

ABSTRACT

Title of Thesis:

ALTERNATIVE CHOREOGRAPHIES:
IMMERSIVE PERFORMANCE
AS A DECOLONIAL
PEDAGOGICAL AND
PERFORMANCE PRACTICE

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The research unfolds through a multidisciplinary lens, weaving together theoretical analysis, artistic creation, pedagogical exploration and performative interventions. Through “el bodegon de la bruja”, an interdisciplinary immersive dance theater performance, this thesis aims to explore alternative ways of understanding, learning, and expressing that are rooted in decolonial principles. The performance engages with diverse mediums and techniques to construct immersive environments that prompt participants to critically reflect on colonial histories and power structures. Through a series of performative acts and pedagogical interventions, the thesis seeks to demonstrate how immersive performance can serve as a conduit for decolonial praxis. The outcomes contribute to an evolving discourse on the potential of artistic and educational practices to actively dismantle colonial legacies. This work not only envisions alternative narratives but actively engages participants in co-creating knowledge, fostering a sense of empowerment, agency, and a deeper understanding of decolonialized perspectives.

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PEDAGOGICAL AND PERFORMANCE PRACTICE

by

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This thesis project was originally not intended to be this. Through a long questioning session with my thesis chair, Adriane Fang, she asked a question that made my heart sink into the bottomless pits of my stomach. "Where are you in this?" She could not see past my passion for this subject of immersivity, of making something at a larger scale involving the audience. I am ever so grateful for this line of questioning, as it clarified my interest surrounding creating immersive performances. I wanted to present ideas of decoloniality, dismantling hierarchies, and the experiences of constructing embodied knowledge through "alternative" ways of performance making.

Throughout my graduate career at UMD and TDPS, I have been branching outside of my chosen curriculum and taking a dive into Higher Education and Student Affairs. I initiated my graduate career because of my passion for pedagogy and the institutions that allow students to deepen their research into their passions of choice, be it dance, theater, and beyond. Through my initial inquiries into these departments outside of my own, I've studied decolonized approaches to education and the myriad ways that these appear (or try to appear) in the institutions that we as educators labor in.

Through this thesis project, I examine my performance-making process through a decolonial filter. There is teaching and learning actively occurring in the rehearsal room. There is community and communication in rehearsals and meetings. There is also an internal investigation of the production of one's embodied knowledge via the performer's and the audience's experience while witnessing and/or participating in this collaboratively built dance-theater immersive performance. These actions bring about how I (as a director, choreographer, and colleague) examine process, pedagogy, and performance through a decolonial filter through not only this one thesis performance but throughout my whole career.

I would like to deeply thank Adriane Fang for mentorship, collegueship and feedback that has pushed me, with care, to become the best version of the scholar, artist and maker that she sees in me even when I do not see it within myself. Thank you to Patrik Widrig and Samuel Crawford for also providing feedback and support throughout this monster of a performance project. I wholeheartedly thank my collaborators that made the performance aspect of this thesis project not only possible but an absolute honor to participate and witness. To the designers for making the space of our dreams possible and to the performers, I truly cannot thank you enough for diving into the unknown. For continuously helping me through the dark tunnel that is creating a new world. It truly shows that it takes a village.

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I would like to thank all of the scholars whose words have made their way onto the pages of this thesis document. In line with ideas of decoloniality, it was of utmost importance that the scholarship presented here was not one-dimensional but instead showcases a vast diverse network of information. It thrills me that there is Indigenous/First Nations, Black, Latinx, Queer and Asian American scholarship strewn throughout.

This thesis document was written on the stolen lands of the Seminole, Timucua, Miccosukee, Nacotchtank (Anacostan), Piscataway and Mascogo people. I hope to honor them by writing a thesis that calls for decolonization. It would be remiss to not mention that in line

with Eve Tuck and K. Wayne Yang, “decolonization is not a metaphor”¹. Decolonization efforts may begin with conversation but must ultimately land with actionable steps that lead us towards the repatriation of stolen land not only for the nations listed above but for all victims of the settler-colonial project of the United States and abroad.

¹

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Definitively Undefined Definitions: Some Guidance for Words You'll Find Along the Way

These definitions are synthesized from theoretical frameworks written by decolonial scholars and theatre practitioners.

Immersivity - the **act** of immersing a subject completely into a creative endeavor where the lines between reality and performance are blurred. Some methods utilized to achieve this might be multi-sensorial experiences, site specific interventions and digital participatory strategies.²

Decoloniality- the **act** (*not the thought, discussion, or hypothesizing*) of dismantling colonial epistemologies such as homogenization of the body, mind and spirit.³

Postcolonial Futurity - a speculative framework in which decoloniality is successful and **enacts** new epistemologies based on the colonial subject's lived experience and embodied cultural, historical, political and social knowledge reconstructs their world.⁴

Alternative Choreography - is an embodied theoretical framework that analyzes how alternative modes of embodiment can lead to potential postcolonial understandings of moving, existing and being.

² This definition has been synthesized from Josephine Machon's *Immersive Theatres*

³ This definition has been synthesized from Anibal Quijano's "ideas descoloniales" presented by Sebastian Espinosa in a compendium of Quijano's works and in connection with Tuck and Yang's "Decolonization is not a metaphor"

⁴ This definition has been synthesized from ideas by Diana Taylor, Edward Mignolo, Eve Tuck, K. Wang, and Anibal Quijano.

Introduction: Where The (Love Of) Dancing Began

“Then there are those experiences that take us over the moon, experiences that remind us of who and why we are. They seem to transform us. Those experiences feel like magic, but it doesn’t take a spell to make them happen.”⁵

The real world is left behind as the lights grow dim. My body is simultaneously a glimmer of the last seconds of reality and a shadow of the new world I'm stepping into. Darkness becomes a cloak. My eyes don't adjust to the small tea lights guiding my path. I stumble through a narrow labyrinth as an orchestra swells to its highest crescendo, leaving my heartbeat as the only audible sound. Until I step into the Manderley Bar. A tall, suited, mustached man greets me and thanks me for arriving on time. I'm handed a playing card, and I immerse myself in the world of Punchdrunk’s neo-noir rendition of Macbeth, *Sleep No More*.

Even as I write this, I feel the weight of my shoulders descend. The grip my jaw has around my teeth loosens. Immersivity, or its synonyms, immersiveness and immersive performance, has this effect on me. This somatic response is not to be overlooked. It is a visceral response to a performance methodology that calls to my lived experience as a colonial subject under rule of the US. This same somatic response is similar to the same way I felt growing up learning Bomba Puertorriqueña, Plena and Salsa: all dances traditionally associated with my homeland of Puerto Rico.

These dances did not contain traditional performative boundaries of spectator and participant but instead invited a community centered approach in which everyone surrounding the *batey* (the performance circle in which Bomba takes place) is involved, at varying levels. There are musicians, singers, dancers, drummers and folks keeping beat supporting the edges of the *batey*. This is in direct opposition to how traditional performative boundaries uphold colonial ideas of homogeneity of the body; in which a performer can only perform and an audience

⁵ Benedetto, Ida *Patterns of Transformation: Designing Sex, Death and Survival in the 21st Century*.

member can only witness. There is a stripping away of self-agency, self-making and community building that silences the bodies in a traditional performative scenario. Through Bomba, however, I always felt my most alive, my most seen in these moments, not only when I was dancing but cheering on a fellow dancer, keeping up with an *un-dos-tres* rhythm or chanting a familiar rumor from the *campesino* days that has made itself into the traditional Bomba repertoire.

The level in which I participated or how I participated was never put into question. The fact that I was participating and contributing to the event unfolding around us - the community - led to my own self making. My own self identification in a community where the ways I moved through the world as fat and queer in a heavy *machismo* air laden environment were not seen as acceptable. But through Bomba, and other community-centered styles of performance such as immersive performance, as spectator-participant-embodied witness-co-collaborator, I could rewrite the rules in which I authentically move through the world, but also carried the potential to support the reconstruction of the world around me and my community.

It almost seems obvious how I'm interested in these performance practices that blur the lines of audience and performer, but it has taken me a while to recognize the "why". Throughout this research it has become clear that I grew up with immersive performance *en la sangre*. The cultural dances of my hometown propelled me to continue wanting to study dance to a larger degree, and little by little, those pieces of community-centered participatory events just kept getting smaller and smaller - dimmer and dimmer in the rearview as I flew away from the island. This thesis project is more than just a written, oral and performative defense. It's a homecoming to a part of me that has been quiet, calmly growing its roots, waiting for the right time to sprout.

This homecoming comes with a line of questioning that is uncomfortable. It is both unfortunately and fortunately, deeply personal. I have found that the lineage that I have left behind to pursue another does not make me any less connected to my cultural roots. That is to say, pursuing contemporary post-modern dance and leaving my island does not disconnect me from the knowledge and imparted wisdom that Bomba has taught. Nor does it disconnect from my entrenched Puertoricanness. However, the thought process behind how my contemporary Eurocentric dance training and my early Puertorrican-centered dance education live in concert carries more friction than it does camaraderie.

From a politicized lens, my position reads as a journey of assimilation - a colonized subject blending into the dominating cultural information in order to integrate themselves into the larger field. This creates a negative feedback loop for myself and my own work that invalidates what I think to be my authentic performance of cultural identity and my validity as an art maker, scholar and pedagogue in our wider field. This homecoming is abrasive as I come to terms with my colonized upbringing, a violent history of homogenization of cultural understanding and politicized bodies on the island at large, and the privileges that I am fortunate enough to come in contact with in the United States.

Personal conflict continues through this investigation of my own relationship to multiple lineages of both dance and socio-cultural and political identity. This comes across when discussing the language that surrounds and anchors this thesis. The title of this work, and the basis of my theoretical research, surrounds itself under the guise of “alternative”. The word “alternative” sits heavy on my fingers and tongue because it represents that these have been epistemologies and modes of being, knowing and existing that have been “othered”. The word

“alternative” is defined in Webster’s dictionary as “(of one or more things) available as **another** opportunity.”

Within a colonial context, “alternative” ways of being are innately incorrect with the cultural and societal hegemony which is why the term carries inherent decolonial potential. The way I exist in the world is “alternative”. As a queer brown Caribbean fat male, I am in constant friction to the societal mainstream that leads the environments that I live in. I am the infinite “other” that walks through the halls of institutions, rehearsal rooms and stages. I am the “alternative” body that has learned and thrived through Eurocentric contemporary modern dance. So while I’m slightly resistant to the term “alternative”, I am also wanting to embrace it as a process of decolonial reclaiming.

Historically, these “alternative” ways of being have been persecuted. For example, Bomba Puertorriqueña was banned and made illegal by Spanish law as it was a secret method of communication for the enslaved population to plan rebellious activity. These ways of “alternative” being are feared by the mainstream due to lack of cultural knowledge, human empathy and understanding instead of being accepted to promote community and cross-cultural understanding. Bomba Puertorriqueña has now reclaimed this “alternative” nature and has adopted gender and queer performance within contemporary Bombaa practice. Another “alternative” way of being has reclaimed a form that was once invalidated by the dominant cultural mainstream. So if the art form has demonstrated what it means to be authentic, community oriented and collaborative and reclaim its own sense of “otherness”, of “alternative-ness”, why can’t I?

The word “alternative” grounds the theoretical research here not to imply “otherness” as negative but to amplify how often marginalized epistemologies (Black, Caribbean, LGBTQIA+

and First Nation communities) are not seen as a main source of pluriversal societal wisdom. That is to say that “alternative” is never the first option. I call upon the word “alternative” as a decolonial practice that implies “possibility” in line with postcolonial futurity that does not center White colonial epistemologies but instead analyzes, deconstructs and reconstructs those institutions from an “alternative” perspective.

The word “alternative” here also grounds my personal investigation. Throughout this project, both written and performed, I aim to claim “alternative”-ness as a position of power in which I can construct and collaborate a postcolonial future with myself and my collaborators in which the ways in which I exist are valid and accepted. A postcolonial future where the ways in which I am “alternative” do not validate or measure the worth of my work. In opposition to my white counterpart scholars in which their whiteness is never utilized as a metric to define the validity of their work.

To quote Audre Lorde and to summarize the arguments to using the word “alternative” as a decolonial parameter for action, “for the master’s tools will never dismantle the master’s house. They may allow us temporarily to beat him at his own game, but they will never enable us to bring about genuine change.”⁶

⁶ Lorde, Audre “The Master’s Tools Will Never Dismantle The Master’s House”

“el bodegón de la bruja”: an immersive dance theater experience

“el bodegón de la bruja” is an immersive dance theater experience that constitutes the creative live portion of this project. It premiered on October 12th, 2023 in the Robert and Arlene Kogod Theater at The Clarice Smith Performing Arts Center as a part of ENCUENTROS: Fall MFA Thesis Concert, a shared bill with Gerson Lanza. Through this process I wove the different ideas discussed above mostly focusing on (a) utilizing fiction as a “technology of community” to abstractly discuss the impact of colonial violence within the Caribbean, (b) improvisation as an embodied pedagogical tool to enact moments of transformational participation for both audience and performers, and (c) immersivity as an experimental methodology for heightened social and physical awareness.

“el bodegon de la bruja” tracks the story of a family of witches played by Christina Collins, Isabella Quinteros-Grady and Emily Adams. They own a bar in a reclaimed warehouse in an unknown location in the Caribbean and run it as a community space in which locals can come together. The performance takes place on their first night of opening the bar to the general public and a trio of witch hunters played by Kevin Clark, Daniel Miramontes and Caleb Wein interrupts the night’s proceedings by trying to claim the space as their own.

Throughout the performance, we encounter moments of joy, sorrow and magic as the audience either protects the family of witches or supports the witch hunters in their journey for power. The cast is supported by the family’s bar performers Debanshi Chowdhury, Avital Dresin and Charlene Cowan, as well as the bar staff Brit Falcon, Emily Sheridan and myself, playing the role of Barkeep.

“el bodegón de la bruja” calls upon strategies of decolonial performance, “alternative choreographies” of performers and audience to create an immersive world that connects fantasy as a symbol to show the harmful consequences of colonial violence regarding climate injustice, gentrification and economic disadvantages that Puertorricans have faced and continue to face.

The “alternative audience choreographies” here involve the audience deciding whether to support the witches’ plight to keep their land their own or engage with the witch hunters’ journey to displace the locals of the bar. Immersiveness here can be seen as a political embodied pedagogical tool (an “alternative pedagogical choreography”) as well as a functional performance aesthetic that produces “alternate ways of being” for the audience and the performers. The audience here become co-collaborators in this immersive world. They are reconstructing Caribbean colonial identity by partaking in this fictional world and helping the performers construct a post-colonial futurity that involves the new community that they’ve built together.

Performer POV: As I emerge from the Robert and Arlene Kogod Theater, three of my cast mates follow my lead into the lobby of the Clarice Smith Performing Arts Center. I ring a small silver bell which traditionally was a bell meant for masters to call the enslaved population of their plantations. I reclaim my power and my voice as I call to attention the space with this small colonial artifact. The bell also dispels evil spirits, or at least that's what folklore says.

I welcome people to “*El Altar*”, a local bar that has been reclaimed by the locals for the locals. It was kept secret inside of the Caribbean Ice Company, a front for the US military to stop pro-independence movement within the Caribbean. The locals gathered their forces in an anti-labor protest and the space was finally reclaimed by the people. I tell them the rules of the space. To not remove anything unless they’d like to be cursed for all eternity. To be kind to the

residents of the bar and to please not touch unless invited to participate and to put their hand on their chest if they do not want to be invited to participate.

The night begins and I pull a single audience member into my altar, a secret space in the back of the bar where relics of Caribbean history, religion and spirituality keep the audience member and myself safe from any outside energy. I perform a monologue, sharing a story about the difference between crows and doves. *“I used to be a dove...”* I show them a polaroid of my brother; a dove, a witch hunter ally played by Daniel Miramontes. I ask them if they have seen him tonight and if they do, to keep him away from me at all costs. I ask the audience member if they are a crow or a dove. Their response varies. I either invite them out kindly or rush them out, depending on their answer.

My night begins.

Fig. 1 - Javier Padilla as Barkeep inside of the hidden altar in “el bodegón de la bruja”. Photo by Dylan Singleton.



Audience POV: As the single audience member gets pulled in, the audience gets mobilized into groups. Multiple groups come in from the main lobby of the Clarice Smith Performing Arts

Center. Group 1 enters through the Dressing Room and Group 2 enters through the Office but are interrupted by a trio of hooded figures casting a protection spell over themselves as the audience travels by them. An audience member stays for Daniel Miramontes and Caleb Wein's solo monologues around the outside of the space.

Group 3 travels through the main entryway that guides them directly into the Bar Space while Group 4 also travels through the Dressing Room Space but gets interrupted by a trio of witches. They block the audience's path as they dart their eyes towards one another, frantically moving from wall-to-wall as if someone is chasing them. They are reliving the night to come.

Everyone settles into the main areas of the performance space which include our main Bar area and some cabaret style seating in the center of the space or on some rises to the right of the main centered seating. The audience moves around from area to area to discover separate scenes. A bartender eerily comes in and out of a premonition while trying to do their job, a hooded man tries to invite folks to his evil plan for the night, a young girl looks at herself in the mirror and confides in an audience member about her strained relationship with her mother. Suddenly, the swell of a Telenovela-like orchestral crescendo takes over the space and a masked figure walks through the space, commanding attention. Their night begins.



Fig. 2- Daniel Miramontes plays Brother/Dove in the Dressing Room Space in “el bodegón de la bruja”

Photo by Dylan Singleton.

Immersive Performance: “Alternative Performance Choreographies for Audience and Performers”

Immersive performance is a vessel that contains multiple “alternative choreographies” and is an “alternative” mode of performance making. Immersive performance is a rapidly growing industry that expands its wide branches into multiple modalities, such as themed entertainment, art installations, virtual reality, and theatrical arts. The differing applications of this term in these different modalities and industries make immersive performance ambiguous, but no less exciting. In her book, *Immersive Theaters: Intimacy and Immediacy in Contemporary Performance*, theater scholar and writer Josephine Machon describes this creative work under the term “immersive theaters.” Machon articulates that the title of her book, *Immersive Theaters*, refers to the multitude of opportunities in creating immersive performances. In her text, Machon surveys and analyzes multiple types of immersive performances while interviewing the producing artists to further try and define immersivity. She infers that there are multiple ways to define immersive work, and she describes a scale of immersivity, a vague spectrum that gauges the amount of how immersed an audience member can be within a specific work. This involves gauging an audience member's participation level and how much the work’s narrative action shifts depending on audience engagement. Through Machon’s scale we come to understand that there is no one way to create an immersive performance, nor is there one specific way to immerse an audience member or a performer into a performance. Through this scale of immersivity, we can start to get a sense that immersive performance, and the process of creating immersive performance invites “alternate ways of making” that don’t necessarily align with rigid structures of space or audience and performer relationships . But instead, immersive performance invites a pluriversal way of existing, which is to say, immersive performance blurs the line in

which traditional ways of performance making are invited but also creates opportunities for innovation and exploration to occur while embodying these “alternative ways of making”.

This spectrum of immersivity that Machon poses is vital to my own artistic and scholarly interests. What parts of the spectrum emphasize and align with these “alternative choreographies”? While I am a massive fan of Punchdrunk⁷'s *Sleep No More*, whose opening vignette I describe at the beginning of this thesis, there are certain aspects of the work that distance and create a barrier for the audience, not fully allowing them to immerse themselves in the world or interact with the space entirely. In his workshop, *Writing for Experiential Theater*, Zach Morris⁸ describes this phenomenon of distance between the audience and performer as a critical point of inquiry.

He describes closing this distance as "casting the audience." He explains that "the world of the work cannot continue unless the audience is there."⁹ To clarify this idea, Morris' comments that the inaction of the audience within proscenium performance does not alter or amplify the action of the performer's actions on stage. Whereas the way that Morris and his collaborators at Third Rail Projects view the audience's importance within immersive performance, the immersive world of their performances should shift and evolve with the audience's individual journeys. Morris' casting of the audience within immersive work orients the audience not only in space but into a participatory role. The audience is significant to the world of the work because the choreography, the space and narrative action is constructed with audience interaction in mind, as opposed to the audience of proscenium work where they do not have power over the action in front of them, they exist solely as witnesses. This idea of “casting

⁷ Punchdrunk is an interdisciplinary immersive performance making company based in the United Kingdom and has wide reaching shows in New York and Shanghai.

⁸ Zach Morris is one of the three co-artistic directors of Third Rail Projects, a Brooklyn based interdisciplinary immersive performance making company.

⁹ Morris, Zach *Writing for Experiential Theater*

the audience” and guiding them towards participatory action can be seen as an “alternative audience choreography”.

The audience has an “alternative” mode of being that relates to their performative self. Immersive performance heightens their awareness into a mode of being that is more than just witness but instead can push them to become a co-conspirator and collaborator. This “alternative” mode of being for the audience is important when in line with my decolonial pursuits. This new sense of embodiment for the audience promotes self-awareness, heightened sense of agency and independence through improvisational choice-making and discovery through play within immersive performance. Also, the democratization of space and how the audience member navigates through this new landscape, as well as how the audience member adapts to the rules of this new world that they encounter supports the audience members own evolution into a functioning member of the immersive space.

Immersive performance teaches the audience something about how to navigate these “alternative performance choreographies” by teaching them about their “alternative” ways of being. This is innately powerful when promoting these “alternative” ways of being for folks like myself who feel as if their existence is deemed as “alternative” or non-normal in line with the mainstream cultural logic. Immersive performance here becomes a decolonial pedagogical practice and introduces a second “alternative choreography”.

The Alternative as Decolonial

“Alternative” here is the word that defines the majority of this project. Decolonial understanding is “alternative” because it works in direct opposition to the dominating cultural logic that aligns with colonial epistemology. “Alternative” understanding is decolonial because it provides us with opportunities to experience other ways of being. To further understand “alternative”-ness as carrying potential for decolonized embodied work, I describe decoloniality in a series of actionable “alternative” steps.

The first actionable step is a reflective awareness and deconstruction of the dominating colonial epistemologies. What are the dominating socio-cultural and political frameworks that limit mobility for some populations? What are the implications of these frameworks maintaining their supremacy? How are these frameworks harmful for the larger population?

The second step is an analysis of the “alternative” ways of existing and being that lead us to create a postcolonial future. What are the ways in which these frameworks can shift to benefit those who have been historically marginalized and oppressed? I take these same steps and ask these same questions to begin this thesis project.

My artistic, scholarly and pedagogical interests all swirl together as I begin to create some concrete ideas into the themes that will emerge through this decolonial inquiry into my dance making. Because of this unity of dance, decoloniality and theoretical exploration I utilize the term “alternative choreographies”. I define “alternative choreographies” as embodied improvisatory or choreographic strategies that center 1) community oriented action 2) an amplification of independence, self-making and agency and 3) marginalized epistemologies that combat the framework of the dominant colonial legacy.

Throughout this thesis project, “alternative choreographies” comes with additional terms to clarify the usage of the term for example “alternative audience choreographies”, “alternative performance choreographies”, “alternative collaborative choreographies”, etc. This is because, as education scholars Eve Tuck and K. Wayne Yang proposed in their seminal work *Decolonization is not a metaphor*, the path to decoloniality is embodied and actionable. The term “choreographies” anchors my decolonial pursuit in an actionable and embodied sequence of movements that both utilizes theoretical grounding to further my understanding of decoloniality but also distances itself from it remaining as a “buzzword”.

This project embodied itself by distancing itself from creating a traditional proscenium performance and instead creating a container for multiple “alternative choreographies” to exist housed under the veil of immersive performance.

“Alternative Pedagogical Choreographies”: Immersive Performance as Decolonial

Pedagogy

Immersive performance and the strategies that are involved in its creation are not only a powerful creative act, it is also an impactful embodied pedagogical methodology. This is seen in social studies and experiments such as Sue Halpern’s “Virtual Iraq: Using simulation to help a new generation of veterans” where VR immersion is utilized to help veterans with post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) as well as multiple studies in education regarding simulated environments and gaming simulation design as a supportive mechanism for affective/effective learning in multiple industries such as nursing, disaster preparedness and even military combat.¹⁰ The act of

¹⁰ For more information regarding these, please refer to “Creating Effective Learning Environments and Learning Organizations through Gaming Simulation Design” by Willy C. Kriz, “Synthetic Learning Environments: On Developing a Science of Simulation, Games, and Virtual Worlds for Training” by Jan Cannon-Bowers and Clint Bowers, and “Supporting students’ learning with multiple representations in a dynamic simulation-based learning environment” by Jan van der Meij and Ton de Jong

learning and the information gained gleams on the transformational properties that immersive experience designer Ida Benedetto refers to as well designed and structured, immersive transformational experiences¹¹. The embodied experience of simulation or immersion reconstructs the enacter/student/audience member into a new sense of self making. They learn not only how to interact within this new, interactive performance but with the world that awaits them outside. This is how immersive performance becomes an “alternative pedagogical choreography”.

Immersive performance can be utilized to expand knowledge on the violent effects of colonialism and how to consider/achieve/work for decolonization. Immersive performance, or the strategies that are utilized to create immersive performance, are transformative/radical pedagogical methods that allow for a new future to exist. In its dismantling of a pre-immersive event past, a post-event future is created in which the audience can take away these new forms of being and thread them into their every day. As a dance educator and artist, the decoloniality innately existing within immersive performance is a powerful tool that can enact significant change within educational, performance and societal spheres. With a recent push for educational institutions to start decolonizing curricula, we must look at the performative and practical strategies that are available to us as educators. Nandita Dinesh, theater educator and practitioner, has experimented with these causal effects of immersive performance in an applied theater setting specifically in areas of conflict.

In their three-book series, *Memos from a Theater Lab*, Dinesh dives into a research project about “what immersive theater does” by creating two productions that utilize the same exact language and physical material but sharing them in two distinct ways. One of the

¹¹ Ida Benedetto, *Patterns of Transformation: Designing Sex, Death, and Survival in the 21st Century*

performances is immersive while the other is set in a traditional proscenium setting. Dinesh posits that immersive theater has the capability to deconstruct societal norms of audience members by putting them in the position of the Other. In other words, Dinesh notes that the “alternative audience choreographies” that immersive performance provides can radically shift societal preconceptions by utilizing immersive performance as an “alternative pedagogical choreography”. We see Dinesh analyzing how the aesthetic framework surrounding immersive theater provides support in their mission with their work *Pinjare (Cages)*.

Pinjare (Cages) is an immersive theater performance devised in collaboration with the Ensemble Kashmir Theatre Akademi (EKTA) and Dinesh. The work “immerse[s] male, Kashmiri audience members in the shoes of Kashmiri women, asking the spectator-participants to embody the gender-based differences in how the region’s conflicts are experienced...with the hope that the performance’s use of a novel/unfamiliar aesthetic (within the context of Kashmir) might stand the chance of sparking new perspectives around age-old debates surrounding gender hierarchies.”¹² Through *Pinjare (Cages)* Dinesh asks the performers and audience members to engage in a performance of “cultural memory”¹³, where audience members embody the choreography of the Other (in this instance Kashmiri men embodying the experience of Kashmiri women) in order to create a communal discussion surrounding gender-based inequities. Through this performance, Dinesh invokes theater scholar and performance studies professor Diana Taylor’s *The Archive and the Repertoire: Performing Cultural Memory in the Americas* which proposes that embodied cultural knowledge – the repertoire, the daily tasks and forced social actions such as arranged marriages of Kashmiri women – can offer alternative perspectives to the written archive - the treatment of Kashmiri women by their male counterparts. Dinesh

¹² Dinesh, Nandita *Memos from a Theater Lab: Exploring What Immersive Theatre ‘Does’*.

¹³ Taylor, Diana *The Archive and The Repertoire: Performing Cultural Memory in the Americas*

powerfully invokes Taylor's theoretical framework within immersive performance aesthetics to dismantle preconceived cultural notions surrounding gender inequality while also formulating new approaches to personal and communal identities. In the case of *Pinjare (Cages)*, Dinesh tracks and attempts to measure the impact of the performance with multiple post-show conversations with the participants. Dinesh then questions how there might be longer lasting effects to the impact of immersive experiences that they might not be able to measure. They quote Michael Etherton and Tim Prentki in describing how the "immediate impact of a project of applied theatre may be measurable and may be included within" questions of measurement and evaluation, "there are also alterations in attitude and behaviour that are registered in the long term, sometimes over years and generations."¹⁴ Because of this Dinesh embarks on creating these two versions of Kay Adshead's *The Bogus Woman* as a way to not only measure impact but see any long lasting effects that this impact might have.

Dinesh expands her previous data collection efforts from post show conversations following *Pinjare (Cages)* and creates four different data collection points for her new project. For both performances, Dinesh had post-show questionnaires, four different group conversations with performers and audience members of both performances, data collected from journals written by the audience members, and an individual interview scheduled a month after the performance. Through these efforts, Dinesh comes up with varied data that does not offer us absolute truths regarding the difference between traditional theatre and immersive performance. However, it does offer us two pieces of information: how the embodiment of immersivity for audiences led to attainment of new knowledge and something that Dinesh calls "different shades of empathy". In the quote below, Dinesh shares the data that corresponds to the questionnaire

¹⁴ Dinesh, Nandita *Memos from a Theater Lab: Exploring What Immersive Theatre 'Does'*.

and how audience members responded to embodied participation and knowledge acquisition as opposed to disembodied witnessing within traditional theatre.

“In response, 70 percent of the respondents to the Immersive Theatre option chose: ‘I am better informed about the experiences of refugees and asylum seekers’. On the contrary, 75 percent of the respondents to the proscenium performance said that the second option - “I encountered an interesting story”- best captured how they had been affected. The embodied action of being involved in the story seemed to lead the immersive piece’s audience members to think that they had gained new information about refugee/asylum seeking experiences while the proscenium piece generated a response that was quite different in that audience members explicitly mentioned having not encountered new information.”¹⁵

The data above is important to establish the understanding that immersive performance does indeed have some effect as an “alternative pedagogical choreography”. Continuing with the questionnaires, “the largest number of consistent responses from the spectators to the immersive performance said that *Policy Reform* is what is most important in addressing the current refugee crisis.”¹⁶ This points to the transformative pedagogical underpinnings within immersive performance.

Because of this embodied sense of the Other (their movement repertoire in conjunction with their “alternative audience choreographies”), the audience left not only with a different sense of their written archive (their knowledge of the conditions of asylum seekers and refugees) but also in the change of the communal/global archive - the potential for immigration policy reform. This is highlighted by Dinesh’s ideas of “different shades of empathy.”

“First, the questionnaires indicate that the two performances generated different *shades of empathy*: that proscenium performances might lead to a distanced empathy, akin to sympathy, that allows for multi-dimensional interpretation; that immersive performances seem to cause emotion-based empathy that is more likely to evoke autobiographical memories for the

¹⁵ Dinesh, Nandita *Memos from a Theater Lab: Exploring What Immersive Theatre ‘Does’*.

¹⁶ Dinesh, Nandita *Memos from a Theater Lab: Exploring What Immersive Theatre ‘Does’*.

spectators.”¹⁷ The difference between sympathy and empathy here is key. Sympathy here is a direct correlation to a disembodied witnessing that occurs in proscenium performance, or in real world situations, whereas empathy occurs due to the proximity of the participant to the narrative and physical action of the performer (in this case the experience of the Other). While Dinesh mentions the problems this can bring up¹⁸, the information provided within her experiment indicates that the transformative properties allowed for audiences to consider post-performance applications of the information gained.

Machon gives further theoretical grounding and evidence to Dinesh’s “different shades of empathy” introduces us to presence and “praesence”. Presence in Machon’s words is a fixed state in which the body easily becomes disembodied to participate in acts of witnessing and observation, “I’m aware that I’m sitting in a theater watching/observing”, where as “aliveness” in relation to “praesence” is an “alternative” multi-sensorial approach to deeper embodiment through corporeal activation of the performance space, “I’m crafting/negotiating my presence in the space”. To connect Benedetto and Machon, “praesence” is the “transformational metric” which illuminates the audience’s existence to more than just the audience members themselves. The activation of “praesence” heightens one’s sense of belonging, being, and humanity, or in Dinesh’s immersive adaptation of *The Bogus Woman* and *Pinjare (Cages)*, empathy.

Immersive performance provides a space for communities whose voices have been marginalized, whose existences have been essentially “un-alived”. Immersive performance allows audience members to step into a world with new, communally-built rules, cultural understandings, and ideas. To create immersive performance is to change the culturally

¹⁷ Dinesh, Nandita *Memos from a Theater Lab: Exploring What Immersive Theatre ‘Does’*.

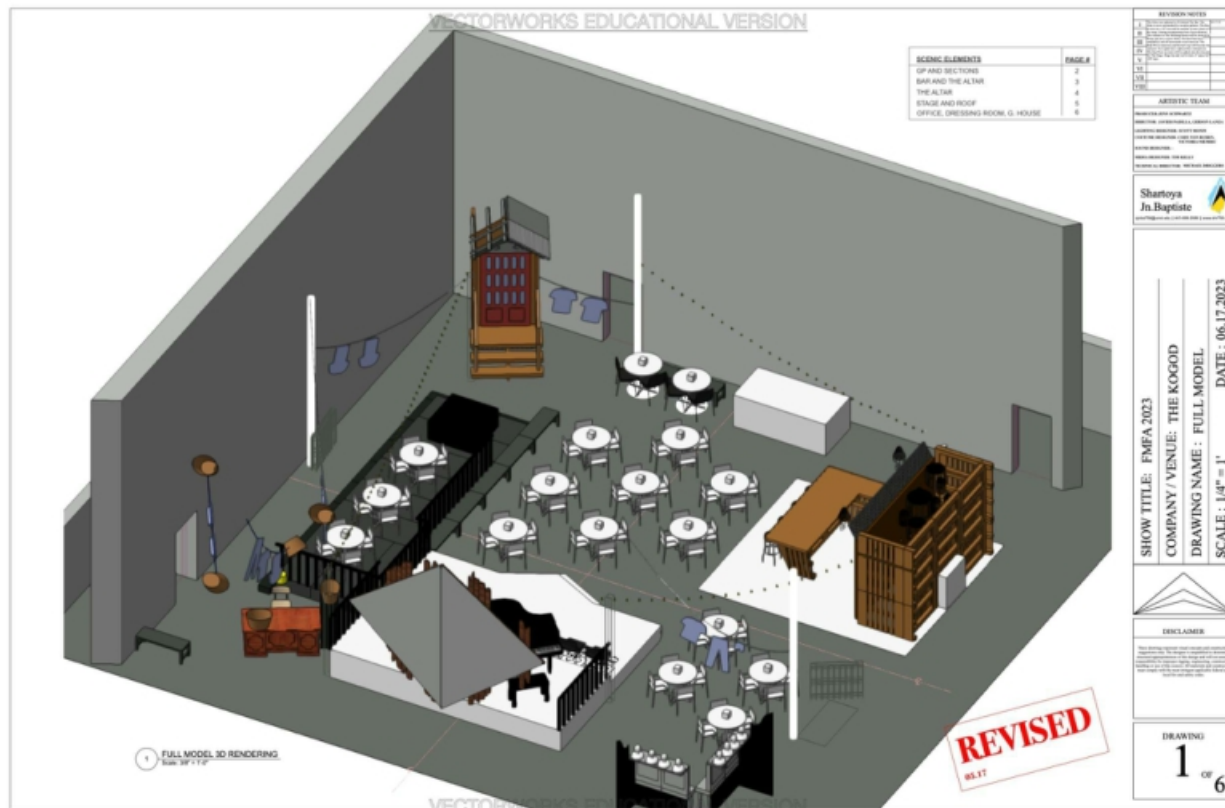
¹⁸ A quote from Dinesh highlights the problematization of people embodying the experiences of the Other: That said, it must be acknowledge that this notion of information gain can be hugely problematic, with spectators assuming that their one hour of being in an Other’s shoes gives them ‘knowledge’ about that experience - much like the kind of tourist who speaks patronizingly about ‘knowing’ a local culture after spending a few days at its touristic sites.

embodied production of information for all participating bodies - performers and audience members alike.

Immersive performance as an “alternative pedagogical choreography” not only creates space for people to reflect and find their own sense of humanity, but it allows them to rewrite how they operate in space with others. This “alternative social choreography” provides audience members with a similar goal, to navigate through the immersive space together, while also allowing individuals to explore and identify how they are evolving at an individual scale. These ideas excite me as a maker and scholar, as we as artists carry the potential to create embodied decoloniality aligned spaces in which the immersive communities that we create can evolve as individuals, as collectives and as forward thinking citizens of the world outside of the performance walls. All of these ideas led to the creation of the performance aspect of this project, “el bodegón de la bruja”.

“el bodegón de la bruja”: “Alternative Collaborative Choreographies in Design”

Fig 3. A ground plan drafted by scenic designer Shartoya Jn. Baptiste for the shared Fall MFA Thesis Concert ENCUENTROS.



The space was divided into four distinct corners and an open space in the center with a section of cabaret tables and chairs where the audience could sit. In the picture above, you'll see a bar space at the furthest right side of the picture, a dressing room space below the bar, a stage space to the left of the dressing room and an office space to the left of the stage. These were the main spaces which were used in “el bodegón de la bruja”, however there is one more space that was created in order to facilitate Gerson's half of the show - his house. In the upper most left corner of the picture above you'll see a door with some steps, while these were not utilized in “el

bodegon de la bruja”, our scenic designer, Shartoya Jn. Baptiste worked with us to use props and extra scenic elements to hide this space during “el bodegon...” but fully exposed Gerson’s house for his half of the show. Shartoya and the rest of the design team continuously worked through the challenges of creating an immersive space which led to us developing a more present and live sense of collaborating. We had to respond to things in the moment and also consider the “alternatives” that could potentially happen night after night.

On top of this new way of responding, Gerson and I had to develop and craft our language to translate the aesthetics of *latinidad* and Caribbean-ness to a design team that was primarily White, except for Shartoya who is Saint Lucian. This crafted an “alternative collaborative choreography” in which we were decolonizing design from a functional standpoint and introducing design as a dramaturgical element that amplified the storytelling and political messaging that Gerson and I were crafting through both of our works. This also led to a devising an “ontology of care” as described by first-nations Heidi Kiiwetinepinesiik Stark in “(Re)Mapping Worlds: An Indigenous (Studies) Perspective on the Potential Abolitionist and Decolonial Futures”.

Stark provides us vocabulary from indigenous epistemologies which align with our deconstruction of a traditional Western view of performance making and creates an alternative future for performance making by sharing an “ontology of care” which comes from Indigenous ideology for world-making/world-ending. This “ontology of care” argues that our “liberation is bound up together and reminding us that the future is already embodied in our relationships” which is to say that my relationship with my designers is key in the post-colonial futurity that we are trying to create and amplify on stage together for our performers and audiences.

Our design conversations began with nuanced conversations regarding the political, social and economic implications of the US still owning Puerto Rico as a colonial territory and how it affects my family and friends personally as well as how it has affected the island historically. These conversations continued to evolve into what symbols can be utilized to represent the current status of Puerto Rico, such as: the decaying world of the bar and the recycling of wood and other materials to create spaces in the scenic design, the shadows made by the Caribbean stark sun and quiet moon over the ocean in the lighting design, the clever usage of surveillance with CCTV and manipulation of baseball games, *telenovelas* and a Celia Cruz concert in the media design, and the *vejigante* mask and Catholic iconography displayed in the costume design.

Through these various design conversations, care for my designers was at the forefront, making sure that their artistic voice was heard but also nourished. Through this act of care within the design process, I felt a reciprocity of care from my designers, allowing for the designs to reach their fullest capacity in both aesthetic clarity and dramaturgical intent.

The importance of clarity of dramaturgical and aesthetic intent creates a believable immersive experience which leads the audiences' to buy into the performance. This "alternative collaborative choreography" in design amounts to the audience member feeling a sense of safety in knowing that this world is different from where they came from and that new rules and new ways of being must be adopted to safely navigate this new world. These successful "alternative collaborative choreographies" creates an authentic embodied experience for the audience members to come together as a community to investigate their relationship to the space but also to one another, creating "alternative collaborative choreographies of socialization".

“el bodegón de la bruja”: “Alternative Social Choreographies”

Jason Warren in his book *How to Make Immersive Theaters* presents the term “living” as an overarching thematic that resonates throughout the pages of this semi-handbook/semi-retelling of Warren’s own experience as director and collaborator in creating immersive work. “Living” comes up in the rehearsal process - “living rehearsals”. In the spatial design - “living spaces” - and in how the audience and performers interact before, during and after the performance is done – “living choices” and “living beyond the performance”. While these were not guiding landmarks while developing the choreography of “el bodegón de la bruja”, they quickly started to become lights in an ever narrowing tunnel: our race against time.

Warren posits that these elements that are “live”, meaning the way that the performers and audience interact with the space differently every night, are key to the development of functional and believable immersive work. These elements evolve during each performance and can shift as the audience teaches us more and more about our spaces, choices and stories. One clear example of how the space “lives” is in the spatial dynamics that we witnessed throughout the run of “el bodegón...”.

All of the spaces mentioned in the picture above, minus Gerson’s house, were all used but the one which Warren would reference as the space with the most “gravitational pull” – or a space distanced away from the action that allows audience members to witness but not participate - would be the space in the middle of the picture where the cabaret style seating was present. Another definition of a space like this would be a familiar location, such as our bar, in which the audience understands the social norms and actions acceptable of a space like this.

However, because most of our action takes place at the bar, the audience would shy away from staying too close to our watering hole. This actually ended up working in our favor as most

of our major narrative plot points ended up taking place at the bar and the audience would give us enough space, but when there was breathing room in between scenes, they felt inclined to come and chat with us for a bit.

Something that spatially didn't work which Warren would've named a "Void" – or a space that does not have enough "gravitational pull" because of aesthetics or having a difficult traveling pathway – was our office space. The office space was our unfortunate "Void" as the pathway was blocked heavily by an audience riser-seating arrangement, as well as being adjacent to our built cabaret stage. The playing/dancing area was lower than the stage and the risers so our sightlines were slightly blocked and the audience was not intrigued enough to move or search over in that area. I say this is our unfortunate "Void" because multiple large plot points occurred in that office space that shifted the narrative and many audience members missed out and were confused with the action. However, the cast and I decided to make a choice out of this unfortunate "Void" and take the action of the space into the center of the room – where a majority of audience members were comfortably seated. Unintentionally at first, the cast and I decided to clarify and highlight those unseen moments at the office by involving and participating with the audience even more, as well as, in Warren's words, "combining zones".

In an accident that incapacitates Avital Dresin's character in the office, she begins to spill into the space, speaking in Hebrew and yelling loudly to get the audience's attention. Her friends and some of the audience members witness this moment, and decide to help her. My character, the Barkeep, comes to their rescue and begins to ask her friends who had hurt Avital. Through our pathway from the office, into the main space, into the bar, we have blended the invisible walls that separate our three corners and main center of the room and have turned the room into one cohesive "living space" as opposed to four independent rooms that co-exist. Through this

tactic, audience members can either follow our narrative path or continue to remain in the office where the perpetrator of the event, Daniel Miramontes' character, is having a difficult time dealing with what he has done. Through this "combining of zones", we've allowed the audience to continue making choices on what to witness, but have freed up our "Void's" problem of a difficult pathway.

Our participatory strategies to clarify this narrative moment involved asking the audience who had hurt our injured friend. The audience who knew answered clearly, most shook their heads not knowing, others said "that guy with the cross on his chest". Regardless of their answer, heads turned towards where we came from and our invitation to answer helped us "combine our zones" even more. This functional, unscripted dialogue became primarily helpful in clarifying the stories in other ways throughout the performance. The whispers that emanated from multiple of our character's conversations ended up being shared by other audience members. *El chisme corrió por todo el lado*. The gossip was running from one corner of the room to the other. This is an example of "alternative collaborative choreographies of socialization".

Sharing a piece of anecdotal evidence on opening night, after our joyous exchange of high fives and minute long hugs with the cast, my parents joined us in the lobby post show. They shared with me the following which I believe to be an important piece of evidence to support this "alternative collaborative choreography of socialization".

My parents relayed to me that after our opening night show, the audience was crowded all together out in the lobby, speaking amongst each other putting together all the pieces of the puzzle they had just witnessed. The folks who had spent most of their time in the office were sharing what they had seen to the folks who had spent most of their time at the bar. The audience entered the performance space as individuals and left the performance space as a community -

unified by sharing the information that they had constructed throughout the event. This not only warms my heart personally as a creator but brightens the bulb that we did something right as makers of a decolonial aligned immersive performance - we created a “living community”. The performance did not end once we took our curtain call bow, in fact, it never really ended. For a week to two weeks after, every time I walked down the halls of TDPS and The Clarice, people were coming up to me and some of the cast to talk about the show, their thoughts, their feelings, what they had garnered from it, what memories came up when they were in the space. The performance was, and at the point of me writing this, still very much “alive”. To align these anecdotal strings with our theoretical threads above, the participating bodies’ own sense of “aliveness”/“living”/“praesence” caused the performance, and the knowledge that it carries, to be “alive” as well.

Because the audience navigated the performance space as individuals trying to figure out where they belong in this new immersive world, they looked towards each other to see how they can collectively thrive in this new experience. These “alternative ways of being” within this immersive performance invited the audience to operate as a community throughout their own journey of self-making. “el bodegón...” was not just a “living performance” - it was a “living community” that held space for individual and collective liberation through immersive performance and “alternative collaborative choreographies of socialization.”

To circle back to my personal goals in developing “el bodegón...”, I believe that employing fiction as a mechanism to abstract real issues into a palatable immersive/fantasy world was a useful tool in supporting the performance to create these “alternative collaborative choreographies of socialization” for the audience. Fiction here becomes a “technology for community building.”

Fiction as a Technology of Community: Exploring Decolonial Identities and Futurities Through Immersive Performance within Fargo Nissim Tbakhi's "My Father, My Martyr and Me: Postcolonial Instructions for Loving the Palestinian Body"

Note for this chapter: It is important to note that postcolonial discussion is never generalized and is extremely specific to cultural, social, political, geographic, and financial contexts. However, within the context of this chapter, I would like to compare the effect of decolonial embodied cultural production between two embodied makers, Fargo Nissim Tbakhi and myself. I bring this up to be mindful that the history of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and the occupation of the United States over Puerto Rico are not the same. Tbakhi and I are distant in the multiple contexts listed above. However, these identities, and potentially our artistic interests, are fabricated due to the aggressive ramifications of colonial oppression.

We are greeted by humid Washington DC summer haze as we find our seats in the backyard of an old art house in Takoma Park. The weather invites enthusiastic poetry and performance fanatics, the buzzing of cicadas, the cackling of nearby restaurant goers, and a patch of breathing earth. A shovel, a ladder, and some strewn lights create the frame for this mound of soil that rhythmically elevates and decompresses itself back to the earth. I turn to my fellow theatergoer, excited to spoil the surprise but contain my excitement as Palestinian house music starts rumbling from the back row. A beat of silence and Fargo Nissim Tbakhi, queer Palestinian-American performance artist and writer, arises from the mound of earth, stretching the silence into our dewey summery skin. They arrest us into a sonic state of stillness; they command our attention. The future is now.

Tbakhi's "My Father, My Martyr and Me" is an exemplary multidisciplinary immersive performance that highlights Tbakhi's domain of the written word. Their poetry resonates through

the air as their body thrashes, rolls, and translates phonetics into physicality. Tbakhi takes us through a ninety-minute journey that interweaves the legacies of three Palestinian men, themselves, Sirhan Bishara Sirhan, and Tbakhi's father. They invite the audience through multiple stories that never entirely resolve but always connect from one to the other. Tbakhi takes their time unraveling these stories and the complexities of queer Palestinian identity while exploring how the violent effects of colonialism have led to a mass misunderstanding of Palestinian cultural identity. Ultimately, Tbakhi presents a deep rhapsodic vignette of queer Palestinian futurity, a postcolonial dream made reality "where no one has bulls**t Middle Eastern sci-fi names." Tbakhi's performance not only dismantles misconceptions of an oppressed cultural identity but offers the audience an introspective method to address postcolonial consequences and the potential to collaborate in creating a peaceful and joyful decolonial future. "In the future, there are no colonizers. The future is unoccupied".

Tbakhi shares their hopeful Palestinian future and takes us with them. We are complicit in the deconstruction of contemporary Palestinian identities created by Western media and the reconstruction and understanding of a postcolonial queer Palestinian body. They achieve this through immersive strategies that elicit our interest and promote our agency as audience members (aka "alternative audience choreographies"). But first Tbakhi, in collaboration with his audience, must create "the magic circle"¹⁹. They have to develop themselves as a trustworthy agent in our communal undoing and self-making. Tbakhi extends his trust and belief in us as his co-conspirators by extending a gentle invitation via their hand. They extend their hand out and await an audience member; a gentle moment of holding hands is materialized into our hot dewey

¹⁹ In a previous draft, the topic of the magic circle is explicitly described. Ida Beneddeto describes in their project *Patterns of Transformation: Designing Sex, Death, and Survival in the 21st Century* that the magic circle is a phenomenological experience in which the performer creates a sense of trust within their audience, and the audience feels a sense of ease when in relation to the performance space or action.

evening. Trust has been developed and Tbakhi has successfully presented how the night will unravel, with us in tow.

We must look at Tbakhi's development of audience trust as not only a model but also a prime example of what Morris describes as a "behavior chain", a pedagogical choreographic device that can help immersive makers develop trust with audience members to potentially guide them into participating within the performance more.

"Behavior chains" can be easily described in three steps, an invitation, a decision and a resolution. In Morris' words, "behavior chains" can be seen and developed as positive or negative reinforcement. For example, Tbakhi could have offered their hand - the invitation - and immediately slapped the audience member's hand in response to their decision which then leads to the negative resolution - that audience participation will be met with reprimand. In the real example, the "behavior chains" set by Tbakhi's gentle invitation and the audience member's response led to a positive resolution that created Tbakhi's "magic circle." This sets a precedent within immersive performances that the audience member is entering a new world - the immersive world of the show you are crafting. It is up to us as the world's co-creators to present and help the audience navigate these new rules. This helps us create not only a safe space for audience interaction but also a trustworthy space. This creation of "behavior chains" is an element useful to creating and expanding Benedetto's "magic circle". This also begins to expand on a new collaborative relationship between audience and performer or an "alternative collaborative choreography".

Because of this simple activation of audience trust, Tbakhi's performance was allowed to push the traditional boundaries of audience participation. Tbakhi constantly addresses multi-sensorial accessible activations of the performance space. Tbakhi introduces multiple

activation points comfortably for the audience, physically, emotionally and mentally. They ask us simple questions. They invite us to hold a piece of string. They invite us for a glass of water and some bread that they baked. They invite us to hold their hand, their shovel, a relic resembling an orb (later discovered to represent an anal lump when Tbakhi was fearful of genetic rectal cancer). Tbakhi decolonizes the perception that all audience members will activate the space in the same way but instead creates a *carte du jour* of physical, verbal, and auditory activations that allow a multitude of audience members to participate, regardless of movement capability or disability.

Benedetto invites psychologist Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi's ideas surrounding participation and enjoyment. When discussing different elements of risk they mention that "what people enjoy is not the sense of being in control, but exercising control in difficult situations... Enjoyment appears at the boundary between boredom and anxiety, when the challenges are just balanced with the person's capacity to act."²⁰

Tbakhi creates the "magic circle" and puts us in control of the performance.. Whether this control is high or low stakes is unbeknownst to us but our sense of our actions is extremely heightened. Tbakhi is enabling our own presence to be of importance to the performance space, which resonates with Morris' claim that good immersive performance "can only occur if the audience is there". Tbakhi's activations of the audience are balancing that potential risk of derailing the performance "with the person's capacity to act" and creating a container of transformative nature. Tbakhi is allowing us to transform as audience members - from a stationary bystander to an activated accomplice - and is actively educating us as citizens, educating us and allowing us to collaborate in the creation of a postcolonial Palestinian cultural identity.

²⁰ Benedetto, Ida *Patterns of Transformation: Designing Sex, Death and Survival in the 21st Century*

Tbakhi does this by employing “alternative choreographic” strategies from all of the theoretical material drawn and discussed in my introductory section. I call back to Nandita Dinesh’s project within *Memos from a Theater Lab*. Immersive performance as posited above, and as Dinesh relates to her own experience as a theater educator, is a pedagogical tool that can shift an individual's preconceived cultural notions and understandings. It does this by physically activating their sense of self multi-sensorially (Machon’s praesence/”alternative audience choreographies”), participating in the creation of a new immersive world and embodying the role of the Other (Taylor’s ideas of the archive and repertoire/”alternative collaborative choreographies”), and harnessing their individual sense of choice making and agency in relation to the world they will eventually exit into (Freire’s ideas within *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*/”alternative pedagogical choreographies”). Tbakhi cleverly utilizes all of these strategies to inform while also imbuing elements of science fiction to restructure and shift us into an embodied, self-aware and active audience.

CASE STUDY #1 “quiero ser mas que un mosaico” análisis de mi nostalgia cultural ausente”: Tbakhi, Muñoz and Me

Tbakhi's performance inspired my second immersive work, *quiero ser mas que un mosaico: análisis de mi nostalgia cultural ausente*²¹, a 30-ish minute Puerto Rican *pari de marquesina* that enacts immersive performance strategies to lead the audience through dreamlike vignettes of cultural, social and political identities. Tbakhi's exploration of queer Palestinian futurity and identity flooded me with questions on how the desires and dreams of queer colonized bodies

²¹ “quiero ser mas que un mosaico: analisis de mi nostalgia cultural ausente” premiered as a part of the Experimental Performance Series in May of 2023 in the Dance Theater housed in the Clarice Smith Center for the Performing Arts.

manifest. How are Tbakhi's futures similar or different from mine? Does immersive performance heighten or diminish the messaging? Are these desires and dreams, in and of themselves, decolonial in nature?

Because of our ties as queer performers, I invite Cuban American queer performance studies scholar Jose Esteban Muñoz to connect us in both aesthetic and theoretical dialogue. Specifically, I engage with Muñoz's *Disidentifications: Queers of Color and the Performance of Politics* as a jumping off point to how Tbakhi and myself utilize immersive performance as a political survival and resistance mechanism against our oppressive tight spaces²².

Muñoz defines disidentification in a variety of ways but the one that calls to how Tbakhi and I utilize it within our performances is the one that follows:

“Michel Pêcheux extrapolated a theory of disidentification from Marxist theorist Louis Althusser's influential theory of subject formation, Althusser's 'Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses' Pêcheux built on this theory by describing the three modes in which a subject is constructed by ideological practices. There is 'identification' when a 'Good Subject' aligns and identifies with a dominant ideological system. Second is 'counteridentification' where a 'Bad Subject' resists and attempts to reject the dominant ideology followed by the 'Good Subject'. Finally, there is disidentification where the subject neither rebels nor assimilates but instead 'works on and against' the dominant cultural logic from within, always laboring to enact permanent structural change while at the same time valuing the importance of local or everyday struggles of resistance”.²³

Disidentification works as a decolonial mechanism of deconstructing “dominant cultural logic” while also reconstructing by “laboring to enact permanent structural change”²⁴. Muñoz's introduction of Michel Pêcheux's three modes of subject self-formation provides us with not

²² Goldman, Danielle “*I Want to Be Ready*”

²³ Muñoz, José Esteban. “Performing Disidentifications.” *Disidentifications Queers of Color and the Performance of Politics*

²⁴ Muñoz, José Esteban. “Performing Disidentifications.” *Disidentifications Queers of Color and the Performance of Politics*

only a theoretical grounding to both Tbakhi and my own disidentification performances but also directly corresponds to the decolonial literature presented in the introduction above.

Disidentificatory performances or disidentification “is about recycling and rethinking encoded meaning. The process of disidentification scrambles and reconstructs the encoded message of a cultural text in a fashion that both exposes the encoded message’s universalizing and exclusionary machinations and recruits its working to account for, include, and empower minority identities and identifications. Thus, disidentifications is a step further than cracking open the code of the majority; it proceeds to use this code as raw material for representing a disempowered politics or positionality that has been rendered unthinkable by the dominant culture.”²⁵ In other words, the colonial subject has the ability to use disidentification as a performative mechanism that both deconstructs and reconstructs cultural memory and identity while simultaneously utilizing the dominating cultural logic. “Disidentificatory readings and performances also always require an active kernel of utopian possibility”²⁶ which call for a potential post-colonial futurity that exists within Tbakhi and my identities as colonial subjects.

Within the construction of disidentificatory performances, there is the phobic object; “the pathetic and abject spectacle that appears to be in the dominant eyes of the heteronormative culture”.²⁷ In both of our cases, the phobic object is the gay male experience. In Tbakhi’s performance the phobic object is that of a queer Palestinian man living in his authentic performance of queerness, whereas the dominant cultural logic deems Palestinian men as “terrorists”. In “...mosaico”, the phobic object it is that of a gay fat bodied Puerto Rican man

²⁵Muñoz, José Esteban. “Performing Disidentifications.” *Disidentifications Queers of Color and the Performance of Politics*

²⁶Muñoz, José Esteban. “Performing Disidentifications.” *Disidentifications Queers of Color and the Performance of Politics*

²⁷Muñoz, José Esteban. “Performing Disidentifications.” *Disidentifications Queers of Color and the Performance of Politics*

performing a “drag-esque” cover of *Gata Bajo La Lluvia* by Rocio Durcal or *Mentiroso* by Olga Tañón (depending on audience choice) and shedding clothing off and exposing all of their magnificent curvy flesh, whereas the dominant cultural logic is fat and queer phobic. We both embrace what makes us “non-normative” and transform these disidentifications into radical resistive acts of performance. Our disidentifications actually bring us closer to the core of our identities and the performances of these become a decolonial act, a reclaiming of our semi-public selves and a reconstruction of a queer postcolonial future for us and the queer community at large.

Tbakhi and I also employ fiction as what Muñoz calls “a technology of the self” as a way to perform our disidentification in order to create proximity to our audience by abstracting our narrative themes into pluriversal ideas. Muñoz describes ““the real self”” who comes into being through fiction is not the self who produces fiction, but is instead produced by fiction.” Fiction here functions as a powerful vehicle for decolonial performance as it is a tool for one’s self-making, as Muñoz deems it a “contested field of self-production”. Tbakhi performs “My Father, My Martyr and Me” and invites fiction through science fiction logic. The audience has the ability to time travel with Tbakhi, as they ask us to decide whether to indulge in the past, the present or the future, as well as present us with alternative realities - the postcolonial future "where there are no colonizers and no one has bulls**t Middle Eastern sci-fi names." Whereas I enter “... mosaico" through the use of non-linear dream logic to present improvisational vignettes that present queer grief, hope, love and transformation. Tbakhi and I utilize fiction and fantasy as mirrors to reflect to the audience the universal themes that underlie our disidentifications while

also refracting our queer stereotypes - “our campy, over the top glam performances”²⁸- as a way to further connect us to our authentic selves.

Muñoz posits that fiction can be utilized as a connecting thread between the performer and the audience. Tbakhi and my shared “drive toward justice, retribution, emancipation - which permits” [us] “to disidentify with” [the performance]”²⁹ is only associated as such because of its reception - its relationship to the audience. Muñoz shares how “performance and reception, interpretation and praxis” are “interlaced and crisscrossed”.³⁰ The disidentification is only asserted as such because the audience is there to witness and become a part of the performance. Because of Dinesh’s assertions regarding the production of new knowledge and their “different shades of empathy”, I posit that immersive performance can heighten the audiences’ understanding of the disidentification being performed. They are not only witnessing it occur, they are helping us in the deconstruction and recreation of our own cultural identities; they are supporting the dismantling of this dominant cultural logic. Immersive performance becomes a communal decolonial act of reclaiming, deconstructing and reconstructing of different individual and collective cultural identities. Immersive performance here is an “alternative collaborative choreography” that is supported by fiction as a means for both parties - audience and performer - to utilize the same “technology” to construct a communal sense of understanding of the performance space and a reconstruction of the disidentification that is being performed.

Muñoz’s ideas of “fiction as a technology of the self” imbued within an immersive performance can then be amplified as a “technology of community”. It is because of the audience

²⁸Muñoz, José Esteban. “Performing Disidentifications.” *Disidentifications Queers of Color and the Performance of Politics*

²⁹Muñoz, José Esteban. “Performing Disidentifications.” *Disidentifications Queers of Color and the Performance of Politics*

³⁰ Muñoz, José Esteban. “Performing Disidentifications.” *Disidentifications Queers of Color and the Performance of Politics*

interacting with our narratives both in an embodied manner as an immersive collaborator and as embodied witness that storytelling becomes a vehicle for postcolonial futurity. Immersive performance provides a space for an “alternative” collaborative relationship in which the messaging of the performance is not only received by the audience, it is created in collaboration with the audience. As the audience discovers their own ideas of independence, improvisatory play and self-agency within the immersive performance space, they share a sense of lived liberatory experience with the performer. They are living a potential postcolonial future via the dismantling of a pre-colonial identity that the performer is trying to shatter via disidentification. In other words, the audience and the performer collaborate through immersive performance to a shared understanding of what postcolonial identities can look and feel like. This “alternative collaborative choreography” is a tool for decolonial “futuring”; an embodied experience which speculatively hatches co-created post-colonial possibilities for the community of the performance space.

Tbakhi’s performance of disidentification allowed me to see myself within his deconstruction and allowed me to take part in my own cultural reconstruction of Palestinian cultural, social and political identity. Also Tbakhi’s performance widened my perspective to how immersive performance can creatively blend fact and fiction, fantasy and reality to heighten the emotional and pedagogical impact of the performance. I honor and offer my deepest gratitude not only to them but Muñoz as well for allowing me to encounter the language that ties Tbakhi and myself to a cultural legacy of resistive queer performances. Linking us through performance and theoretical dialogue as it allowed me to not only see immersive performance as a performance methodology and aesthetic that provides the audience with a heightened sense of embodiment

but also provided me with a method to my own self-making and personal catharsis that has transformed me into the artist and scholar that I strive to be today.

CASE STUDY #2: NORA AND THE LIGHTHOUSE: Fiction as a Technology of Community In Action and The Multi-Modal Body:

To continue on the thread of “fiction as a technology of community” and “alternative collaborative choreographies of audience and performers”, I present more anecdotal evidence through my first immersive performance titled *NORA and The Lighthouse*. *NORA* premiered informally as my final project of our Graduate Choreography class and recently had its official premiere at Dance Place on March 15th, 2024. It was an immersive science fiction dance theater experience that tracks the story of a family that has been under observation by a secret organization. *NORA* explores themes of loss and questions our relationship to death and the afterlife.

NORA choreographically involved what I began referencing as “the multi-modal body”. I was curious about how the body could perform “alternate performance choreographies” where the body is the main catalyst for activations involving technology, sound and social interaction as a vehicle for in-depth storytelling and audience immersion. *NORA* became a successful entry point for researching immersive performance and started to introduce the theoretical framework that would soon inspire the remainder of this project. *NORA* also introduced how we can see that interdisciplinary collaborative environments promote ideas of decolonization via transcultural dialogue, dispersal of power, agency and equal sharing of resources.

The “multi-modal body” is an “alternative choreographic” approach that was utilized to develop *NORA* improvisationally. *NORA* has four distinct sections that all to some degree involves improvised and choreographed movement in conversation with another improvisational element. For example, in the opening section of the work, I am digitally composing the soundscore on my computer, recording my breath through a looping pad, and rocking back and

forth on a chair at a desk. Movement and technology both are improvisational elements that are in concert and happen simultaneously. The negotiation of all these elements becomes the world-building mechanism that is threaded throughout the whole work; the world is constructed entirely from my body, as opposed to the world being designed to amplify the narrative that lives at the center of my character's experience. I refer back to Muñoz's mention of fiction as a technology of the self and reify it also as a technology of community.

Because world building is taking place there is also world ending³¹ which, in line with the previous assertions about immersive performance as a decolonial practice, runs in perfect alignment with de-and-reconstruction of a postcolonial world. The "multi-modal body" here is a disidentificatory object in which a traditional dance or dance experience is seen as a performance of choreographic sequences, potential moments of improvisation with increasing distance from the audience. However within *NORA*, we destroy the assertion because of a body performing interdisciplinary sequences that position the main medium of the body as a "multi-modal" vessel of performance. This is to say, we are coming to see a dance show, where dance is a medium that is equally important to the development of sound, projections, audience interaction and spoken word. The "multi-modal body" constructs a world where all disciplines are welcome as a technology of story-telling and world-building/world-ending.

As the world within *NORA* is constructed through fantasy, the preconceived notions of the performance in front of us (us = the audience (you) and the performers (me), are being transformed into something else. This allows for the "**uni**-verse", a singular perspective in which the world can be actualized, into the "**plu**-riverse" where Mignolo asserts is "a world where

³¹ Stark, Heidi Kiiwetinepinesiiik. *(Re)Mapping Worlds: An Indigenous (Studies) Perspective on the Potential for Abolitionist and Decolonial Futures*

many worlds, worldviews, and epistemologies fit”³². The pluriversal/interdisciplinary approach to performance making increases our embodied decolonial work as it allows us as makers to have further conversations with designers, creative technologists, dramaturgs and other collaborators to expand our “universe” into the “pluriverse” which in turn allows for audience members of immersive performance to potentially see themselves or align with any of the epistemologies presented. This is seen in other immersive experiences and has been studied by experience and game designers Dr. Jane Turner and Dr. Manuela Taboada in *Story-making: Re-imagining possible futures through collaborative world-building approaches*.

Taboada and Turner studied three different unrelated Table Top Role Playing (TTRPG’s) Workshops to study the potential of “dismantling the ingrained habits of current design methodologies; unlearn normalized ways of thinking and re-construct shared approaches for designing, making, rethinking and reframing problems” through the use of active imagination, play, world-building and collaborative story making through improvisation within table top role-playing games. While the point of view of the study is primarily through the players’ point of view, we can extract the identity of “player” and expand that into the “multi-modal body” of the performer and the audience. The “multi-modal body” invites the ‘pluriverse’ through improvisation and it is not limited to the performers. In fact, immersive performance calls for everyone in the playing space to become ‘multi-modal’.

The audience is invited to participate, to socialize, to deconstruct, to build and rebuild and to connect to one another and the performers. The “multi-modal” body here is a point of invitation for multiple epistemologies, ideas surrounding participation and proximity to come into the purview. Taboada and Turner amplify my argument that immersivity, improvisation and

³² Mignolo, Walter. “Coloniality of Power and De-Colonial Thinking.”

collaborative world-building are innately decolonial/world-ending by grounding themselves (and this argument) in the theoretical framework surrounding Arturo Escobar and Boaventura de Sousa Santos “alternatives to alternatives.”³³

When talking about the embodied nature of collaboration and story-making they mention that “this offers a powerful space to not only engage people in telling stories with each other—and, as such, learn and unlearn about other ways of being, knowing and living in the world—but also to engage people in creating stories together, stories that can embed the collective pluriverses to create speculative, fictional or future worlds which can be a basis for understanding and designing together for the future; stories that can foster active imagination and which can create a nurturing space for Escobar’s possibilities for possibilities and de Sousa Santos’ alternatives to alternatives.”³⁴

The embodiment of the “multi-modal body” within immersive performance calls for a reimagining of the collective stories that we tell and share as a method of rediscovering a potential future for us all. The “multi-modal body” also calls to what Taboada and Turner call “embodied and emergent spaces”³⁵ in which the embodiment of the players (or the audience and performers and, to some degree, designers as well) can move through a space that prompts emergence through active imagination rather than predetermined outcomes. The emergence that comes up allows for everyone to collaborate, cohabitate and co-create the play/performance space, and potentially allow for the same structures to exist outside of the space as well.

³³Boaventura de Sousa Santos’ decolonial theoretical framework of “alternatives to alternatives” is quoted in Turner and Taboada’s article. It’s decolonial underpinnings are in line with Quijano and Mignolo’s ideas of “deconstruction for reconstruction”. Sousa Santos calls for indigenous epistemologies to come against the struggles of capitalism and the violence of coloniality.

³⁴Turner, Jane, and Manuela Taboada. *Story-making: Re-imagining possible futures through collaborative world-building approaches*

³⁵Turner, Jane, and Manuela Taboada. *Story-making: Re-imagining possible futures through collaborative world-building approaches*

The “multi-modal body” calls to a decolonized approach to performance but also to pedagogical inquiry as well. Through the use of interdisciplinary approaches to embodied educational experiences, we can expand the learning capabilities and outcomes of our audiences and students. This is supported in the evidential data recorded by Taboada and Turner where two of the three workshops were live embodied experiences and one was an online digital roleplaying workshop.

Taboada and Turner both saw an increase in collaboration, active imagination and heightened self-agency in the embodied live workshops, whereas the digital workshop led to a distancing of the participants to each other, a lack of active imagination - relying heavily on the Game Master/Dungeon Master³⁶ to lead the sessions - and a lack of a “nurturing space” or in Benedetto’s words - a space that lacks “the magic circle”. This leads to an understanding that the embodied nature of these experiences was the transformative factor here that led to a heightened sense of community, creativity and collaboration. The “multi-modal body”, with a heavy emphasis on **body**, is the connecting link that can shift an immersive experience into a transformational event.

Reflecting back on *NORA* and its recent remounting, my attempts at discovering and implementing the “multi-modal body” were successful from the lens of the performer and the audience. I felt fully embodied with Machon’s ideas of “praesence” and available with what Danielle Goldman refers to as “state of readiness”³⁷. Both of these being primed by my improvisational awareness and investigation, amplified by my interdisciplinary and “alternative

³⁶ Game Master/Dungeon Master is a role in traditional table top role playing games. They take on the role of director of storytelling essentially that leads the group through a series of imaginative improvisational narrative scenarios traditionally called “quests”.

³⁷ Danielle Goldman’s, “I Want To Be Ready”

choreographic” approach to performance making by involving technology and audience participation.

Through the audience lens, I noticed that the collaborative relationship between performer and audience isn’t just a two way conversation but I as a performer/maker can also encourage collaboration within the audience as well. In the pre-show of *NORA*, specific audience members get two items 1) an envelope with either a specific embodied task or information regarding the lore of the world of *NORA* and/or 2) a secret note that activates a one-on-one scene with my character, Kirby the Intern, at the front of the space. I encouraged the audience members to make a decision whether they were going to keep the information in their envelopes for themselves or they could share their envelopes with other audience members and try to piece together the mystery of the world that *NORA* creates.

As groups of audience members began to enter the theater, I noticed that larger groups began to form. As I walked in character around the space to check in on folks, I noticed that groups were sharing information with each other from each other’s envelopes and trading their information back and forth so that everyone could communally piece together the information they needed to potentially solve the mystery of Shenoa Creek, the town where *NORA* takes place. This “alternative collaborative choreography” of the audience led to a communal space where the performance wasn’t meant for individual witnesses but for an empowered group of embodied participants who wanted to understand and follow the fictional narrative. This “alternative collaborative choreography” recruited fiction as a gateway to collaborative audience socialization and understanding, something that would later occur yet again in the creative portion of this thesis project which we discussed earlier.

The success of the “multi-modal body” and inviting audience members to physicalize different aspects of their being such as socializing, sharing information, gossiping, vocalizing, utilizing technology and beyond amplifies a sense of independence within the audience. This is also facilitated by the audience member feeling like they are in community with their fellow audience members. “If this person can do it, so can I.” The community empowers the individual to step into their embodied self awareness, their “praesence”, and vice-versa. The individual craving and searching for community inspires the space to become further community led.

The usage of “alternative collaborative choreographies” can lead decolonial embodied scholars and makers to create spaces like Turner and Taboada mentioned above in their study; spaces that are “nurturing and agentic”. Placed within an immersive performance space, these “alternative collaborative choreographies” can help the audience feel like they are finding the rules of the space by themselves and within community with other folks helping them find their independence and potentially intensify their willingness to participate and make decisions. In line with decolonial thinking, “alternative collaborative choreographies” might facilitate difficult conversations that could lead audience members to each other’s own self making and reconstruction of colonial ideologies. In essence, “alternative collaborative choreographies” promote community oriented pedagogical shifts that could bleed into the walls outside of the performance space and shift societal mainstream thought.

The “Multi-Modal” Body in “el bodegón de la bruja”:

The “multi-modal” body was not how we initially began investigating the movement vocabulary that would eventually become “el bodegón...”. The process actually began by focusing on “movement first” and how we can translate the narrative world into the physicality of the

performers. This was an ambitious part of the project and it worked during our early process. I intentionally hid the cast's roles from them and focused on constructing character skeletons that fit not only the character's storyline and emotional arc but also that challenged and highlighted each performer's qualities and preferences. Most, if not all the material was made in collaboration with each performer in a conversational and collaborative way. Constant questions kept coming up: does this feel good? How does this make you feel? What's coming up for you? The aesthetic clarity and definition of details ultimately came from me, but the elevation into its performance came from the collaborative relationship that we developed as a cast. The way that we built and performed the work was in line with Machon's ideas of *praesence*, Warren's "living..." pieces and Paulo Freire's constant decolonial line of active questioning so that the work wouldn't stay stagnant and would constantly be evolving. The audience, the performers and the work were truly "alive". Below we'll go into more detail about certain choreographic tasks and practices that helped us achieve this sense of "aliveness" and how it aligns with decolonial "alternatives to alternatives".

Decolonial, Alternative and Holistic: Choreographic Strategies for Creating Trust



Fig 4. Christina Collins performs Mother Witch in “el bodegón de la bruja” Photo by Timothy Kelly.

When addressing this idea of movement first, I witnessed the possibilities of creating a container where the body is the main medium. I embarked on this large project trying to connect all of the narrative throughlines solely by choreographed and improvised movement strategies. This was successful in the beginning but when we started connecting all of the scenes together, we were missing narrative continuity. This is to say that this idea of movement first only got us so far before we had to involve text, craft moments of audience and spatial interaction - inviting in the “multi-modal body”. Because we spent so much time researching character skeletons, the adding of vocalizations, text, audience and spatial interaction was easier than expected. This is because the dramaturgical research came from an internal embodied approach as opposed to external stimuli such as a script to dictate a character’s motives or intentions.

The “multi-modal body” in the instance of “el bodegón...” functioned also as allowing performers to be their own dramaturgs, directors and script writers. The choreographic structure of “character skeletons” here provided the performers with enough physical information, guided by our constant conversation and questioning regarding the physical material, that allowed them to create narrative threads that would lead us to a next narrative landmark.

For example, Christina Collins, Isabella Quinteros Grady and Emily Adams all played the family of witches that owned the bar where “el bodegón...” takes place. All three of the performers had specific “character skeletons” that were developed in solo sessions with each performer. Christina Collins’ Mother Witch was strong, bound with moments of fluidity and a sense of quick time. This created Christinas’ Mother Witch to be an urgent matriarch who was constantly bursting through the space.

Isabella’s Daughter Witch however was fluid, with a light sense of weight which allowed her to read as jovial, whimsical, with a side of darkness that we don’t get to see until the very end. Emily’s Young Daughter Witch was a mixture of both characters, constantly battling between her light and strong sense of weight, both rebellious and wanting to obey, but not knowing the boundaries of how far is too far. Through these “character skeletons” we developed not only believable characters but self-evolving characters that the performers could tap into and continuously find new information by investigating the physical nature of their characters.

This was especially noticeable when all three of the characters were in relationship to each other. In a series of improvised conversational vignettes, the three performers would discuss the proceedings of the night while adding hints of character information for the audience to gleam upon. During one of my favorite of these moments, Isabella finds Christina and Emily and recounts her encounters with the witch hunters. Christina’s character immediately embodies her

strong sense of weight and we can feel her sense of urgency in wanting to protect those around her. As she continuously asks Emily's character to remain hidden and safe, Emily's character decides to not follow her mother's rules and throws a pack of playing cards flying into space.

I would like to reiterate that these moments were improvised. Emily felt that was the action needed in the space because of their prior physical investigation of the inner workings of this "character skeleton." The rebellion that was festering within her amounted to a full destruction of the space, which then in turn created reactions out of Isabella, wanting to maintain lightness and pulling her sister away from her mother, and Christina, raising her voice and creating a tenseness in her spine that indicated anger veiled under fear.

Investigating these "character skeletons" and moving from a "movement first" standpoint allowed the "multi-modal body" that was required for this performance to flourish. Having the performers investigate the physical vocabulary of these characters allowed for actual spoken vocabulary to develop from a somatic sensory place. They could feel the words, therefore they were able to speak the words. The way "multi-modal body" functioned for us within "el bodegón..." amplifies the transformational properties within immersive performance making specifically. The "multi-modal body" here acts as "alternative performance choreographies" as well as "alternative choreographies for creative process." Investigating "movement first" and these "character skeletons" allowed for dramaturgical intention to support aesthetic clarity and vice-versa. The movement was the medium in which the story was received by the audience, but it was also the mode in which the performers could investigate the narrative for themselves.

The "multi-modal body" here supports Christina, Emily and Isabella's performance choices by enabling their physical research and confidence within the movement material to amplify their own sense of self-agency and ability to make creative choices. It frees them from

pressures of “being right” and pushes them to “feeling alive” within their characters, enacting the sense of “praesence” that Machon articulates earlier on. This helps us address the decolonial potential of these “character skeletons” as it shifts away the power of me as director and distributes power, independence and agency to the performers. Within this also comes a great act of trust and care.

We come back to Heidi Kiiwetinepinesiik Stark who provides us with vocabulary from indigenous epistemologies which align with our deconstruction of a traditional Western view of performance making (dancer as vessel or blank canvas)³⁸ and creates an alternative future for performance making by sharing an “ontology of care” which comes from Indigenous ideology for world-making/world-ending. Through the work of these “character skeletons”, I tried my best to employ a constant “ontology of care” which makes me responsible for taking care of those around me, the space, and those things that aren’t in the room³⁹. I embodied this “ontology of care” because Stark also argues that our “liberation is bound up together and reminding us that the future is already embodied in our relationships”⁴⁰. The more I showed care for my performers, the more they could trust themselves. The care that we took with these “character skeletons” was important. These “character skeletons” were made in conversation, collaboratively and individually. Everyone felt cared for through these “character skeletons” which then in turn allowed them to care for their own trajectory with their characters.

³⁸ Knox, Sarah *It’s all of me there, all the time: Meanings and Experiences of a Holistic View of the Individual Within Choreographic Collaboration*”

³⁹I would like to acknowledge that within the context of the article, “those things that aren’t in the room” references the spiritual qualities of the Earth in line with First Nation thought. In the context of this thesis, it is the performer’s lives that come in differently every day into rehearsal. Emotions, arguments, losses, excitements.

⁴⁰ Stark, Heidi Kiiwetinepinesiik. *(Re)Mapping Worlds: An Indigenous (Studies) Perspective on the Potential for Abolitionist and Decolonial Futures*”

Character Skeleton for Track C: Britney Falcon - Bartender

Fig. 5 - Javier Padilla as Barkeep and Brit Falcon as Bartender in the Bar Space in “el bodegón de la bruja”. Photo by Shartoya Jn. Baptiste.



Britney Falcon’s Pre-Show solo at the bar and her “Premonition” solo is a great example of how this “ontology of care” created a dynamic “plurivers-istic” creative relationship in which Brit’s agency developed through active imagination⁴¹ via our improvisational tasks within choreographed structures and creative collaboration through our personal check-ins conversations in and out of the rehearsal space. We spent some time defining and re-defining the particular nuances that define how this character moves within the world, but also how this world

⁴¹ Turner, Jane, and Manuela Taboada. *Story-making: Re-imagining possible futures through collaborative world-building approaches*

moves them. Brit's character has multiple premonitions about what's about to occur in the space which we translated through a constant shifting of weight, focus, attention and text. These decisions were made in collaboration with Brit through conversation. Every time I gave Brit movement, we would talk about heightening the physical sensations that came about the movement.

I was able to guide my cast through this idea of movement first because I originally wanted the narrative to develop from a sensory standpoint as opposed to from a feigned emotional performance. This was for two reasons. One, I wanted them to focus on deepening their relationship to the physicality of the movement and how that influenced how their character moves through space. And two, to develop authentic displays of emotion that depended on physical nuance and expression rather than melodramatic flair.

Some examples of how we utilized this, going back to Brit's Pre-Show solo, is using the vocabulary to heighten emotional displays without calling forth that emotion.

A sense of unease became:

1. Indirect Attention to Space within our focus/Direct Attention to Space within our body to showcase this contrast of Brit's being in "premonition" time versus her being in "real" time with the audience.
2. Heavy Weight and Sustained Time when stuck in "premonition" time/Light Weight and Quick Time when "snapping out of premonition time.
3. Free Sense of Flow when in "premonition time"/Bound Sense of Flow when in "real time".

These would come out through our conversations between sections of movement and by calling forth Laban's⁴² Ideas of Effort. We enhanced our "character skeletons" and created nuanced and believable physically embodied characters as well as created a safe environment where we kept a non-triggering vocabulary available for the cast to use.

Another example of the above is when working with a section we called "Ghosts", where I was working with Avital, Isabella, Charlene, Debanshi and Daniel. We created this quintet with the idea of "tumbling", the whole space was constantly shifting underneath Daniel's feet and the undergraduate cast was making that shift happen. This scene is intentionally aggressive, malicious and sometimes a little violent. Because of the amplified nature of the scene, in rehearsal we used a similar vocabulary to stray away from utilizing a potentially triggering vocabulary, so instead of using aggressive, violent, malicious, etc. we utilized Heavy Weight, Quick Time, Bound Flow as a mechanism to explore the same emotional qualities from, again, a movement first standpoint as opposed to jumping off from our emotional portrayals or connection to story.

The language we utilized in these "character skeletons" also enhanced everyone's relationship to their own performance. Through our conversational and collaborative approach, the performers and I were questioning the physical sensations that came up within the material

⁴² A very hefty footnote - Laban's unfortunate connections to Nazi Germany here are not to be ignored, especially in a project discussing decoloniality, and more specifically, in a chapter that discusses care as a potential technology for the embodied decoloniality of the creative process. I offer the following. A full project should/could be dedicated to the dismantling of the Laban system as a method that upholds systems of white supremacy and homogenization of the body via intentional language and the hegemonization of the Western standard of dance. However, this thesis project is in direct correlation with the decolonial line of questioning by utilizing Laban's methodology and dislodging from its original intended usage. We are undoing Laban's system of language, re-doing it to amplify dancer's agency and humanity, as opposed to using it to "pigeonhole" movement into a vocabulary that is not inclusive of disability (visual or non) and displays of cultural affectation. This paragraphed footnote again can be its own project, however for the sake of this thesis, I offer the above as a way of reckoning with Laban's harmful past and moving forward with his methodology in acknowledgement of this while also reframing the deconstruction and "alternative"-ization of his system in line with decolonial futurist thought.

and answered them via improvisational play and dialoguing through the narrative implications that would come up because of these physical sensations.

Going back to Brit's Pre-Show solo at the bar, this sense of unease became our improvisational score as well as our guiding light behind the choreographic choices made. We continued to dissect this sense of unease via Brit's physical analysis as well as our use of Laban's Ideas of Effort to create an embodied experience that allowed Brit to define the narrative arc of their character via improvisational choice-making. Guided improvisational structure and choreographed movement allowed Brit's sense of "praesence" as a performer to heighten, which calls to Brit's agency as a performer. To connect to Stark, I reflect and connect "that active imagination needs spaces for collaboration, for open communication, reflection, and most importantly, spaces that allow for agency and emergence. In short, spaces for multiple onto-epistemologies and multiple worlds to come into being."⁴³ That is to say that through this "ontology of care" and reflection and trust building with Brit, we developed a movement approach that connected both of our artistic interests while allowing personal space for Brit to perform and make creative decisions, while also navigating the "unsteady landscape"⁴⁴ of the immersive audience.

These "character skeletons" allowed for each performer to find that same sense of self awareness and aliveness, not only through the narrative through line of the work but also by navigating Shartoya Jn. Baptiste's set design and new audience members night by night. The choreography provided a framework in which the performers can make improvisational choices regarding the "bones of their skeleton." These refer to the physical sensations that would come

⁴³ Stark, Heidi Kiiwetinepinesiik. *(Re)Mapping Worlds: An Indigenous (Studies) Perspective on the Potential for Abolitionist and Decolonial Futures*"

⁴⁴ Danielle Goldman "I Want To Be Ready"

up when creating a specific movement phrase, as well as key Laban Effort Vocabulary that was utilized when creating that choreographed structure. This sense of “aliveness” within these “skeletons” allowed for a deeper understanding of themselves but also of their surroundings, of their relationship to space and of the immersive properties that were happening around them, such as making decisions based on audience placement and any movement of the set design.

I posit that the success of these “skeletons” came from us taking time to know all of the artists in the room on a deeper level. Taking care and feeling responsible for their care allowed for all of them to expand into their “skeletons” in more nuanced and creative ways. Trust - the “nurturing space” - served as a conduit to the “agentic spaces” found in Dinesh’s *Pinjare (Cages)*. The “ontology of care” provided us with a safe space for active imagination and collaboration to flourish, while persisting on the decolonial act of being in community, of relating to one another on the common goal of creating an immersive experience and a creative rehearsal process that points us to a potential future where all of us can move towards our freedom and liberation.

Improvisation as a Mechanism of Freedom in “Alternative Choreographies” and Immersive Performance

As we continue throughout this thesis project, I’d like to highlight the importance of improvisation within all of the applicable approaches to “alternative choreographies”.

Improvisation lies inextricably within my artistic practice as a method of movement generation and emotional self-regulation. Improvisation has been a saving grace within my personal life and a vehicle for innovation in my artistic life. I was always curious as to how this way of approaching movement and life could potentially show up in my art making. Improvisation is itself an “alternative performance choreography” that allows folks to also embody “alternative ways of being” that are authentic to one’s own sense of self expression. Through that line of thought, I asserted that improvisation must be a shared liberatory experience that is both decolonial in nature and functional in its approaches to embodiment. It was through my research and personal experience within immersive performance that I started to identify how improvisation lives inextricably within immersive performance through decolonial theoretical and functional applications.

Danielle Goldman’s *I Want To Be Ready: Improvised Dance as a Practice of Freedom* highlights how improvisation functions as an embodied technology of liberation; a technology that, as mentioned above, is constantly utilized within immersive performance.

Immersive performance also invites the audience to participate through the world in their own self-making, making sense of this new world around them through improvisation. *I Want To Be Ready* begins with a heavy assertion away from the traditional ideas regarding improvised movement. Goldman asserts that improvised dance “does not reject or exemplify the understanding of freedom as a desired endpoint devoid of constraint. On the contrary, it actively

resists it.”⁴⁵ This is to say that improvised dance within itself is not a “process of liberation” in which the activation of it automatically provides a sense of social, emotional and political release of constraint. But Goldman posits in fact that improvisation invites working with and against this sense of political, social and emotional constraint - or what Houston Baker⁴⁶ terms a “tight space”⁴⁷ - to achieve what Michel Foucault coined as a “practice of freedom”.

“I am not trying to say that liberation as such, or this or that form of liberation, does not exist: when a colonized people attempts to liberate itself from its colonizers, this is indeed a practice of liberation in the strict sense. But we know very well, and moreover in this specific case, that this practice of liberation is not in itself sufficient to define the practices of freedom that will still be needed if this people, this society, and these individuals are to be able to define admissible and acceptable forms of existence or political society. This is why I emphasize practices of freedom over processes of liberation.”⁴⁸

Foucault refers to improvisation here as a “practice of freedom”, a powerful technology in one’s own self making. Improvisation is the decolonial act of doing while undoing/undoing while doing. Goldman highlights this in her conclusion by exclaiming that “improvised dance literally involves giving shape to oneself and deciding how to move in relation to an unsteady landscape. To go about this endeavor with a sense of confidence and possibility is a powerful way to inhabit one’s body and interact with the world.”⁴⁹

Goldman’s call to the confident inhabiting one’s body as a way to interact with the world relates to immersive performances’ audience participatory activations. The audience is

⁴⁵ Goldman, Danielle. “Introduction.” *I Want to Be Ready Improvised Dance as a Practice of Freedom*

⁴⁶ Goldman quotes Houston Barker’s *Turning South Again*

⁴⁷ “Houston Baker defines tight places in various ways and gives multiple examples throughout his book, but he summarizes his definition by describing tight places as “the always ambivalent cultural compromises of occupancy and vacancy, differentially affected by contexts or situations.”

⁴⁸ Michel Foucault quoted in Goldman’s introduction

⁴⁹ Goldman, Danielle. “Introduction.” *I Want to Be Ready Improvised Dance as a Practice of Freedom*, The University of Michigan Press, Ann Arbor, Mich, 2013.

constantly negotiating their preconceptions regarding performance (their archive in line with Taylor's language) and must come across their own self making in this new "unsteady landscape". While the "unsteady landscape" that Goldman references is that of an unstable and ever-in-flux political landscape, I utilize "unsteady landscape" to refer to the improvisational participatory moments within immersive performance. With this in mind, we can address this "unsteady landscape" of immersive performance through the lens of Benedetto's ideas of "risk", as a way to heighten the audience's sense of "praesence"; the urgency in which they have to act in the face of an invitation to participate.

Benedetto's ideas of "risk" involve "any threat to one's current state that offers the potential to destabilize the way things are...Primal risks threaten our emotional, social, or physical well-being. Risk can be closely associated with uncertainty, challenge, and reward. Exposing oneself to risks in order to achieve a goal is what makes an experience gratifying."⁵⁰ This destabilization causes what Goldman references as the "burden of improvisation", where the exhaustion of choice and action causes a potential transformational moment. Immersive performance provides a democratized space in which the audience can be complicit in their own self making within the "unsteady landscape" in which risk is coupled with safety. This allows for audiences to inhabit "risk" fully while mitigating this risk via the use of improvisational choice-making. This is also true for the performers.

The technique employed by the performers within immersive performance is also tied to a sense of "aliveness"; of humanity and of a close "shade of empathy" to borrow from Dinesh's early language. Improvisation here is not just a means to an end, as the audience might utilize it

⁵⁰ Benedetto, Ida *Patterns of Transformation: Designing Sex, Death and Survival in the 21st Century*

to get through an interaction. Performers tap into their improvisational intuitiveness “as a mode of making oneself ready”. Through this readiness, they are in a constant loop of transformation, waiting for the audience’s transformational moment of decision making. Improvisation here shows its decolonial tendency not only in its negation of a static and unalive sense of freedom and pursuit of liberation, but transformation can only happen because of social and communal interaction. Improvisation is utilized within immersive performance as a shared experience in which both parties are negotiating “risk”, “readiness” and an “alternative reality” in which both parties create a different set of rules. While Goldman might reference “exquisite moments” through the lens of the improvisational performer, I invite the audience to experience these “exquisite moments” as well. Goldman beautifully explicates how, in these transformational social exchanges, improvisation “breaks out well beyond survival. Even if just for a moment - felt in the pressure between throat and ribbon, or the broad expanse of one’s chest, or the refusal to strike back or be carried - improvisers alter the terrain of society’s tight places, creating thrilling new spaces in which to dance”. These thrilling new spaces in which to dance are also the spaces in which we live. Through immersive performance improvisation becomes not only an “alternative performance choreography” to navigating a performance, it empowers and further strengthens bodies to navigate the world that awaits them.

Improvisation as a Mechanism of Freedom in “el bodegón de la bruja” - Track A and G:
Daniel Miramontes and Javier Padilla - The Dove and the Crow

The narrative track that Daniel Miramontes and I embodied was that of two brothers that had been separated for a very long time due to opposing moral dichotomies. Daniel and I both had a polaroid of one another and one of our main tasks throughout the beginning of what we call our ‘Pre-Show’ section was to give the polaroid to an audience member and ask them either,

in Daniel's case, to help them find me or in my case, to hide me from Daniel. The audience is not presented with a choice but an improvisational score. There are these two paths in which an audience member can recall and utilize in order to participate or not. Some of the highlighted moments from our tracks were:

1. An audience member got both Daniel and my polaroids. Because of Daniel's association with the witch hunters, the audience member decided to find me and help me keep Daniel away. When I asked them why they were helping, they responded "because he's with the bad guys".
2. Daniel was being helped by an audience member throughout the whole night shouting to him whenever I was near. That audience member specifically did not interact with me the entire night, so they only had the information that Daniel's track could provide - that Daniel was searching for me and that I was "evil".
3. I decided in a moment of long pause in my track to sit down at one of the cabaret tables and asked one of the audience members to help me piece together what was going on. They described how the witch hunters were trying to take over our bar and how they didn't know "how to help me".
4. Every night, depending on the interactions that lead to our duet's climax, the conversation in our duet would shift depending on what the audience members' interactions with us were prior. Specifically, in line with Moment 2, Daniel had said that same night "I know you've been looking for me too." in reference to the moments that the audience member had shouted.

In all of these highlighted moments above, we can see fiction becoming a powerful abstractor. Benedetto's "magic circle" is created successfully and the audience suspends their disbelief momentarily to support the narrative unfolding around them. Moment 3 showcases the audience members' heightened social awareness and, again, a "shade of empathy" in wanting to help but not knowing how. Moments 2 and 4 are personally my favorites as it gleans a lot of information regarding the use of task based audience participation through improvisational methods. I posit that because we gave the audience a task or an improvisational score for them to lean on, they became aware of their own agency within the space. This empowers them to not only perform the task, it "casts them in a role" as Morris would say. The transformation of audience member to cast member becomes seamless - albeit disruptive as I remember the audience member yelling quite loudly. The transformational components continued as our characters are also transformed by our interactions with the audience members. Improvisation provides us with Goldman's technique of "staying ready" - we are not anchored in our perception of what our characters used to be, but what they are living. Our characters are alive and breathe in these interactions as source material. Through the improvisation of the audience, we learned something of the world and the story. And through our handling of the improvisational score, the audience joins us and actually helps us, and through that, themselves, transform.

Track B: Kevin Clark - The Witch Hunter

Kevin Clark's track was narratively the hardest to refine as we were qualifying his character as "the obvious bad guy". That to say, he had no true motive or rhyme or reason to why he causes all of the terrible things that occur in the night. Kevin's process for developing his narrative involved more speaking than movement and it led us to make his motives clearer for

the audience. Unfortunate for Kevin's character (but high praise for his storytelling and acting skills), the audience quickly turned against him. However, interestingly enough, night after night, I noticed that the audiences were following Kevin's track more than any other tracks. I believed that knowing Kevin's motives right from the beginning would allow the audience members to search for the Witches storylines more, which did occur. However, when audience members began with Kevin, they stayed pretty far into his track until the diverging point at the end right before his climactic ending.

I point back to Dinesh's project in which the audience members' data showed that they had found sympathy for the main character in the proscenium performance while they had found empathy for their immersive counterpart where they shared their immersive version of *The Bogus Woman*. I note this to question, does the audience have enough information regarding the plight of the victim that they felt they had to learn more about the motives surrounding the oppressor? Did the audience see themselves inside of Kevin's character and wanted to witness his transformation in order to find a transformation within themselves? These questions, while left unanswered, provide fodder for a future version of another immersive work in which we can use this to our advantage in the development of characters in "play-tests" - a rehearsal-like period in which the performers can test the potential interactive moments with the audience and see how they read.

There are two pivotal moments in Kevin's track, his duet with myself and when he hands the poisoned drink to an audience member. In our duet, Kevin hands me the deed of the bar as a bluff. At this moment, I take the deed and ask an audience member to help me read it. Every single night, the audience reacted by getting angry and one audience member actually offered to help defend the bar because he thought it was a "special place that shouldn't be touched".

When Kevin was handing off the poison at the end of the run, one night got increasingly problematic. As Kevin meandered through the audience asking for someone to place the poison down at the bar, it was a night where the audience had followed him the most, which meant they had seen most of the violent deeds he had done throughout the night. As he continued to ask, every single person denied his invitation. The narrative elements have landed and Kevin's social role in the space has solidified; he's our bad guy. The audience here casts themselves away from that accomplice and become allies to our cause of maintaining the bar as our domain. The audience's communal knowledge of the space around them is transformed and their inaction leads us to believe that they do not want to perpetrate any more colonial violence.

I chose to highlight these moments because these felt like the ones that closely aligned with our goals of creating an immersive performance through a decolonial pedagogical lens. Within an immersive performance one can only be prepared for a multitude of outcomes but sometimes Goldman's "burden of improvisation" sets in for the performers as well and the exhaustion can lead to those "exquisite moments", similar to those mentioned above with Daniel and Kevin, or simply moments that just had to occur. Nevertheless, through the moments above, we can clearly see how improvisation is a transformative tool for both performers and audience members to increase their personal and communal awareness and an unconscious learning process where embodied action leads to newly attained knowledge.

Improvisation as a Mechanism for Personal Freedom

Improvisation has always been at the crux of my choreographic identity. It is a point of contention because I feel like I cannot accomplish the creative task of creating by simply choreographing; creating a sequence of movements in order that live within a rigid structure of

time and space. It is now exceedingly clear to me that this is out of alignment with my artistic interests. This is not to say that choreography in its traditional most understood sense is colonial in nature. However, I'm noting that my interests in improvisation lie inextricably with my human need to connect to something outside of myself. Improvisation counteracts and resists the isolated experience that I have felt being a queer fat body in an elitist dance field that has upheld traditional body and identity standards. Improvisation is both where I create a space for the exploration of personal freedom by colliding with the exact things that hold me down. Improvisation allows me to expand, to disidentify and multiply. Improvisation here provides me with "exquisite moments" of personal pleasure and exploration of my artistic, personal and public identities in which I can find deeper language to share with my students and my collaborators. I immerse myself in improvisation and I emerge not quite free but anchored in a deeper understanding of myself and how I can navigate the world around me. I am both the audience and the collaborator in my improvisational disidentificatory performance that both identifies and separates me from the things that make and unmake me. This is how immersive performance invites improvisation into the same space as well. Similar to what Benedetto calls a space of co-creation, improvisation is the link that ties the decolonial, the pedagogical, the performative and the transformative into a potential utopic space that bleeds outside of the walls of the performance.

“Alternative Pedagogical Choreographies” Continued: Student Centered Decolonial

Teaching

Throughout this thesis research, I want to emphasize that the creative work here is not separate from other potential applications. For example, the terms utilized above can easily be interchanged with another. “Audience member” can be easily switched for “student”, “alternative audience choreographies” can easily become “alternative student/teacher choreographies”. Immersive performance as a pedagogical method does not need to limit itself to the stage but instead, its transformative properties can integrate themselves into the toolbox of decolonial aligned dance educators.

I previously defined decoloniality as an awareness and deconstruction of colonial epistemologies as well as a reconstruction of ways of existing and acting that lead us to create a postcolonial future. Taking this definition of decoloniality into dance education, addressing decolonial action puts us in conversation with “alternative” educational methodologies that promote a student-centered holistic approach to learning. This is in line with Peruvian sociologist Anibal Quijano. Quijano sees decoloniality as “a perspective, stance, and proposition of thought, analysis, sensing, making, doing, feeling, and being that is actionable (in the Fanonian sense), praxistical, and continuing.”⁵¹ Argentinian scholar and critic Walter D. Mignolo continues Quijano’s work and proposes that decoloniality is a praxis of “undoing and redoing”⁵² Mignolo and Catherine E. Walsh propose that decoloniality fails when these systems are deconstructed (undoing) and aren’t replaced with innovative epistemologies of the oppressed (redoing). While

⁵¹Tremblah, Sarah *Decoloniality* - this quote is an amalgam of Quijano’s thoughts and a synthesis made by Tremblah in conversation with Walter D. Mignolo and Catherine E. Walsh

⁵²Mignolo, Walter. “Coloniality of Power and De-Colonial Thinking.”

it is not explicitly stated, this ties in with Quijano's "continuing". Education scholars Eve Tuck and K. Wayne Yang proposed in *Decolonization is not a metaphor* similar to actionable futures on top of this undoing proposed by Quijano, Walsh and Mignolo.

They specifically claim that "decolonization" does not occur without the repatriation of indigenous land as well as the dismantling of colonial-settler projects still occurring in modern day colonial occupations. They call for action in the dismantling before even considering the ideals to be explored in a potential postcolonial future. Tuck and Yang provide actionable steps in the undoing, while Quijano, Walsh and Mignolo provide a structural epistemological framework to address the redoing- how to consider the construction of a postcolonial future.

"Alternative pedagogical inquiry " is a holistic decolonial tool that creates a student-centered educational environment that invites play and self-agency while dismantling a "universal" ideal for learning. This dismantling of ideas (our colonial undoing) comes from a holistic perspective that addresses the violent colonial practice of homogenization of the body while healing and supporting individual creative pursuits that promote community, cultural competency and wellness (our postcolonial futurity).

In their work, *Alternative Universities: Speculative Design for Innovation in Higher Education*, education scholar David J. Staley proposes a creative and imaginative framework that can be useful for dance and other performing and visual arts units across the higher educational field. While not necessarily promoted as a decolonial text, Staley's ideas push forward a transformational agenda, away from metrics, and center the student's self-making, similar to the self-making improvisational process of audience members that partake in immersive performances. Staley does this by positing that the university is always in a "state of being", or Machon's "praesence" and that it should never remain stagnant. Staley also promotes the idea of

“play” (improvisation) as a pedagogical tool that can promote experimentation and heightened student agency. These ideas seem to stem from Brazilian educator and scholar Paulo Freire in his work *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*.

Freire argues that the classroom is a direct representation of the world outside of the educational institution and it is up to the educator in the room to constantly be in a state of “aliveness”. To promote Freire’s ideas of “critical pedagogy”, the educator must be constantly negotiating and renegotiating their actions, questioning their intent and promoting a classroom that is “alive” and responsive. This is in direct response to what Freire calls the “Banking system of education”, where students are to sit and receive information via a lecture or a reading. Freire and Staley’s ideas both bring in immersive performance strategies as a way to promote decolonial pedagogies. They both utilize “alternative pedagogical choreographies” as a mechanism to involve student participation. An “alternative pedagogical choreography” seen here and similar to immersive performance is the transformation of a space to support multi-sensorial exploration for the individual student as well as the collective classroom. This in turn helps turn the classroom into the “living community” that we have seen throughout this project within audience members in immersive performance.

This sense of a “living community” is seen in multiple “alternative educational” models such as Montessori education, the Reggio Emilia approach, the Waldorf/Steiner educational model, and Forest schools. These “alternative” educational models provide students with a decolonial model of self-making, distanced from the homogenization of the student’s body through the Banking method, utilizing strategies to develop self-agency, independence, creativity through play and discovery, akin to improvisation.

In connection with Quijano, Walsh, Mignolo Tuck and Yang, “alternative” presents an actionable foundation for undoing and redoing. “Alternative education”/“alternative choreographies” is innately decolonial in nature because it calls for the undoing of the homogenization of learning bodies and encourages a different way of existing, learning and being that invites a larger and more diverse population to participate, explore and grow.

While this may be one mechanism for decolonizing educational practices within dance, I use this thesis project as an “alternative” vehicle for exploring decoloniality within artistic practice, the rehearsal process, performance coaching and devising theatrical work. Rehearsing, devising and performing with a group of undergraduate and graduate students provides real-time feedback as to how these creative strategies of decolonial performance making are succeeding or failing and how these, even if not tied to pedagogical pursuits, are learning experiences. These strategies within this project offer a holistic approach to the rehearsal and performance process, but also establish methods for potentially undoing and redoing the performers’/students’ repertoire and archive.

Conclusion: The Work Is Alive, Evolving and Free

As I write this intimidating and hopefully enjoyable-to-read document before us, I have been creating bridges that help theoretical information influence the construction of physical knowledge. How do these theoretical ideas surrounding decolonial pedagogical inquiry transition from studio to page and vice versa? The methods we embraced in space were decolonial. We created “alternative collaborative choreographies” that lead to “alternative performance choreographies”. We strived (and, in line with my prior and further thoughts, succeeded) to create a safe cohabitating space that allowed us to not only live in this shared performance world together but also to create it in community. Reflecting on the past few months of focused studio research, I have tracked some specific moments that led our studio practice into an embodied decolonial pedagogical and performance praxis above, and I feel that we have achieved some level of success in line with the theoretical framework and practical applications of the scholars that I have invited into this conversation.

Some personal highlights from this experience were the reactions from both my cast and the audience on opening night. When we finished our performance, the cast was jumping and running from side to side with excitement. Everyone was smiling from ear-to-ear and sharing a space full of joy and happiness. We had finally accomplished such a major feat and everyone had agreed that it was just really fun. This experience of joy came through “play” and everyone also agreed that playing with the audience in the room made the difference, and that sense of “play” can only come through trusting.

I think there's a heavy emphasis on trusting in this process. You feel warm when someone gives you responsibility and shares confidence in you. They charge you to accomplish something and build and create something with you. This sense of trust overwhelmed me in the beginning.

This whole cast of folks trusted me to keep pushing forward. To be the voice at the front, to lead us to victory. I trusted them with equal and, if not more, respect. We trusted each other. Through constant communication, dialogues of consent, comfort and safety. Not only in making new works but also refining intentions with Britney Falcon as Performance Coach, polishing movement material with Emily Sheridan as Assistant Choreographer, and collaborating with the design team. Language became more than just a tool to communicate. Words became a mechanism to ensure we all had personal agency in making creative decisions while still responding to the world we were making. The constant shifting of where the work was going and how our words were steering it influenced the outcome. The performers' experiences sharing with the audience, playing with their choreographic and narrative structures allowed them to be in that constant "state of readiness" while also finding freedom to explore their artistry and to some degree, be more than just themselves - if not an amplified grander version of the beautifully nuanced and eloquent performers they were evolving into. Even as I write this conclusion, I feel my breath get short as emotion courses through my lungs. I'm ever so grateful for every single performer in this cast who decided to "play" with this huge idea. Thanks to you all, "play" becomes more than just improvisational choice making, it becomes a model for decolonial embodied pedagogical and performance methodology. Without them, there would be no performance. I say the same to the audience. Without them, there would be no point to immersive performance (let alone any performance).

My internal critic obviously has things that I would love to develop further, not only in theoretical research but mostly within the performative and rehearsal elements that align with decolonial epistemologies. But, I want to validate this experience of "*el bodegón...*" and the past experiences of "*...mosaico*" and "*NORA*" as seedlings that have developed, as I mentioned in the

introduction of this thesis project, a voice that has been humming at the core of my humanity and has now found the lungs to sing.

Through stress, panic, anxiety, and all the bottomless void-like emotions, this process has been the most rewarding choreographic educational experience. I trust that our words have more power than we think. The way we conduct rehearsals and the language we use in the space directly correlates to the working artists' trust in one another. Intentional dialogue and language that mitigates, disburses, and dismantles power have provided a compelling framework for a decolonized artistic workspace. This in turn translates into a powerful and useful tool not only in performance spaces but in pedagogical instances as well. Immersivity does not stop with the audience and decolonial ways of thinking only erupt if we consider an alternative future in which we are accountable for our own communal undoing and redoing. Immersive performance as a decolonial embodied practice of performance and pedagogy gives us a potential future in which everyone can create a safe, nurturing, agentic space in their own bodies and craft a “pluriversal” future where the harmful legacy of coloniality is a thing that we study, and not endure or perpetrate. Through these strategies of embodied decoloniality, immersive performance making practices and “alternative pedagogical choreographies” we can craft an “alternative” postcolonial future that is constant evolution and continues to harbor safe, agentic spaces for performers, audiences, makers and our students.

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