artists that classical choreography came from in process of restaging and my own inquiry in the act of performance. Other questions arise as I think about restaging: How can I change a limited observation or incorporate more to the themes in those choreographies? I use the word "limited" to provoke but to also question what else can be invigorated. I am thinking about collaborators and broad forms of research that can do a deeper investigation to not only uncover the process and performance of the past but to also consider our present and future. I think about how other artists have restaged and are reinvigorating classical work. Looking at movement, how much of the movement can I retain and at what point must I interpret these dances?

With this approach of research and expanding engagement, I am inquiring about reengaging classical works of José Limón. I think about this as someone who engages their classical modern training but looks to find ways of appreciating the work while also making a space to interrogate, analyze, and develop. I bring a lot of myself within in examining Limón's body and his body of work. Recognizing the spaces that need to be

integrated and examined deeper by my view. However, reminding myself that I need to take a step back is constantly in my awareness, I am judging and critiquing with today's standards and consciousness. That brings me back to questioning, why are we doing something again? Why must a work be performed again? I would hate to think that classical works just live as vessel or a mold, that we are bound by what someone created years ago, and it must live in rigidity from performances of the past. I think of these choreographies as malleable works of our humanity, constant and fluidly evolving.

In 2018, I was thinking about a specific restaging and I examined my experience with learning Limón's *The Moor's Pavane*. I was an understudy for the role of the Moor in 2015 as a contracted performing artist for sjDANCEco.^{39 40} I dutifully learned the work and imposed a body on myself, I did not think much of it. In the process and performance, I could not help but glaze over the Moor and onto another part. I am working through it now and I recognize that the Moor is absolutely the character that is of least interest to me. How about Iago? I was captivated by the grim and fluid quality that was embodied by Robert Regala, motions I feel that I can move through. Or what about Emilia? That dress would look phenomenal on me and I would definitely enjoy pantomiming gossip. I recognize how the character of the Moor would just attend to my physically recognized gender, from the perspective of viewers. But what about the depth of my feminine and queer identity? Is there space to explore that? I would hope so, I would hope that as Limón developed a technique around humanity that he himself would

³⁹ Ulrich, "A Taste of a Masterpiece."

⁴⁰ Company performing *The Moor's Pavane* at the time: Maria Basile, Raphaëlle Boumaila, Heather Cooper, Hsiang Hsiu-Lin, and Robert Regala.

be receptive to an examination or reengaging of the work through the spectrum of human identities.⁴¹ These are the thoughts that now come to mind when I think about restaging a classical choreography. I feel that I am not the only one and I also would like to put my body first in other choreographies. Not just the physical body but the lived body.

Having performed for FLACC allowed me to explore humanistic and egalitarian approaches in development, practice, and performance. The performing body that I take on in both works is different and attends to varying elements within performance, yet both look to speak to the audience in their own way. Choreographically, I aim to share by speaking, using prompts for choreographic exploration, and work to find connecting themes for the viewer to access. I navigate with the dimensionality of meaning making and the spectrum of complexity or simplicity. It is this mindset that I retain and expand on as I continue to create and question forms of moving and making. I reflect on growing up in an impoverished community when I think about making dances. More specifically at the disparity of access and notion of understanding interpretation. I recognize the sentiment of how modern dance plays part of a hierarchy and there is a certain amount of education needed to be able to understand.

The Body in Academia

I think about how modern dance was introduced to me in an academic setting. Also, I recognize how academic settings foster institutional adversity to impoverished communities and how it is discussed as a questionable luxury to the working classes that

⁴¹ Inspired by stories from Gary Masters on how company members of “opposing” gender identities wanted to perform other works and characters.

are my familial connections.⁴² I am thinking about how the lack of incorporation to my culturally specific community generated an absence. It is that absence to me that feels unwelcoming and needs close examination. It is personal, my mother to this day cannot imagine a career path for me and after one heated debate will not entertain the conversation of my life's work. I see her as seeing my work unfold on the sidelines, disengaged. It is these divisions that I think about as I make. Being undocumented, the barriers and adversity are greater. Not only is there a lack of support from the community, I also was invested in a field that is limited in funding resources.⁴³ Even as it may feel limited, it then has a larger absence as it does not develop working artists with noncitizen status.⁴⁴ I think about the theme of migration in dance, dances, and dance making, it is broad. My specific focus attends to undocumented communities, even I who lived that experience cannot name more than a handful of undocumented performing and choreographing artists, those are part of my network. Yes, there are Latinx artists and artists with immigrant background, but the experience and community of current noncitizen and undocumented dance immigrants of color is limited and navigates an

⁴² Familial connections as the neighborhood community we treated as part of our own family but were not related to each other.

⁴³ Although I am now hold permanent resident status, the funding resources remain limited for the undocumented artist community.

⁴⁴ Noncitizen: as the newly coined term by the Biden administration to differentiate from the terms alien and illegal from being used as a descriptor.

almost nonexistent space.⁴⁵ As of March 2020, I became a permanent resident, a development that is steeped in access and privilege.^{46 47}

Undoing the Body

With considering self-reflection I am attentive to how I will continue to make dances. It is my body and narrative that I think about as a bridge to connect the worlds that I am a part of. The complex idea of a bridge, connection, and relationship draw me to revisit and examine the work of dance writers that have been able to speak to me as a person who faces adversity and as an artist involved in making art that uncovers hidden realities and suppressed bodies. Dance historian Takiyah Nur Amin's writing of "African American dance revisited; undoing master narratives in the studying and teaching of dance history" resonates by engaging themes of questioning, adapting, and undoing through dance. Nur Amin writes "To undertake the study and teaching of dance history is both a personal and political act." Through this statement I think about choreography as also offering the opportunity to engage the personal and political.⁴⁸ For someone who does not have American citizenship, it is through performance that I create access to a voice and politics when I myself cannot vote. The writing of Amin to me connects to

⁴⁵ I think about artists who engage the themes of immigration. Artists possibly spanning the identifiers of immigrants with visas, with family that has an immigrant background, second-generation, and those who come from some form of wealth and privilege, it is those bodies that I see create nostalgic work on the prompt of immigration.

⁴⁶ I use the terms access and privilege to call out the lack of policy reform, had I not married a citizen I would still be a DACA recipient.

⁴⁷ I draw on this personal example to carve a sense of egalitarian form of making. If the notion is for equal access and a social advocating of removal of inequalities, I recognize a cultural imbalance. Refraining from linear and constantly used terms such as equity and inclusion I think about this by creating a scenario. The idea of egalitarian would look to make for the marginalized bodies while offering a space of learning for those that have access. I am drawn to that process as opposed to a thinking of successful fulfilment.

⁴⁸ Amin, "African American Dance Revisited." 44.

talking dancing. I am thinking about the performing body and space as serving in the ways that our present politics does not. Additionally, I think about the research process that Takiyah Nur Amin underwent in creating “African American dance revisited.” I am drawn to the way she connects and expands on her personal views and on American concert dance in relation to African American history. Western concert dance history has been a requirement in the academic institutions that I have attended. It has rigidly retained the articulation of historical context spanning from King Louis the XIV, the revolutionary Isadora Duncan, and the birth of modern dance in America, but the course instruction has not done the work of thinking critically beyond the preserved white history. Nur Amin creates space within her writing, to introduce access, “I am interested in exploring the ways in which African American dance itself is, in many instances, the scaffold upon which other aesthetic predilections are grafted.”⁴⁹ Nur Amin develops her statements about presence in concert dance, how African American dance is foundational, global, contemporary, and generative. “A critical point: the execution or performance of African American dance does not depend necessarily on the presence of African American bodies.”⁵⁰ Unearthing to decenter, Amin does not default to a dominant and singular textbook approach to instructing and thinking about dance history. It is this action that I am focusing on by recognizing Amin’s body, her argument, her critical thinking, and the space in which it is being stated; countering the suppressive “master” narrative.⁵¹

⁴⁹ Amin, “African American Dance Revisited.” 45.

⁵⁰ Amin, “African American Dance Revisited.” 46.

⁵¹ Amin, “African American Dance Revisited.” 52.

With that in mind, I also draw on the work of American cultural historian and dance artist Brenda Dixon Gottschild. Her writing of “Stripping the Emperor: The Africanist Presence in American Concert Dance” offers me guidance on interconnectedness as a theme to explore. She writes “Influences from past and present cultures are woven into, intermeshed with, and redistributed in any given moment in time. (To paraphrase this idea in the structuralist terms, every text is an intertext.)”⁵² This statement moves me to think about the modes my body can expand on. What is yet to be discovered by my kind of body? What is the inquisitive view that I can offer and also meaning making that my body can develop? It is there that I think of my marginalized body as offering and being the source of generative research for such intersectional bodies, being able to see the body in the way that *unbothered* others cannot. How I see Gottschild employ these ideas is by engaging the performative ability of Earl “Snake Hips” Tucker with the embodied Africanist presence and five principles.⁵³ Gottschild introduces how George Balanchine⁵⁴ helped “develop and define American ballet” and through his work he adopted Africanist influence.⁵⁵ I think about this as an exposing of the interconnectedness of dance culture that has been suppressed by dominant white bodies in the performance space. I recognize that I did not readily know this information. Seeing white bodies in performance and positions of power is what painted the culture of ballet for me. It is these bodies that take on the narrative and when highlighted, redirect

⁵² Gottschild, “Stripping the Emperor.” 336.

⁵³ As described by Gottschild, the principles are: Embracing the Conflict, Polycentrism/Polyrhythm, High Affect-Juxtaposition, Ephebism, and The Aesthetic of the Cool.

⁵⁴ Baryshnikov, an immigrant to the U.S from St. Petersburg, Russia.

⁵⁵ Gottschild, “Stripping the Emperor.” 337.

the source of influence in the work, renaming and embodying the experience on the stage. Gottschild writes “The Africanist presence in Balanchine’s works is a story of particular and specific motifs... these were not dispensable, decorative touches that marked one or two ballets; rather, they were essential ingredients in his canon.”⁵⁶ In the writing, I see the ways that historical context is uncovered and the non-physically present integral body of influence is realigned to be the focus.

Returning to a quote from Nur Amin, “One must make choices about what is included or excluded from the exploration and in so doing, reveal a set of intellectual priorities that can either reinforce dominant narratives or choose to move in a direction that troubles or complicates such notions,”⁵⁷ I also want to introduce a quote from Arthur Mitchell in Gottschild’s writing,⁵⁸

There was a fallacy that blacks couldn’t do classical ballet—that the bodies were incorrect. But then you talked to Balanchine, who was the greatest master of them all and changed the look of ballet in the world today. He described his ideal ballerina as having a short torso, long arms, long legs, and a small head. If that’s ideal, then we [peoples of African lineage] are perfect.⁵⁹

It is through these quotes that I recognize that both writers are doing the work of undoing. Symbiotically supporting each other's work and confronting the suppression of black bodies and highlighting their influence in western concert dance. It is this deep layered context that I see how their own marginalized bodies make space through their work. The work of Takiyah Nur Amin and Brenda Dixon Gottschild has developed the recognition

⁵⁶ Gottschild, “Stripping the Emperor.” 339.

⁵⁷ Amin, “African American Dance Revisited.” 44.

⁵⁸ Arthur Mitchell of Dance Theatre of Harlem.

⁵⁹ Gottschild, “Stripping the Emperor.” 340.

of how my creative embodiment takes shape as scholarly writing. The investigations and practice, inverted, have a connecting relationship. These thoughts, process, and inquiry are in the trajectory of creating a body of work, whether written or performed. A body of work that is being uncovered, that I am uncovering. A body that was suppressed at a time and is working through to leveling out the field. As I am a person of color (POC) representing and working in a predominantly white institution (PWI) and art form, I recognize how Nur Amin and Gottschild have done the work and are those bodies that I need to see. I continue to be curious about how their bodies articulate bodies of dance that are not known through an art that has historically prioritized white bodies through a systemic hierarchy.

Chapter 2: Making and Moving Through Mediums

In 2020, I was awarded the first ever summer research grant for a graduate student from the School of Theatre, Dance, and Performance Studies Board of Visitors. I planned for dance program development focusing on universities and institutions by teaching modern, disco, and choreographing for students. The plan was impacted by the covid pandemic and I had to reconsider my ideas while trying to understand where and how dance was shifting. Live performance was being cancelled and gatherings were being disbanded as safety precautions. At the same time, I was offered a performance opportunity by the Hispanic National Bar Association (HNBA) for their virtual conference. For that commission, I did not know what to do, to offer a recording of a past stage performance was not what I wanted to default to. I chose to challenge myself and these two opportunities came together and grounded me to explore the landscape of dance film making.

Self-professed control freak, sporadic drag queen, and founder of haus of bambi, Robert Woofter was the collaborator, dramaturg, and confidant as I explored making in the virtual realm.⁶⁰ *This is where/I Begin...* came to inspire the creation of *En la Tierra*. I reflect on the premiere of my solo work of *This is where/I Begin...*, in February of 2020, I was preparing to present the work. Performance opportunities highlighting the immigrant experience were offered and I was humbled at the recognition, looking forward to sharing my narrative. It turned out that the one-night only premiere would end up being the only time the work came alive through performance. The effects of the pandemic resulted in

⁶⁰ haus of bambi is a movement-based company that produces genderless and gendermore fantasies for the stage and screen. From www.hausofbambi.com

having all performance opportunities cancelled. The sensation of disappointment and questioning of what would happen to this body of work left me wondering if anything about it could be salvaged. Additionally, a month later, my Deferred Action for Childhood Arrival status (DACA) and undocumented body would be no more, I was granted permanent residency in the United States. I wondered if I could return to the body of work and I thought about *This is where I Begin...* as a resource to draw from as I was prompted to touch on Latino/a/x themes that the Hispanic National Bar Association represented. I recognized the interconnectedness that *This is where I Begin...* could touch on the context of *latinidad*. Some parts of the work can support the generating of another, becoming aware of how my moving and making body is not just connected through my being but in my dance works.⁶¹

At the time, national events of influence that I was responding to were the recognizing of native people's lands and the social reckoning stemming from the killing of George Floyd.⁶² ⁶³ Artistically, I wanted to strike a tone that had a hopeful sensation. The Mexican proverb came to mind, "they tried to bury us... they didn't know we were seeds." With all these thoughts in mind, I merged them to create a plan that worked through improvisation, choreographed sequences, gesture work, and a spoken word

⁶¹ Herrera, Email exchange. 2020. Inspired by a conversation "My process often works that way, where I am actually making two works at the same time and I don't realize it."

⁶² A Land Acknowledgement is a formal statement that recognizes and respects Indigenous Peoples as traditional stewards of this land and the enduring relationship that exists between Indigenous Peoples and their traditional territories. From <https://www.northwestern.edu/>

⁶³ On May 25, 2020, George Floyd, a 46-year-old black man, was killed in Minneapolis, Minnesota, while being arrested for allegedly using a counterfeit bill. During the arrest Derek Chauvin, a white police officer with the Minneapolis Police Department, knelt on Floyd's neck for approximately eight to nine minutes after he was handcuffed and lying face down. From https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Killing_of_George_Floyd

element. In thinking about the visual work, I wanted to move through environments that were intimate, exposed, raw, and transformative. Those were words that guided my design and visual direction. The performing body was to expose the suppression of conformity and traverse through the reclaiming of identity, within the theme of land and seeds. It used *novelas*, food, the home, and Americanisms as themes to make cultural references.⁶⁴ Joined together, the work's intention created a dance film that would speak my truths, aimed to connect to the community, and embolden the audience.

Remember Summer and *Fading/Fade Out* were two other dance films that I created within the summer of 2020 in collaboration with haus of bambi. *Remember Summer* was initially inspired and meant as a movement homage to Donna Summer, disco icons, and the era. Visions of how I have inherited the moves, culture, and political progression were to be explored. I was curious about embodying how disco lives today and is developing through the iconography of the era. The pandemic and the copyright limitations redirected the intention of the work. I had to reconsider a communal theme for the work and the closing of various nightclubs terminated the possibility of collaboration in regard to filming locations. The Wonderland Ballroom would host *Sleaze*, “Sleaze is a monthly party... blending the darker side of disco with forward-thinking techno. We pay homage to past eras of queer nightlife and culture in order to usher in a new breed of LGBTQ+ nightlife in Washington, DC.”⁶⁵ I imagined it as a supporting resource that played a major role in my work, but the club night was closed down. How do you pay tribute to an era without its music? That is personally a challenge that frustrates me.

⁶⁴ Spanish word for soap opera.

⁶⁵ Description from www.sleazeparty.com. I would attend the club night on a monthly basis.

Music from artists like Sylvester, Donna Summer, and Diana Ross have a high cost for music licensing and the project had a budget to consider.⁶⁶ Those limitations redirected my approach to the work. I recognized that as a queer body, I lost nightclub spaces that allowed me to live, move, and perform in ways that I cannot during the day. My queer brown body does not fall in alignment to the hetero white socio-cultural form of moving throughout the day. My boisterous and flamboyant self does not feel secure, my body cannot embody myself when I feel out of place in my daily sense of being. The loss of communal gathering and nightlife left a void, which was unsatisfactorily filled with only nostalgic reflection of what once was. It was that awareness that ended up being the generative source for *Remember Summer*. The title remained and was able to highlight another train of thought. *Remember Summer* as remembering the past, the experienced motions, and the hope of when and where my body can be in the future. In collaboration with DC DJ and composer Lemz, we worked on a musical score that took on that nightlife sensation, its pulse drove the body to move throughout the film. This work made me dive into exploring the embodiment of mourning, relishing, and desiring the past and future of nightlife. I noticed how this work redirected my body in performance, away from my technically trained body and recognized the embodiment of the self in a space not often seen in concert dance. This work had a different sensation from how my past

⁶⁶ Donna Summer an American singer, songwriter and actress. She gained prominence during the disco era of the 1970s and became known as the "Queen of Disco", while her music gained a global following. From: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Donna_Summer
Sylvester an American singer-songwriter. Primarily active in the genres of disco, rhythm and blues, and soul, he was known for his flamboyant and androgynous appearance, falsetto singing voice, and hit disco singles in the late 1970s and 1980s. From: [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sylvester_\(singer\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sylvester_(singer))
Diana Ross an American singer and actress. She rose to fame as the lead singer of the vocal group The Supremes. Following departure from the Supremes in 1970, Ross embarked on a highly successful, globally ground-breaking solo career in music, television, film and stage. From https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Diana_Ross

experiences had navigated through dance and there was satisfactory discovery while moving through this process. It was the parts of my queer and nightlife self that I was working through, in the day and through choreography.

Fading/Fade Out was a collaboration with performer Gary Champi.⁶⁷ Through discussion and choreographic exploration, we moved through layers of complexity, meaning, and undoing. The thought of retaining classical modern dance practices in our bodies as people of color was present throughout the process. I thought about how these “white” movement techniques, experience in Cunningham from Gary and Limón from me, are seen with bodies of color.⁶⁸ We noted how we experience a sense of contention as we continue to navigate within the movement form. The fraught uncertainty about how we can develop our careers within what we have invested our time leaves a lot of questions unanswered and thoughts rummaging about. We employed white sheets as a prop, exploring a sense of covering, wrapping, and revealing of our colored bodies. Within movement, we moved around and in support of each other. I continue to think about how these bodies, Gary’s and mine, came to be in the movement form. How our questions continue to develop while our connection to the organizations of the technique are now dismal and distant.

Moving with the Movement

I draw on the distance of “birth home,” with technique as home. Since we are not presently in the companies and are not certified instructors, where is our access? The

⁶⁷ Gary Champi is a freelance artist.

⁶⁸ I think of Limón technique as “white,” the technique is in our preserved history as fall and recovery. Limón learned it from the work of Doris Humphrey and Charles Weidman. They are white, cisgender, and heterosexual dance makers.

distinction draws me to imagine how I am an immigrant in movement, I adopted the Limón technique and am removed from the “native land of the founders.” I think about how Limón’s body was of color yet in several ways has been claimed and colonized by white bodies, Doris Humphrey was the first artistic director of the Limón company. I was not able to find the connection I thought. It seemed that this technique and company would recognize my moving and lived body. I did not see it as a failure, but I recognized the internal politics and connections that go on within dance companies. Who really gets a seat at the table is not something given on merit and performance alone. I worked through what my time in the Limón technique offered me. I use the themes of Limón to move in and out of the humanistic ideas while prioritizing my relationship to movement and contemporary thinking of practice.⁶⁹ Through this process we worked with movement forms that we know but used it as a space to further support ourselves as thinkers and movers while dealing with the complexity of working in the margins.

In collaboration with Woofter, his knowledge of dance filmmaking and process offered a concentrated experience in the multiple facets of the making process. I shifted my relationship with movement, not just from the performer’s view but from that of the camera and on the screen. Storyboarding and editing were limitless tools of conceptualizing and manipulating movement. I gained agency in developing an ability of conceptualizing dance film making. This also offers a collaboration with live performance. I recognize that I am accessing a broader dimensionality on the ideas of humanity.

⁶⁹ I will articulate more on this in the next section.

Additionally, the process of filmmaking brought up questions that I recognized I did not have to consider in a proscenium space and also it afforded me opportunities that proscenium spaces cannot. As a body, I realized that I was seeing the body differently and that it had different motions. I was capable of hiding movements and angles that are visible in live performance. This had an alarming thought, it made me wonder if, during the process, I may have subconsciously acted on suppression not just in the physicality but in meaning. What do I share and what do I not engage? I entertained this trail of thoughts as a process of trying to uncover the underlying themes I would have to research because I was developing in a new medium. What sense of undoing will I have to bring attention to? What relationship will I have with this process? Additionally, what was there beyond the instinctual responses? What, in my marginalized body, do I need to develop an awareness of and who is directing it? I now pay attention to how my body looks on screen, from the superficiality of how my skin tone is whitened by light to the layers that I will unfold within this form of meaning making.

The filmmaking process made conscious themes between movement and inquiry. Within the practice I thought about the work of writer and artist madison moore.⁷⁰ moore helped introduce and contextualize the depth of *fabulosity* and how it comes from non-marginal marginalized bodies. The idea expands on recognizing that the world does not afford fabulous bodies the space and therefore those bodies need to make the space, in their mind, their everyday dress, in the nightclub, and in varying forms of manifestation. “Fabulousness may look great on the outside, and beautiful eccentrics may seem confident and well put together, but underneath the surface lurks a story of struggle,

⁷⁰ I will continue to address madison moore with lower case letters, even if it is not the way it is done in English writing.

survival, and resistance.”⁷¹ To me, this sense of fabulousity is in part a coping mechanism while also being resistant and challenging to the dominant culture. Another part that I related is that a fabulous body, like mine, emerges out in phases as it has conformed to the dominant culture, between my cultural inheritance, queer identity, and developmental status as a citizen in the US. As a fabulous body, I take on the role of dance maker to afford me the space I need. Recognizing my artistic platform, vision, and lived experience, I wondered if I defaulted to suppression in hiding away the conforming aspects of myself. I recognized that the dance films were, like my work, making space for the ways that my body is not seen yet I was sculpting it to be “desired.”

The Body as Central

Thinking about the role of choreographer, I am heightening my marginalized body and relating my experience in the space by being the conversation. I think about: How do I see my body? I have focused on my relationship to myself and the audience. Live performance spaces hyper focus on my movement which has been a point of insecurity. This stems and ranges from the physical to the emotional. Redirecting that sensation and thought is where I have developed my research within dance film making. I imagine the idea of a guide, instead of a performer, to bring attention to the work while also not taking on the pressure of performance and a white supremacist goal of “perfection.”⁷² This guide notion also offers me some leeway into the act of “performing” with improvisational space. In recognizing the various forms of consciousness when on

⁷¹ moore, *Fabulous*, 17.

⁷² I use white supremacist goal of “perfection” to call out the social standards that have been set by a predominantly white culture in how bodies move and what

stage, I am not bound by the choreography but use it as a path that I can deviate from every so often and yet arrive at the intended point. This process allows me to use performance as an extension of the continuing research. I am not thinking of a choreographic work as definite but as fluidly moving through the phases that it takes on, never being purist to a label. This is the response to live performance that I developed while generating dance film work. Dance film work is definite and has a life of cemented continuity. I embraced the uncertainty of live performance by recognizing how film creates the body in a set pattern.

Dance filmmaking has taken on thoughts and physicality beyond what I could have imagined. In that work, I do not see movement as the only moving aspect but as a part of it, the frame, images, and dance move. The outcome, although polished, begins from movement attempted several times, is edited, revised, and edited a few more times. That is part of the discovery within that opportunity, I am able to embrace the uncertainty and instability that stems from movement. Movement cannot be perfected, and I recognize how I do not have the “perfect” technique, body, or ability. Yet I can generate work that brings me to realize the most of me that I can through the film, not imposed on by others. This offers my body and world to be seen through another viewpoint where I can become more than movement and voice. I come to attend that my body is central to focus, I use my *fabulous* body, to move in and out of several forms of my consciousness. I use it to connect to a sense of *unbothered* privilege that I am not afforded as an intersectional person. Manifesting the ways that I would like to drive the dialogue. Creating the performance space, in proscenium and virtual spaces, fostering a welcoming

environment as opposed to what I have known from performance cultivated by western concert dance ideology.

Chapter 3: Disco, Jazz Disco, and Ballet in the Space.

Developing choreographic processes for me has been an act of engaging my social, personal, and researched knowledge while taking on the outlets that I do not access outside the stage space. I also engage this thinking as I explore ways of developing movement courses in the academic curriculum. Course instruction and requirements have remained stagnant as I have moved through academia. From public high school, community college, undergraduate studies, and now a graduate degree program, the study of western concert dance has remained a requirement. My inquiry in developing and training in new movement forms, within the social sphere, have not been supported within the institutional structure. It is that space that I engage through my research to make a space while offering socially conscious instruction. A steppingstone for the time being but a generative space to redesign the culture that is retained in institutions.

Teaching Intermediate/Advanced Ballet, Global Dance Forms; Disco Dance, and Fundamentals of Jazz; Disco, has afforded me a space to research and expand beyond western concert dance mindset. Disco and Jazz Disco are courses that I had not seen within the institutional structure and this awareness left me to propose these courses while developing my own approach to the work. Taking on these courses left room for interpretation, inquiry, and examination of how they can be generated through community. Themes that I prioritized were individuality, collective development, and egalitarianism.

While developing the courses, I recognized my inclinations from training in Western concert dance forms. My knowledge of ballet and modern dance forms, which in ways complimented each other, did not make space for how bodies could move with a

sense of community and egalitarianism. My experiences were deeply rooted in codified movement practices. Upon initially imagining how I would direct these courses, I recognized that I defaulted to the progressions of contemporary modern and ballet. I needed to make room for how things could generate and flow from the principles that I wanted to develop. I wanted to challenge the iconography and moving images from what has been historically preserved for disco. Not feeding into notions and commercialization of what disco is promoted as, but the personal manifestation. The fusion between disco and jazz created a space to make connections and negotiate between genres. Across all three courses, challenging and allowing the student to engage their own known knowledge, ability, and inquiry. This research is not reflective of my own experience as a student, which is what guided my interest. I came to realize that I should not rely on known teaching practices as I prioritize a sense of community and focus on attending to the bodies in the space. Within this development, I keep questioning: Is this creating access? Is it egalitarian? Is it humanistic? This is part of the research process, the questions that bombard and cloud the mind with doubt. However, with a focus and intention, I wanted to attend to the bodies not traditionally or historically recognized in contemporary modern practices; they should have the space to shape the direction of where and how we move. An example for me is Gottschild, instead of thinking about Balanchine's work, why not refer to Dunham. This I think of as decentering, acknowledging the creation of American ballet from the influencing roots as opposed to the white cis male body in a position of power.

In practice, limitations varied in developing the courses. In disco, the limitation of preserved documentation and commercialization of disco led to a partially limited view

of disco culture. Bound by imagery, I acknowledged the limitations of technology during the early time of the era and thematically directed the work to make personal connections with a sense of boundless freedom, connecting to the progressive social movement of the time. The ballet course had an attendance of dancers with varied knowledge and appreciation of the movement form. There were varying forms of resistance from the students in exploring a process of teaching that did not have gendered movement, refrained from French terminology, began with center movement phrases, and accessed various meters in musicality. I took the time to paint a scenario for myself, about how some students just wanted ballet in line with how they were taught it. By having my research lead the instruction, they were being tasked with a viewpoint that was out of their comfort zone and they had to adapt their modes of learning to the process I was cultivating. I thought about how I could argue that this is not distant or different from what they know, but we are observing and moving through a different viewpoint. The Jazz Disco course is a continuous investigation of how much influence of one social genre connects with a codified dance form that came from social engagement. How do they merge? I continue to experiment with what that “perfect balance” is. Additionally, I am recognizing how much the students are navigating this course. With various abilities and experience, I must attend to them individually while developing the instruction. As this is an elective course, I think about the sense of freedom that this space should afford them. What curious investigations and personal growth should they manifest into. These thoughts are ideal while discovering the culture between jazz and disco.

Overall, I constructed the development of the courses from a combination of personal movement experience, recorded movement, improvisational class structure, and

by prompting student's own research. This could not be developed without the engaged consciousness of the students. I have learned from directing as much as I have learned from the generous offerings of movement, information, and responses from the students.

The Bodies Making

Thoughts that emerged from developing these courses were that I began getting the sensation that the courses were blending or that I was making connections. Does teaching two forms mean a completely different pedagogy? Thankfully not, throughout every course I worked with individuals with their own bodies, abilities, and experiences. Broadly speaking, I could not have disconnected the way that I teach from one course to another, some practices remained while I generated new ones for others. I was drawing in while editing and also generating, thoughts and movements.

These dance forms were cross pollinating because of my body. It was the specificity in detail and historical context that, for me, differentiated movement forms and styles. The movement practices that I use in ballet or modern can also translate into disco and the newly researched disco jazz form. I just mentioned how I used codified movement practices from ballet and modern to develop the other forms of dance but that does not mean that I placed or viewed them in positions of power. Instead, they were sequences that I could refer to, but they were just supplemental. To me, it is what I know and default to but in my own journey of undoing, I work to not rely on what has been taught by those systems.⁷³ If they are in practice, I explore ways of not succumbing to their hierarchical notions as I know them. Meanwhile, for disco and jazz disco, I

⁷³ I will write about an inspiration from this on page 41.

recognized that I had the space to analyze, respond, and transition within an environment that is fluid and prioritizes the body's development within a communal approach. What does that say about how we access, interpret, and support movement? I am thinking about dance in an academic context, where the grading system influences a trajectory and develops a goal. With that in mind, does alleviating the pressure from a grade make one dance better or is progression more noticeable? I chose to not place such limitations on expectation from these moving and researching bodies. While they still received a grade, I tried cultivating a culture within class that was not burdened by the strenuous act of passing a course. While these were different courses, there was a receptive culture from the students that was able to support my own approach to the work. Within the classes, there were students who were engaged, others that had challenging inquiry, and some that were not as vocal. In thinking about decentering movement from systemic oppression, it is this inquiry and response that I have developed through my own practices.

Why do I Move Like This?

This is not a purist approach to teaching movement forms, but it responds to current themes of resourcefulness and social impact while personally recognizing the gaps in representation along with possible steps to navigate through. A call to action or an awareness of, I think about how we can decenter and challenge the practice of teaching movement forms in an egalitarian way. I am thinking and am conflicted about the idea of equity. I am receptive to recognizing systemic oppression and hierarchies in art forms that are predominantly white. I am challenged to imagine a form of teaching movement while recognizing inequity and biases.

Reading and thinking through the work of writer and social activist bell hooks was an initial source within this research.⁷⁴ In her work “Teaching to Transgress” and through my work, I continue to return to this quote:

If we examine critically the traditional role of the university in the pursuit of truth and the sharing of knowledge and information, it is painfully clear that biases that uphold and maintain white supremacy, imperialism, sexism, and racism have distorted education so that it is no longer about the practice of freedom. The call for a recognition of cultural diversity, a rethinking of ways of knowing, a deconstruction of old epistemologies, and the concomitant demand that there be a transformation in our classrooms, in how we teach and what we teach has been a necessary revolution - one that seeks to restore life to a corrupt and dying academy.⁷⁵

While we cannot uproot the foundations and systems that academic institutions navigate overnight, it is then that my research focused on an internal system of restructuring for educators that work within movement. I also think about the doctrine of marginal gains as an approach to the work.⁷⁶ I thought about what movements and shifts I can do in my research that can help progress to a sense of equity. It is by thinking about the subtle shifts that I can imagine the impact of becoming greater in the future. This draws me to think about a sense of becoming. Like my queer undocumented *fabulous* body and as I do not fall in *alignment*, I am researching how my body moves and makes in a space where I have to make the space.

Finally, this all brings me to recognize how “westernized” my thinking and awareness is, my non-citizenship status developed a sense of tunnel vision. Citizenship

⁷⁴ I will continue to address bell hooks with lower case letters. Even if it is not the way it is done in academic English writing.

⁷⁵ hooks, *Teaching to Transgress*, 29 - 30.

⁷⁶ The doctrine of marginal gains is all about small incremental improvements in any process adding up to a significant improvement when they are all added together.” (Merriam-Webster)

was a goal and desire upon the journey towards the American dream. I am embedded in the United States mindset because that is all that I have known, seen, and worked to become. I am curious about future research that looms and aims to look beyond what is locally marketed to me, decentering and bringing awareness to a global context.

Chapter 4: *re/living*, collaboration, and designers

In an approach to create humanistic and egalitarian work as an artist and educator, I sought redirection by acknowledging the communal aspects of disco and how it was created by marginalized people of color. My research and engagement into the disco culture came from two parts. Firstly, I connected to the music and dance genre through what felt like a natural embodied response. When I was young, I may not have known the names Donna Summer or Sylvester but their music caused a reaction in my being. To an extent it was escapism, the music created a sense of levity and celebration, running counter to my upbringing. My immigrant experience left me void of familial connections and cultural inheritance.⁷⁷ I grew up with no relatives but an impoverished migrant community that succumbed to an idea of improving their lives by being more “American.”⁷⁸ Growing up I was entrenched in an educational system that taught only U.S. customs and culture. It was not until college that I took a Chicano studies elective course that I saw bodies like mine in a textbook. It was in those experiences while also being told that I was not part of the United States that left me with a desire to connect to something.

Secondly, it was an act of decentering from my movement knowledge and technical training. As I discussed earlier, my studies in Limón technique (although Spanish in name) come from white bodies, Doris Humphrey and Charles Weidman.⁷⁹

⁷⁷ To elaborate, being able to place myself out of my living conditions. The brief moments alleviated through music from the traumatizing upbringing I had.

⁷⁸ Incorporating the American Dream and the Melting Pot ideas to realize how those notions lead to conformity and cultural suppression.

⁷⁹ Doris Humphrey was a trailblazer in modern dance during the early twentieth century. As an American dancer she broke new ground by creating a new philosophy of dance that focused on the rise and fall of the

Along with that, I also include the predominantly white practices of ballet mentioned before.⁸⁰ With a focus on redirecting and realigning, I wanted my physical research to attend on a form and movement practice that is in awareness to social and humanitarian themes. Disco came, surprisingly, as a curiosity that later garnered depth by the recognition that it was able to make space in the way that my traditional movement practices did not.

There was apprehension on taking up research that I had not seen in my experiences, but it was a revelation when I recognized that I could affirm my connection to disco through my historical inheritance as a marginalized queer person of color. A genre by and for marginalized communities. I wanted to discover what it offered while making connections to my other identities. While I engage intersectional dialogue, there are ways that these identities connect and are in conversation. Disco is socially deemed dead by the actions of Disco Demolition on July 12, 1979, led by a DJ by the name of Steve Dahl.⁸¹ In a larger context, this was nationally known as the Disco Sucks movement. The event is historically preserved in documentaries, film, and books. What is often discussed is this movement as an embodiment of hostility and racism from white cis gendered males towards queer and communities of color. In this event, the burning of disco records, and records from musical artists of color not related to disco, was that action of racism. This is also a part of my queer disco cultural inheritance. As a

body. Charles Weidman, an American dancer was also a pioneer in modern dance as well as an inspiration to other male dancers of capturing masculinity in dance. José Limón trained with them and adapted their technique to form his own. From <https://mikaylaschoreography.wordpress.com/2015/01/29/the-story-of-doris-humphrey-and-charles-weidman/>

⁸⁰ Not a specifically focus technique, learned from various teachers from 2009 – 2012.

⁸¹ Petridis, “Disco Demolition.”

performer, choreographer, and researcher I took on the work of interrogating this past with my present knowledge. My research looks at this as an opportunity to decenter through dance performance.

Discussion with design collaborators in scenic, costuming, lighting, and projection offered me an avenue to expand on my research ideas. The interpretations and artistic offerings challenged the portrayal of the work I sought to make. A three-foot-high platform, fog, a trailing coat, a shimmering body suit, and projections of people of color dancing to disco were to be part of the work. With these elements in mind, it helped to expand the work in areas that I did not recognize, exploring a broader viewpoint. The employment of images as projection produced thoughts on working with the magnitude of these past bodies. I wanted to imagine how they take up space. The shimmering body suit prompted a personal discussion into an idea of value or the lack of recognized value for my body. In thinking about lighting, I wanted to hyper focus on details that are not readily available or seen. I also wanted to embody the movement that I navigate through the bodies of the past. My experiences in dance film making prompted me to guide the viewers eye. I felt the need to choreograph how the viewer's observe the performance. All of these initial ideas prompted a sense of making space. Directing an intensive rehearsal created a space to investigate the work that was to be the thesis production of *re/living* in conversation with the research that I had developed, diving into the inquiry through an embodied practice. Themes within the work were disco, iconography, my personal experiences in relation to the genre, and an examination of newly released music influenced by disco. These were explored through movement, text, music, and projection.

Before stepping into the rehearsal studio, I recognized that disco was rooted in African American social dance, the rise of the discotheque, and the sudden influx of gay men in dance clubs.⁸² I also returned to the thought of Steve Dahl organizing disco demolition as an anti-gay and anti-people of color movement. I identify Dahl as a white cisgender heterosexual male. I question how and why it is that a white straight male could claim that he can demolish disco when it was not created or supported by his kind of body. Between colonization and commercialization, white straight bodies impacted the disco culture resulting in its socially recognized cultural “death.” This sensation felt loaded and heated while engaging the curiosity of how I would be exploring this. I began my physical research with improvisational movement phrases. Guided by music I gave into what felt comfortable while also disrupting my “natural” concert dance training response. A goal was to move and retain movements that could have dimensionality in meaning and have a visually resonating impact. The continuing beat of disco is a theme I discovered. Not just as a musical beat but as a pulse in its lifeline. The simplicity of a “step touch” or “step together,” basic social dance foot patterns, allowed me to access a quality that provided a percussive element.⁸³ My intention was to “keep it going,” within the rhythm I was creating, verbally using the phrase, and introducing disco movements.

The scenic design element, a platform, served as a new way of processing and thinking about the performing body. My experiences were on proscenium stages. The platform allowed for layers in movement and meaning making. At three feet tall it was not easy to jump up onto and I explored that struggle. From that altitude, a couple ideas

⁸² Lawrence, “Beyond the Hustle.” 201.

⁸³ Step touch: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GSZ7XWcId5Q>

came to mind. The platform gave me sensations of presentation, such as a soap box. I was curious about blurring the lines of speaking. Indirectly, I wanted to speak to the bodies of the past, present, and future, much like I experienced in performing Limón's *The Exiles*. Also, I thought about bodies that are not recognized, "the unknown or missing body."⁸⁴ These bodies, I could place front, elevated, and center of focus. I thought about what they offered me that I was not aware of, as well as what I inherited through their lived experience. By covering my body in black clothing, I was intrigued by how it added an element of mystery.

As the work developed, I shifted my process into thinking about John Travolta's dance scene as Tony Manero in the movie *Saturday Night Fever*.⁸⁵ ⁸⁶ I learned the solo from a YouTube clip, the choreography was simple and repetitive.⁸⁷ I became aware of how as a person of color I learned a white person's performance. However, that performance from the film came at a time when disco was commercialized for consumption by predominantly white audiences. I thought about if and how "authentic" that actually was. Either way, I wanted to poke at the idea that this performing body was doing a "disco dance." I indulged myself by thinking that he could not authenticate the moves because in his experience, he was not marginalized. I make that argument in

⁸⁴ Recognizing the lack of documentation, the beginning origins of disco came from an impoverished community that may not have financial means to have documenting equipment.

⁸⁵ I will be using Manero's name to discuss this Solo. Although, it is John Travolta's body and cultural reference that is widely known.

⁸⁶ Movie released in 1977, during the peak of the Disco era. Nineteen-year-old Brooklyn native, Tony Manero, lives for Saturday nights at the local disco, where he's king of the club, thanks to his stylish moves on the dance floor. But outside of the club, things don't look so rosy. From: <https://www.imdb.com/title/tt0076666/>

⁸⁷ Dance scene from Saturday Night Fever: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LUID0jSh2Ic>

acknowledging the bodies in the club watching Manero's solo were predominantly white, counter to where the culture came from. What was being produced was an image of the culture, specifically molded to be safely consumed by the general public. I wanted to investigate the physical complexity of this solo and I ended up inquiring about Tony Manero's performative body as well. I think about how white cis gendered bodies of privilege could access disco. If disco is about freedom and self-expression, it is their bodies that are not bound or limited. Those bodies and their dominant narrative is what created the sense of *alignment* but disco was an act of decentering.

By sourcing videos of queer bodies of color dancing to disco, I learned their movements and started incorporating them into the solo choreography. Some movements were hard while others looked easy and I defaulted to a sense of mimicking the movement. I questioned if that default stems from my trained past. As this idea developed, I reflected on a quote from Takiyah Nur Amin's writing,

I am struck by the ways in which the work of Black dance artists and Afro-descended performance traditions are often left out, diminished, misrecognized or rendered as a mere 'contribution' to a more dominant understanding of 'western dance history', which is often read as remarkably and persistently White.⁸⁸

The idea was to incorporate the voices that were left out while thinking about reclaiming the space and navigate that through my embodiment. I wanted to bring this conversation up because what I was sensing is that while I am presently desiring representation in my present, I also want to see how marginalized bodies sculpted and moved in the past.

Having these two trains of thought engaged how this may be an act of reclaiming,

⁸⁸ Amin, "African American Dance Revisited." 45.

“Songs into seducing” was a section that was generated from choreographic exploration while thinking about how I could pay homage to the music, sensuality, and sexuality that the disco era fostered. This was both a way of foreshadowing the theme of the work while thinking about musical artists of the time. By selecting song titles and strategically organizing them to make a monologue directed out to the audience, I made space to live in a sensual fantasy.

“Come to me, You and I, Hot Stuff, Super Freak, Le freak, Dr. Love, Savage Lover, I’m so Excited, Could this be Magic, Yes Sir, I can Boogie, Let’s Groove, You Make me Feel, Down to Love Town, Don’t Stop Til You Get Enough, Babe, Do you wanna funk?, Can’t get enough of your love, It only takes a minute, Take your time (do it right), Give it to me baby, More More More, That’s the way I like it, Spank.”

The final song was I Feel Love by Donna Summer. I decided to not finish the song title and repeat the words “I Feel...” These words were to make a transition into a floor work sequence that slowly transitioned into another episode.

The next day, I returned to Manero’s solo. I created a version that was lively and elaborate with movement from other bodies. I made sure that it lived comfortably in my body by naturally finding the ways that I did not have to fit a mold of the body that created it but as inspiration and guidance. While I saw that phrase as complex, I then was curious to look into a minimalistic and fragmented version. The idea of isolation came to mind and it served as a physical challenge. Lines, fluidity, and taking space are movement qualities that I am comfortable with. To isolate and break down was a practice that I needed to develop, it felt like a new language and I had to start slow. I developed a warm-up sequence that went through the motions of the movements I would be moving through. I recognized this as some movement form that I do not embody nor recognize. Where is this staccato and isolated movement? Not within the ethereal qualities of ballet

or the fall and recovery of my training. Through this “broken solo/Manero” phrase I wanted to explore internal turmoil and create a sense of reckoning; recognizing the impact the work had on viewers and in my own experience.⁸⁹ This phrase was imagined to be performed while accompanied by a distorted and layered projection of footage from the film's performance of the solo.

Examining the disco-esque⁹⁰ music that was created in 2020, I wanted to explore a response to the work. Artists like Dua Lipa, Lady Gaga, Kylie Minogue, and Jessie Ware released work that was influenced by and labeled as “disco.”⁹¹ *Rolling Stone* called Dua Lipa a Disco Queen and her album “...the disco liberation soundtrack we need now,” and she went on to create a performance called Studio 2054.⁹² Kylie Minogue released an album labeled DISCO and a New Year’s virtual performance with her music. Minogue had an interview about her album with National Public Radio (NPR). In that interview I reacted to her passive comment about how she thinks about disco. I wondered if it was my biases but it sounded superficial and disengaged. Minogue mentions in her interview

There really is some correlation that I’m just discovering or being forced to look at between where disco began. You know its origins and people needing to uh find a place of expression and belonging and... Disco lights shine out of the darkness and that’s kind of what we are going through at the minute. I’m finding some kind of bridge.⁹³

This response to me seemed like a rambling, unfocused, and inattentive approach to be relatable or conscious of the genre. Other artists also created songs, but these were the

⁸⁹ Broken solo/Manero, as the choreography between the Saturday Night Fever solo and my own incorporation and people of color into the work.

⁹⁰ Self-described.

⁹¹ Dua Lipa, Lady Gaga, Kylie Minogue, and Jessie Ware are white female mainstream musical artists.

⁹² Freeman, “Future Nostalgia.”

⁹³ Shapiro, Interview.

names that I saw often in the media, social media feeds, and promoted on Spotify. I wondered how they have access to the disco world. I felt a sense of dismay and disconnection, however that did not stop me from giving in to the music.

That discontent relied heavily on recognizing that the genre, which was created by black and queer bodies, was being reinvigorated by straight white bodies. I came across an article that supported what I was thinking. Spencer Kornhaber of *The Atlantic* wrote “The Eeriness of the 2020 Disco Revival.”⁹⁴ His statement connected to what I was experiencing, when he writes:

To be sure, a diverse set of performers has landed disco hits in 2020. But glaringly, the stars who went all in on disco albums this year were white women (Lipa, Gaga, Ware, Minogue, Murphy), many of them working with white production and songwriting teams.⁹⁵

I made a connection to the dominant culture which still retains the power and privilege of doing the kind of work. While I appreciate that disco still lives on, I am conflicted by the bodies who perform the work. I imagine a world where that genre can be reclaimed, but for now it lives in my imagination. “When Black Lives Matter protests flared up across the country this year, they led to soul searching within the music industry over the ways that white artists have so often profited from Black innovation.”⁹⁶ How much or for how long will this “soul searching” last? The skeptical side of me did not want to believe that this was going to last long. “All music is Black music,” singer and songwriter Lady Gaga said in a *Billboard* article and Jessie Ware told *Gay Times*, “Everyone knew disco, but I

⁹⁴ Kornhaber, “Eeriness of the 2020.” 2021.

⁹⁵ Kornhaber, “Eeriness of the 2020.” 2021.

⁹⁶ Kornhaber, “Eeriness of the 2020.” 2021.

didn't fully understand the significance of it as a genre for the queer community and the Black community as much."⁹⁷ ⁹⁸ At least some influential voices were echoing what I was aware of this, like land acknowledgement, at least held space to recognize the bodies who created the genre from which they profit. All of this was substance, to expose and interrogate. I felt my body have reactions near convulsion as I tried to consume the work that was being created.

Back to the creation intensive, I experimented with bringing up more of the real bodies over a fictional character from *Saturday Night Fever* that conforms to the dominant norm, Tony Manero. A costume element, a big purple cape, was to take over the space. Its texture as a sensation of comfort, its size taking over as influence, the surface as a projection site, and as a prop to wrap myself with. The theme of reusing and recycling is something I thought about throughout the process. The idea of using as was intended as well as discovering ways to interact and perform that are unexpected. I went on to think about Sylvester, the flamboyant gender nonconforming queen of disco, as the partially unsung icon and hero in my work. I had sourced several images of his body and I recognized how Sylvester's influence on disco is something I wanted to engage and challenge. I started to imagine him as the resonating echo of a body in the work. These distant sources came to engage an idea of transition and exposure. Through projection, I thought about a section where I succumb to the imagery that has resonated within the idea of disco and from that there would be a rupture and disconnect. A sense of uprooting

⁹⁷ Kornhaber, "Eeriness of the 2020." 2021.

⁹⁸ Kornhaber, "Eeriness of the 2020." 2021.

preconceived notions with the bodies that created the space, acknowledging the connection to the work of Gottschild.

Within this process and my research, I came to name this thesis production *re/living*. It is a dialogue with present consciousness. While it looks to the self it pays tribute to the bodies that were in the space and works to uncover and challenge iconography. This work enabled me to make the connections between identity, decentering practices, and movement. The work had developed and expanded beyond my initial imagining. The collaborations drove me to inquiry beyond my awareness. I developed a work-in-progress and I thought about disco as its superficial commercialized iconography and the contrast in relation to in-depth research. I explored the interrogation of white bodies past and present while finding a way to engage the overlooked voices and bodies; an act of reclaiming the space. Using talking dancing and a fragmented narrative helped highlight and engage conversation and inquiry.

Chapter 5: Becoming

What does all of this work say about my body right now? It is layered and intertwined, I am in a process of unfolding such a coiled body of thoughts and movement. Also, intermeshed, these pieces come together to define and redefine my body. The interconnectedness translates intersectionality which has created a stronger bond and a surprising unraveling. Dance making gives me the space to cement my presence in a tumultuous world. Doing the work of producing a narrative where there is an absence of my body is the necessary act of decentering. This research has been the affirmation of my body in space, it is becoming. And yet, there is an unknown space.

Throughout my graduate research, I recognize a shift. I knew of my training in Limón technique and relied on its embodied practice and theory to guide and investigate. It felt like such a connected part of my being. However, focusing on the humanistic quality of the technique while introducing an egalitarian concept allowed me to expand and redirect on equity and inclusion. Unintentionally, I began disrupting the comfort of a known movement and process. As my intersectional identity guides me in varying pathways I recognized that these directions were introduced by a sense of conformity to a white cis-male hetero and U.S born narrative. Additionally, to add to the complexity, I acknowledge how José Limón's own body of dance work and lived experience retains questions that I am working through. In his body, I see conformity to a white cis male hetero and U.S. born narrative as well. So where is my body when I remove that sense of alignment or my modern dance training? Presently, I do not know. What I mean by that also engages for me a broader consciousness and negotiation. I will be navigating from inquiry; it feels almost like a sense of limbo. I stray away from using the term

decolonizing because of my queer body of color that has invested time and appreciates elements of modern contemporary dance. To decolonize would also rid me of my work that I have done as it has been influenced by white bodies. For personal reasons I am not currently interested in redirecting my dance focus to what can be culturally recognized as Mexico's *ballet folklórico*. Through my identity as Mexican and US American I recognize the binary that I navigate between, yet my cultural make up is from the United States perspective. My training and knowledge is within the American modern and concert dance. I use the term *decenter* to also make space for how American dance, with the incorporation of black dance, is my foundation in movement. With the term, I also make space for the modes of moving and teaching that were not present in my educational experience. The modes and practices stem from the extensive research within my graduate studies in relation and critical response to my own experiences within dance.

Thinking about future choreography and performance, I will be holding on and even interrogating the body of work that I have engaged within the graduate process. I do not see my work as a successful result but as a process towards of a notion of a just world. If I stray away from a space of modern work and process, I am embodying through questions, sensations, and a space that I cannot form or imagine yet. What is my body without the training I learned? As I feel that I cannot leave my body, I am consciously or subconsciously holding onto to something either way, right? This non-question, more of a thought, is hard to navigate as my mind has been result driven. My movement experiences have been guided through academic structures and grades. That is why I cite and reference to dance works. But what will the loss of this structure and

system relate to my body? Or how will I think about making? With these questions and in thinking about form, for me it highlights what a contemporary modern approach to dance making can offer. It is an expansive tool of research of deeper meaning making. By thinking of contemporary as present but finding a connection to the past; classical modern dance. I can access or delineate from what is known to what I will call as my trained natural movement patterns. I state this, while also thinking of talking dancing as an extension of the form. I can make from not knowing. I can make from impulse and a sense of discovery. I am left with what I know and the agency and choice of not relying on that body. I can leave a part of my body, just as I have tried to do in the ways I am not part of the dominant narrative.

Returning to the performed dance work and process, the development of narrative has expanded from directly verbalizing to finding a poetic and rhythmic pattern that moves as fluidly or sharply as the movement. I have been able to arrive to words as poetic, not to be clear, concise, and bound by notions of singular meaning. Elements such as tone and repetition along with playing on words has developed in my use of voice. In embodiment, the virtuosic performative qualities have been redirected into decentered explorations from a humanistic perspective in the choreographic process. I am inspired by social forms of movement, which connect me more towards communities where I can play a larger role than would ever be possible within the predominantly white culture. Within my process, research is now incorporated in my practice of creative visualization and collaboration, which enables me to expand beyond my viewpoint.

The inclusion of unrecognized narratives and bodies is a focal point of my awareness as it plays a role in all facets of my work. The academic and humanistic work

of Gottschild and Nur Amin argues that, black dance is American dance. Its aesthetics have been adapted in concert dance by various artists and have been recognized within historical preservation. This example brings up an interrogation of hierarchies and practices of erasure that are presently needed. By addressing and being in conversation about awareness of forms of suppression, I aim to navigate through the art with a sense of hypersensitivity in regard to forms of suppression that I have come to feed and adapt into, a process of undoing.

I am aware of the people and audience in the space. Working with a collective practice, in teaching and dance making, leads me to attend to the bodies in the space. I direct with a sense of invitation and sharing, making space for their bodies and their lived experience. Through this, I aim to put those bodies in the performance space. The themes that I explore are expansive, I recognize my own experiences as not being able to afford the space that is needed. With that, I look to movers and designers to be able to engage that awareness and inquiry. This makes me think of my body as directing the process that can manifest.

Leaving space for improvisation as a foundational act of navigating in process and the field is a theme that has been adapted.⁹⁹ An awareness of how teaching has been a fluid and flexible endeavor exposes the environment that I am attuned to. Engaging research and inquiry plays a role in my process of educational development. Course instruction, as well as my dance work, comes from various sources and the ability to adapt and redesign through an awareness of what is lacking and in filling the space with the needed context.

⁹⁹ Mentioned and practiced by educator and dance chair of University of Riverside, Joel Smith,

I am thinking about the act of choreography and a memory. I found uninspiring hearing from a mentor that a choreographer only makes three good dances in their life.¹⁰⁰ I instinctively wanted to challenge that thought, what I saw as a limitation or their own personal feelings. Within the work I have developed, I recognize the themes that could be explored further. Taking *This is where I Begin...* into consideration, I am now attentive to how this work can also evolve as a choreographic foundation to examine my experience as someone who has recently received permanent residency and in the future will become a citizen of the United States. I can be in conversation and thought about how my performing body has shifted over time and status, unfolding. In thinking about the tape/prop element, how can it be used to explore other physicality that I did not embody at the time? That evening length work was only performed once at the Atlas Performing Arts Center's Intersections Festival in 2020. What does that say about that body then and that body now? That conversation can be discussed and explored in the performance space. This train of thoughts to me only cements that the choreographic act is one that is evolving, fluid, and continuous.

The choreographic research of *re/living* was explored by the queer person of color perspective while interrogating the commercialization from white bodies. The disco era also offers space into exploring the femininity/feminine bodies, the influence of Latinx bodies at the time, the transition of music, the social movements that initiated the era, and much more to be thought about. *re/living* as a choreographic structure resonates into how I can use the choreography and research to make space for topics, genres, and movement forms that are not recognized in concert dance and through my own identity. Point of

¹⁰⁰ Fred Matthews, Lecture, Fall 2013.

access was a theme I was developing as I wondered how I can research the work; my queer person of color perspective is what I came to realize engaged the work.

My body, I have spent a lot of time thinking about how others see my body. I acknowledge my family, community, the audience, the white gaze, the model minority ideology, my students, the institution, and have entertained the bodies of the future.¹⁰¹ There is so much about me to unpack, my intersectionality allows me to access such broad and raw identities all the while not devaluing my humanity. I see and hear strength through my body, strength that I did not recognize. My body moving so much is an example of how much adversity I must propel myself through. My work looks to create access and equity through the necessary act of decentering, realigning, and reimagining. I draw upon artists, writers, and movers who do the work of uprooting dominant narratives and notions because the bodies are there, they are just constantly suppressed.

reliving holds, makes, and breaks space. This research has cultivated strengths and awareness of how I have navigated and think about the world. It has engaged intersectional dialogue while being capable of taking space to create through an egalitarian process supported by a humanistic approach. The heightened awareness developed leads to a generative inquiry into further research and ideas, some that have been put on hold. What I once thought I could not access or engage due to lack of privilege or academic knowledge, I am able to now foster and find my way through research, becoming.

¹⁰¹ A model minority is a minority demographic (whether based on ethnicity, race or religion) whose members are perceived to achieve a higher degree of socioeconomic success than the population average, thus serving as a reference group to outgroups. From https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Model_minority

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