

ABSTRACT

Title of Thesis: MI VIDA, IN RHYTHM: RESISTANCE AND INTEGRATION OF AN AFRO- HONDURAN IMMIGRANT IN THE UNITED STATES THROUGH TAP DANCE

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This article focuses on *Mi Vida, in Rhythm*, which premiered on October 12, 2023, at the Clarice Smith Performing Arts Center. This performance is an autobiographical account of my experience immigrating from Honduras to the United States. At the heart of this production lies the art of storytelling, brought to life through the combination of live music, dance and spoken word. The performance draws heavily from the experiences of Afro-descendant peoples in Central America and the United States. It is steeped in the cultural traditions of the Garifuna, an afro-indigenous people of Honduras, incorporating their language, dance forms of resistance, and everyday choreography. The performance aims to capture the evolution of communication tactics, identity, and coping mechanisms of Afro Latinoe/xs as we navigate the challenges of realizing the American dream.

What follows are brief personal accounts that serve as guide to essential artistic discoveries that sparked my curiosity. These curiosities eventually mold my artistry in percussive dance, particularly tap dance. With that, I formally analyze specific segments in *Mi Vida, in Rhythm*, that serve as reservoir of knowledge for movement and sound exploration. Ultimately my scholarly research dwells in three different topics; First the term Blackness as descriptive of one's ethnicity, race, or both, and the movement practices unique to their demographic and diasporic thread. Second, the understanding of historic privileging of Eurocentric perspectives within higher education. Third, the necessity to highlight Afro-Latinoe/ experiences and dance forms within dance curriculum. The article concludes by highlighting my contributions as an artist, instructor, and creative collaborator steeped in the artistry of bodily percussion practices and the intersectionality of Black cultural terrain and immigration paranoia.

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DANCE

by

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Dedication

I dedicate this to my beautiful mother, Blanca Nusly Ruiz Arriola who sacrificed the unthinkable to provide me and my sibling, Karla Melendez, Alexzyk Lanza, Misael Lanza, a chance to pursue our dreams.

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Chapter 1: From *Nada* to Something

To Dance is to be Free

Hay gente abajo decía mi madre, Blanca Nusly Ruiz, as a dance

Afraid to carry my tap shoes in my
back pockets because of the glaring
metal.

Paranoid to street perform
without a permit. Hesitant to drive
outside, Harlem, Washington heights, and el barrio after dark.

I have a
college degree, speak multiple,
languages, traveled the
world.....am a mentor, a son, a
brother, a tap dancer.
And for some reason none of
this seems to matter.

This system
of fear attempts to strip me of my
power, but I won't let it. I carry
on a legacy, I carry on a tradition
Born in slave plantation, nurtured in jazz,
rooted in song and the blues.

Tap dance is
My universal voice, I
can resist and protest and fight
without saying a word. I can
empower my brothers aqui en los Estados Unidos, Honduras, Chile, El Salvador,
Ghana,
Colombia, Costa Rica,
Ukraine, Palestine, China, Puerto Rico, Ethiopia,

To be a man is to be
strong, to be a black man is to be
powerful

To dance is to be
free.

Introduction

As an Afro-Honduran immigrant in the United States and a tap dance practitioner, I focus my work on converging traditional folklore dances of the Afro indigenous people of Honduras with percussive dance found within the legacies of Black American vernacular dance and Jazz. I believe that tap dance is well equipped to speak on the histories of migration. Merging such dance forms such as tap dance, body percussion, and *Mascaro* (a traditional Garifuna/Afro-indigenous folklore dance) I demonstrate the value of the African-Diaspora's inherent ability to utilize dance and live music to resist, protest, and heal.

In these chapters, I seek to achieve three goals: 1. Reiterate that Blackness is an expansive term and should engage with Afro-Latinidad as a vital part of its diaspora; 2. Promote the inclusion of Afro-Diasporic studies in dance and performance studies curricula in higher education; 3. Create an evolving artistic platform that challenges systemic oppression and nurtures diversity within dance education and performance research.

As a researcher and educator, I approach Blackness with an eye towards inclusivity, specifically Afro-Latinidad, as a significant contributor to the diaspora and Black culture. Despite sharing a skin color, people of African descent possess distinct languages, traditions, culinary practices, and dances unique to their demographic and diasporic thread.

In my performances, I draw upon my experiences and cultural upbringing to offer audiences a glimpse into the mundane choreographies enacted by my community. These choreographies include crop harvesting, washing clothes, and other everyday movements.

Mi Vida, in Rhythm is exemplary of this choreographic strategy. The piece presents a world of music and dance in which a live band made up of steel drums, piano, and upright bass plays a tropical fusion of Caribbean and Jazz music. The sounds fill the air, and you can feel the Rhythm as the performance commences. As the music plays, you hear voices in the Spanish and Garifuna languages that transport you to Honduras. I meticulously crafted sound texture when choreographing to create a noticeable progression, aiming to captivate my audience and complement the soundscapes already at play.

At The Kogod Theater at the Clarice Smith Performing Arts Center, the performance was not a proscenium show, but an immersive experience. The unique design allowed you to partially see the dance but fully hear it, offering a fresh perspective. The scene transitions from a backyard in Honduras to a New York City bar and, finally, a jazz club in Harlem, keeping the audience mirroring my own journey with immigration and how movement practices were an essential aspect of navigating it. The gradual upward shift in height and the activation of three spaces over a metaphor for upward mobility towards the American Dream.

As the story's protagonist, I embarked on a movement journey, from barefoot to soft shoe to tap dancing and lindy hop. The choreographic choices were guided by musicality, merging Mascaró, modern dance, sand dance, tap dance, and lindy hop.

But the core of *Mi Vida, in Rhythm*, lies in its improvisation. The performers in the work (Isabella Grady, Lleyton Beinhaker, Charlene Cowan), used musical rhythmic patterns with unassigned movement, allowing us to find our own voice in the dance. This element of spontaneity and creativity is inspired by dances of Central America and the African Diaspora, and thus are a key part of the performance.

The movement is rooted in my childhood, reflecting playful moments among siblings (everyday choreographies) while performing chores (choreographies of labor). It progresses into metaphors of instability and tenderness that characterized my adolescence once I left Honduras. As the performance gains momentum, the rigor and effort of choreography and improvisation increase. The work concludes with virtuoso tap dancing on top of a piano in the jazz club environment, jumping twenty feet in the air, and landing into a split; symbolizing arrival, confidence, and agency in my own narrative.

As a percussive artist, and scholar my work utilizes methods of storytelling to disrupt the monolithic clumping of Central Americans to encourage dialogues rooted in cultural multiplicity. The term cultural currency, defined by George Watley is to “understand how culture and its manifestations are forms and have systems of exchange”¹. Watley’s theory supports culture performance on legitimacy as forms of exchange. Take for example, "Bring in 'da Noise, Bring in 'da Funk,"² (1996), a musical directed by George C. Wolfe and choreographed by Savion Glover. The show tells the story of Black history in the United States from slavery to the present,

¹Watley, George. 2011. “The Cultural Currency of Afro-Caribbeans in Northamptonshirec. 1960–1990.” *Midland History* 36 (2): 245–61. <https://doi.org/10.1179/004772911x13074595849158>.

² Wolfe, George C. 1996. “Bring in 'Da Noise, Bring in 'Da Funk" .” Broadway Musical. *New York, Performing Arts Library* .

using tap dance as the central art form of expression. Through exploring themes of the transatlantic slave trade, the Great Migration, industrialization, riots, and modern conversations on the Black experience in hip-hop and inner-city culture, the production serves as a reminder that cultural currency informs and sparks creativity. In other words, performance inevitably serves as a form of exchange between performer and viewer.

In her book titled *The Archive and the Repertoire*, scholar Diana Taylor provides valuable support to my research by highlighting the significance of studying performance as a means of exploring the cultural memory and preserving a variety of aspects such as stories, traditions, culture, and diaspora. Her insights emphasize the crucial role of performance in keeping the collective memory of a society alive and relevant, and offer a valuable perspective on the importance of understanding the cultural context of various performances.³

Mi Vida, in Rhythm, is fueled by cultural memory base on the immigrant experience, the multifaceted understanding of Black cultural terrain, and decentralizing Eurocentric dance aesthetics in higher education institutions.⁴ I have learned in the creation of this performance that by embracing and welcoming my identity, the term intersectionality can become a gateway of expression anchored to push agendas of empowerment and advocacy through performance.⁵ My

³ Taylor, Diana. 2003. *The Archive and the Repertoire : Performing Cultural Memory in the Americas*. Durham: Duke University Press.

⁴ Davis, Crystal U. *Dance and belonging: Implicit bias and inclusion in dance education*. Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Company, Inc., Publishers, 2022.

⁵Melina Gerdtz, *Demarginalizing the Intersection. Intersectionality of Race and Gender a Brief Historical Outline of the Development of and an Introduction to the Meaning and Modern Relevance*

understanding of cultural currency brought to light a production that honors culture, history, and the Black Latino experience in The United States.

Tap dance has impacted my life in numerous ways. It has surpassed all my expectations in providing me with a sense of belonging, mentorship, companionship, and a community of like-minded individuals. As you read this paper, you will come to understand that tap dance has never been a mere hobby for me. Since the beginning, it was a lifeline that offered hope during my formative years as a young adolescent, navigating a new world filled with an unfamiliar culture, languages, and much more. For me, tap dance continues to be the key that unlocks superpowers.

I am committed to researching the African diaspora in Latin America and developing a culturally relevant curriculum by advocating for addressing the current prevalence of educational neglect and misrepresentation regarding Black dance studies.

Primer Encuentro

For the past twenty-three years, I lived at 116th between Lenox and 5th Ave, my home since I immigrated to the United States as a child. However, tap dance loomed in my mind long before I moved to this country. Our family home is modest and simple, with just enough amenities to live comfortably. Our home is located al costado sur del centro de salud, al lado de la pulpería “Los Gemelos”, la casa número seis. All seven houses on the strip faced east, making every sunrise magical. Witnessing the sun piercing the sky over the cordilleras de Gracias Adios was breathtaking.

of the Intersectionality Concept as Coined by KIMBERLÉ W. CRENSHAW (München: GRIN Verlag, 2020).

I vividly recall the hot sun beating down on my navy blue uniform as I walked home from Jardín de Niños San Antonio. Every day after school, I eagerly looked forward to sitting on the couch and turning on the television, making the walk seem like an eternity. With every step, my old black leather shoes, whose soles were nearly flat from overuse, collected another layer of dust step by step. In the afternoon, my father and I would sit in front of the TV, cruising through channels to find something to watch before continuing with our daily chores like harvesting corn, beans, or cleaning the house. My mother had sent us a TV for Christmas from La USA. You had to look closely to make sure it was a TV. The elaborate wooden carved molding all over gave it a square shape, and it was as tall as my brother at ten years old. The gray glass screen was a third of the size of the entire composition that made the TV, and it had two knobs on the side that labeled a few channels— thirty rotations. Every rotation of the knob sounded like a metronome, loud and annoying after a few rotations. No one else in the block had the privilege and luxury of having a parent living in the United States who constantly sent home goods like furniture TV's.

As my dad turned the channels, we stumbled upon Pinky y Cerebro, Johnny Bravo, Canal 5, Caballeros del Zodiaco, Dragon Ball Z, and noticieros. After a steady beat from knob rotation, we always landed on Sesame Street, which became our ritual every afternoon after he finished teaching middle schoolers and met with me at home. Sesame Street provided valuable learning lessons. Each episode included various teachings on love and friendship while introducing literacy and cognitive skills. I fondly remember learning the alphabet and performing simple math beside my dad while enjoying the show.

A particular episode left a lasting impression on me. On the screen were two tall, handsome Black men standing at equal heights with perfectly shaped afros. Their attributes mirrored one another with facial hair, beautiful smiles, and athletic bodies reminiscent of a cross-country runner. They were dressed in earthy bright colors that complimented their brown skin: shades of purple, orange, and green, well fitted for their athletic physique. The two men were explaining the concept of nearness. One of the men peeled away and circled the other, with their feet making sounds similar to drums - one beat after another in a steady rhythm. Over a few musical measures, this man traveled away from the other, and at his arrival, said, "This is far," demonstrating a basic understanding of distance.

I was both confused and intrigued at the same time. Although I did not understand the complexities of his moving body and the sounds of music he was projecting with minimal effort, there was an understanding within me that I could not explain. Witnessing this duo reminded me of the drum circles, punta, and Mascaró that my tios danced during Christmas in el pueblo. I had knowledge of dance and percussion and their sonic vibrations, which have been ingrained in my body for generations. However, I was unaware these art forms could be combined into one moving expression.

It was on Sesame Street that I first saw a tap dance. The gentlemen in that television episode were the Hines brothers, Maurice and Gregory Hines. Although I knew nothing about tap dancing or the Hines Brothers, I knew that their feet made music, and their bodies glided effortlessly throughout space like a dance. This brief episode was my first glimpse at the magic of tap dancing.

Tap Dance and Academia: Challenges and Advocacy

Brenda Gottschild, in her book *"Diggin the Africanist Presence in the American Performance,"* abstracts how tap dance has served as a model for the advancement of postmodern dance. Gottschild examined tap and jazz giants Jimmy Slyde, Savion Glover, Charley Parker, and others to shed light on the aesthetics of the cool, meditative performance state stemming from the grassroots of Black culture. She writes that "rhythm tap dance offers a strong attitudinal modeling for postmodern dance. Its cool, laid-back energy is a mirror in the "no skill, few accents, unhurried control' principles as an aesthetic by postmodern dance." ⁶ According to Gottschild, the Africanist presence has contributed to Eurocentric dance forms. Gottsdchild's motive is not to debunk the roots of post-modern or modern dance, but to delve into the hidden contributions of Black aesthetics in American performance.

Tap dance is an American art form that offers tools to improve a dancer's musicality and stage presence, and sonic awareness. Its unique combination of auditory elements (creating rhythmic patterns with the feet) and visual movement is what sets tap dance apart. Gregory Hines, tap dancer and revolutionary of the entertainment industry says, "One of the great things that separates tap dance from everything else is that you see the body move and hear the body move. Tap dance is not just dance; it is also music."⁷ The rhythm and the moving body work harmoniously to forge melody, stories, and, ultimately, a form of communication.

⁶ Brenda Dixon Gottschild, *Digging the Africanist Presence in American Performance : Dance and Other Contexts*(Westport, Conn.: Praeger, 1998).

The African diasporic terrain of performative arts and pedestrian movements has always been connected to Earth. West African traditions that extend from the Yoruba emphasize access to the ground.⁸ I view this earth bounding experience as the access to sonic vibration that resonates from the soles of my feet to the crown of my head. The phrase “To know where you are going, you must know where you are coming from” is significant for every tap dancer. Tap dancing is an art form deeply rooted in history and tradition. To truly understand and appreciate this dance style, one must thoroughly know its origins and evolution.

The elements of music and movement in tap dance are inseparable. Tap dance has evolved and developed its unique style by incorporating elements of jazz improvisation, musical feels of swing, and the freeform of be-bop. It has been nurtured by the Black population within the United States as an expression of resistance and preservation of Black culture, making it an African American art form. In the last three years, while actively participating in modern dance classes, I have noticed a disconnect with the music in the room. As a practitioner in a sounding body, I am always invested in how the music informs my moving body. Although I may not be able to execute a bound high kick with grace like my counterparts, my sense of rhythm and timing is superior to most in the room because of my awareness of sound. This awareness has been developed through tap dance music training, traditional west African, and lindy hop.

⁸ Stearns, Marshall, and Stern, Jean. *Jazz Dance; A History of American Vernacular Dance*. (NY: Da Capo Press, 1994) pp.14-15

By studying the work of past tap legends such Sammy Davis Jr., Bill “Bojangles” Robinson, Jeni Legon, John Bubbles, Dianne Walker and modern contributors such as Dormisha Sumbry-Edwards, Chloe Arnold, Michelle Dorrance, Derick Grant, Jason Samuel Smith and many others, we can fully appreciate and understand the technique, rhythms, and musicality, improvisation and choreography that define tap dancing. Moreover, this awareness of rich history helps to inform one's artistic vision and goals, seamlessly appreciate the art form's potential, and strive to push the boundaries of what is possible. Today, tap dancing continues to evolve and innovate while paying homage to its rich history and cultural heritage.

In the 2013 film "*Tap or Die*," Derick Grant, a performer and educator, explains that tap dance is an instrument. He says that when you tap, sounds are constantly coming out, so it's essential to be responsible for the sound you produce. Otherwise, it's just noise.⁹ Like a band percussionist, every tap dancer's movement is designed to achieve perfection in tone, volume, and clarity, with the goal of contributing to the musical composition. This means that tap dancers are and need to be trained like any other musician. They must understand musical bars, structures, and feel, such as medium-time swing, twelve-bar blues, or an afro 12/8. Tap dance combines mathematics, sounds, movement, listening, ensemble, accompaniment, and solo performance.

For a percussive artist, the dual curiosity in sonic and movement innovation requires an immense amount of grit and a lifelong journey. In a promotional video showcasing his tap shoes in collaboration with Bloch, Jason Samuel Smith urged

⁹ Jackie Paré, “Tap or Die ,” November 22, 2014.

performers and educators to avoid becoming complacent, as settling into a routine can hinder growth and progress.¹⁰ As artists, it is crucial to remain receptive to fresh ideas and novel techniques to evolve and cultivate our unique dance identities. Pursuing graduate studies was my way of forging my identity and exploring uncharted territory, both with my artistry and wanting to become a published author. Being an immigrant, personal complacency is rare. Nonetheless, after numerous years serving as an instructor of dance, as well as performing nationally and around the world, I surveyed the dance field I identify with. What I found rare was a tap dancer attending graduate school. Which I understood because a few (if any) programs cater specifically to tap dance or African diasporic dances. Nevertheless, I have been willing to take the leap and allow my practice to treasure risk, inevitably to evolve.

Having spent a decade working full-time as a performer and instructor fully immersed in creative practice, returning to school was a dream come true. I knew that by pursuing this journey, I would have access to a consistent creative movement and intellectual practice backed by resources in technology, space, and creative minds who, like me, were looking for professional and artistic expansion. I was eager to represent my community in higher education and bring discussion about the greats of the dance such as Gregory Hines and the union that exist between tap dancers and jazz musicians. However, the transition to becoming a full-time student was challenging.

¹⁰ BLOCH Dance USA, "Jason Samuels Smith: BLOCH (Inspired By) [HD]," www.youtube.com, 2010, <https://youtu.be/DNMgGksUpfc>.

First and foremost, I questioned how the program would welcome a percussive artist into what seemed a strictly modern dance program. Would the curriculum be flexible enough to accommodate my needs as a percussive dancer? Would there be a dance studio with a wooden floor where I could collaborate and explore new ideas? How would the faculty support my endeavors to create provocative work without bias?

During my first year in graduate school, I found it challenging to navigate the best way to ask for assistance, as this was unfamiliar territory for me and the University of Maryland. In the United States, many dance programs concentrate on modern dance and Eurocentric styles, often at the expense of Black diasporic techniques.¹¹ Nyama McCarthy-Brown, a dance scholar and practitioner, has devoted much of her research to integrating Black dance into educational spaces such as high schools and universities. McCarthy-Brown's approach is centered on honoring the evolution of dance pedagogy by embracing culturally relevant methods. This approach emphasizes diversifying curricula by shifting away from Eurocentric norms and moving beyond viewing modern or ballet as the foundation of technique.

In her article, "*Decolonizing Dance Curriculum in Higher Education, One Credit at a Time*",¹² McCarthy-Brown examines the mission statements of over one hundred universities to measure their true commitment to inclusive faculty and forms of dance expression in their dance department. She concludes that only a few

¹¹ Nyama McCarthy-Brown and Takiyah Nur Amin, *Dance Pedagogy for a Diverse World: Culturally Relevant Teaching in Theory, Research and Practice* (Jefferson, North Carolina: McFarland & Company, Inc., Publishers, 2017).

¹² Nyama McCarthy-Brown, "Decolonizing Dance Curriculum in Higher Education: One Credit at a Time," *Journal of Dance Education* 14, no. 4 (October 2, 2014): 125–29, <https://doi.org/10.1080/15290824.2014.887204>.

universities “walked their talk.” The reality of dance programs is that it can be challenging to overcome decades of monocultural aesthetics, programming, and curricular structures.

Although universities nationwide are trying to diversify curricula, the model remains largely the same for two reasons. Firstly, courses from the African diaspora or Latin America, such as traditional West African dance, tap dance, bachata, salsa, jazz, and composition, are considered elective courses and are not prioritized in training. Secondly, there is a lack of Afro-Diasporic and Latinoe/xs educators in the room to drive this agenda and a deficiency of primary resources to tap into this wealth of knowledge. In support of McCarthy-Brown’s research, it is time to give these marginalized art forms the platform, space, and resources to flourish and gain the academic legitimacy they deserve.¹³

The University of Maryland's description of the Master of Fine Arts in Dance program states that "the program provides modern dance techniques each semester and welcomes entering graduate students whose dance backgrounds are not modern-based."¹⁴ This initiative has drawn a new population to the program. Having attracted non-traditional practitioners, the program must adapt its traditional methods to meet the needs of the new comers. These questions continue: who is best suited to mentor the upcoming student? How can we guide their success in the classroom and movement studio? How is curriculum pushing their scholarly practice in performance

¹³ Nyama McCarthy-Brown, “Decolonizing Dance Curriculum in Higher Education: One Credit at a Time,” *Journal of Dance Education* 14, no. 4 (October 2, 2014): 125–29, <https://doi.org/10.1080/15290824.2014.887204>.

¹⁴ University of Maryland website, <https://tdps.umd.edu/academic-programs/mfa-dance>

studies? What guest artists can be invited to challenge and push the margins of modern dance training?

While I faced numerous obstacles, the biggest challenge was needing a studio space with a wooden dance surface. I cannot overstate the importance of this. Without a proper dance surface, a percussive artist can't hear rhythms with accuracy or modulate expressive sonic dynamics. While curious about modern dance, I wanted to focus my practice and scholarship on tap dance and the union between music and movement. Upon my arrival, I quickly realized that there was an absence of a movement space where I could feel grounded and complete in choreographic and movement endeavors.

My sounding body research is guided by the curiosity of sound layering. Sound layering involves the stacking of various sounds that originate from the movements of the human body. I utilize different textures/surfaces to enhance tonal quality. These textures could be anything from sand and newspapers to the reverberation of raw materials. The addition of these textures brings about contrast, dynamics, and vibrancy to the layered sound. When experimenting with external elements in percussive dance, I pay particular attention to how the "sounding body" interacts with the surrounding textures and space.

Although tap dance is traditionally danced on hardwood, there are sound dynamics worth investigating. Soft surfaces tend to produce softer tones while harder surfaces create sharper and brighter sounds. For percussive dance, a soft surface can absorb the quality of sound. For instance, Marley flooring, which is made of controlled-slip plastic vinyl, has a soft quality that mutes the sounds. In return, a hard

surface such as maple wood flooring provides a sharper quality sound. In my advanced practice in musical composition generated from the sounding body, I find the range of exploration peaks at a hard wooden surface.

My "moving body" is influenced by the interaction between my "sounding body" and the surface I am on. For instance, when I dance on surfaces with sand, it affects my body mobility differently depending on whether the flooring is soft or hard. Leather sole shoes are usually worn when dancing on sand surfaces because they provide support and musical pitches based on the interaction between the shoe and sand. When moving on top of sand, I often find myself negotiating my weight and head-to-tail relationship, which requires more rigor. However, the musical notes become lengthened, and others sharp in their attack, similar to a trumpet. For example, Tap dance master Howard "Sandman" Sim keen ear for music making allowed him to unlock new sound textures when dancing on sand.



Figure 1 Gerson Lanza is dancing on top of the bar in *Mi Vida, in Rhythm*, extending his body horizontally, resulting in the lengthening of a musical note using sand as a sonic texture.

Despite obstacles, I noticed change at the University of Maryland's with my contributions as a student, Instructor of Record, practice professional. Notable achievements include: 1) procuring a Gerstrung portable sprung floor designed for percussive dance, 2) showcasing the musical versatility of tap dance by accompanying multiple modern technique classes, 3) collaborating with peer graduate students to explore choreographic tools for modern dance rooted in percussive movement, 4) expanding the tap dance curriculum to offer intermediate and advance



Figure 2 Gerson Lanza & Ali Bradley posing in front of the New York City Center marquee.

classes, 5) providing performance opportunities for percussive expression, and mentoring over 80 undergraduates in theory, movement-based courses, and performance over three years. 6) highly regarded international performances opportunities including notable space such as New York City Center, George Mason University, Montgomery College, Strathmore Music Hall, Howard Theater, and Wagner Theater across the Theater,

Dance, and Performance Studies (TDPS) department, 8) first-ever collaboration with the jazz ensemble and the UMD Choir, 9) I was a guest on numerous podcast ¹⁵ and television episodes nationally & internationally pushing forward my efforts to bring visibility to The University of Maryland efforts to diversify its dance curriculum.¹⁶ In short, I opened new networks between the University of Maryland the percussive dance community and the world at large.

¹⁵ Kelly Christ. Hadero, Meklit, Movement: The Washington Post January 31, 2024, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/dc-md-va/2024/01/31/best-concerts-dc-february-2024/>

¹⁶ The Movement LIVE, “Listen: How Local Tap Dancer Gerson Lanza Found His Superpower,” WAMU, February 15, 2024, <https://wamu.org/story/24/02/15/listen-how-local-tap-dancer-gerson-lanza-found-his-superpower/>.

Furthermore, with my continued dedication and perseverance to remain involved in my professional work and portfolio, I debuted my jazz quintet at the Kennedy Center, Levine School of Music, and performed with the University of Maryland and Saint Mary's Big Band Jazz Ensemble. As a choreographer, I also showed work at the New York City Center and New York City Dance Lab, World Dance showcase at the Publik Playhouse, 92Y Round Table virtual Choreographer showcase, curated by esteemed panelists including, Kyle Abraham. I served as the artistic director and choreographer of Tap Residency Madrid and became one of six Strathmore Artists in Residence, and the first-ever tap dancer to be accepted into this network focused on elevating promising musicians.



Figure 3 2021-2022 Strathmore Class. Left to right, Alex Hamburger, Taisha Estrada, Titi, Gerson Lanza, James Fernando, Langston Hudge II.



Figure 4 Leading discussing on tonality and responsibilities of the sounding body at Collegium for African Diaspora Dance (2024)

I owe much of my performance activity through graduate school to *Music From The Sole* (MFTS), a live music company that blurs the lines between dancers and musicians. MFTS is musically anchored in the exploration of joy and feel-good music with the musical compass in Afro-Brazilian rhythms, jazz, and other folk-American influences.

We had the privilege to perform in the Guggenheim Work in Progress, Vail Dance Festival, Cleveland Dance Festival, White Bird, Utah Presents, The Yard, The Joyce Theater, and The Clarice Smith Performing Arts Center at the University of Maryland. I have been honored to have been mentioned in the *New York Times* twice within the 2023-24 season for my choreographic endeavors in *“Hoofers’ Memory*

Lab” during Ayodele Casel's Artist at the Center curatorial work ¹⁷ and my feature solo in *"I didn't come to stay"* by MFTS ¹⁸ as well as the Boston Globe.

Supporting my academic aspirations, I also presented work at the Graduate Conference “Oye Como Va” hosted by the Latin American and Caribbean Studies department hosted by UMD, presented a tap dance workshop at Collegium for African Dance Diaspora (CADD) at Duke University, and partnered with Strathmore and The Clarice community outreach and educational program to bring percussive dance education to middle schools and high schools in Prince George’s and Montgomery Counties. In 2021 and 2023, I was awarded an IPPCR research grant to conduct research abroad, where I studied the cultural influence of tap dance in Spanish-speaking countries, particularly Spain and Honduras.

While on campus, I received the Arts for All grant, which provides financial support to produce arts awareness activities to the university community. The objective of the grant project, Jambush 2.0, was to deepen the power of the arts to reach and gather an audience in ways we have not yet thought of within the parameters of our campus. Jambush 2.0 presented a series of four pop-up interdisciplinary sessions that feature live music, movement, DJing, and live painting in non-traditional performing spaces across campus, such as parking lots, loading

¹⁷ Siobhan Burke, “Review: Ayodele Casel Shares the Floor with Varied Visions of Tap,” *The New York Times*, April 14, 2023, sec. Arts, <https://www.nytimes.com/2023/04/14/arts/dance/review-ayodele-casel-new-york-city-center.html>.

¹⁸ Siobhan Burke, “Review: Music from the Sole Brings a Party to the Joyce Theater,” *The New York Times*, January 31, 2024, sec. Arts, <https://www.nytimes.com/2024/01/31/arts/dance/review-music-from-the-sole-joyce-theater.html>.

docks, and alleyways. These performances facilitated live, multidisciplinary collaboration and engaged the broader school population in interactive creative activities. Needless to say, I worked very hard to bring visibility to the art form, which has given me a voice.

The support of the University of Maryland was integral to bringing these endeavors to fruition. Although the process has been labor intensive, I am witnessing that percussive dance is gaining recognition and respect beyond the university. Additionally, in my touring experience over the past two years, I have noticed that performing arts centers commission more percussive dance and BIPOC productions than ever. There are countless talented percussive ensembles constantly gracing the stage, including but not limited to the Syncopated Ladies, Michelle Dorrance and Dorrance Dance, Dormisha Sumbry-Edwards, Sole Define, Music From the Sole, Michela Lerman, Lisa Latouche, Brinae Ali, Ayodele Casel, Caleb Teicher, and M.A.D.D Rhythms.

Although I accomplished the goals many dancers dream of achieving, feeling at home and welcomed at UMD was still challenging. No matter the accolades, the void was still there. I frequently walked down the hallway and encountered my cohort rehearsing with faculty. I would ask, “Am I missing class?” Their response was, “We are rehearsing.” These gestures were not malicious, but still made me feel like the other. Moments like these made me reflect and try to make tap dance more visible on campus.

Incorporating my tap dance into a Eurocentric curriculum and practice was akin to adapting to a new country as an immigrant. I experienced a sense of alienation

in my body, yet familiarity with the environment. It felt as though the art that once gave me the freedom to express myself was now limited within the walls of academia.

It is worth mentioning that my colleagues have not had the opportunity to explore percussive dance as part of their university curriculum. This raises the question of whether the school's mission is truly inclusive and supports diverse practices beyond modern dance. Perhaps, if my colleagues had to step outside of their comfort zones in the way that I had to, this exchange of styles and values would have been more mutual. By continuing the program's focus on modern dance, the school inevitably continues the homogeneous practices well-documented by the authors I've already mentioned above.

By entering academia, I represent a call to action to re-think, re-adjust, and re-introduce a recalibration of dance studies and research. My efforts are strengthened by similar calls from Gottschild, Brown, Davis, and Foster and Tomko, who propose new methods of inclusivity that welcome new generations of dancers, researchers, and educators. This call for action deconstructs the power of prejudice that continues to exist in dance departments and academia. It is time for higher educational institutions to recalibrate and introduce a shift in traditional historical and movement inquiry models to best serve future generations of dance scholars.

Chapter 2: The Garinagu People and Resistance

Limón, my mother's *pueblo*¹⁹, is a municipality in the department of Colón in Honduras. This was one of the sectors of the coast of Honduras first inhabited by the African Diaspora. My people, the Garifuna (also known as the Garinagu), are a mix of African and indigenous Carib peoples. They were expelled from St. Vincent for rebellion and forced to settle on Roatan, an island off the north coast of Honduras.²⁰ My time in Limon taught me about my culture and Garifuna heritage. From an early age, I listened and danced to Garifuna music like *parranda* and *punta* while my grandmother made pan de coco. I have been part of drum rituals that pay tribute to our ancestors.

The African Diaspora in Latin America is overlooked and excluded from Honduras's identity and division of political representations. Sarah England, in her article "Negotiating race and place in the Garifuna Diaspora: Identity formation and transnational grassroots politics in New York City and Honduras," grapples with the complex issues surrounding the socioeconomic and political processes that the Garinagu people face in their quest for legitimacy within their autochthony. England further explains that the Garinagu played a pioneering role in shaping the ethnic makeup of Honduras and Central America. She notes that qualities of race, ethnicity, and belonging further complicate their struggle. With the theoretical backing of Paul Gilroy in his analysis of the African Diaspora's search for origins inside and outside

²⁰ Keri Vacanti, *Land Grab: Green Neoliberalism, Gender, and Garifuna Resistance in* : Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 2013), 23.

of the West,²¹ England argues that “the Garinagu are considered inside the West in the sense that the history of the diaspora population is intimately tied to that of the West via the spread of global capitalism, the formation of nation-states, and international migration. Yet they are simultaneously seen as outside of the West through discourses of race and nation that place them on the margins of national identities and at the bottom of national and global economies.”²² The Garinagu community's struggle to maintain their cultural identity is complicated by their lack of political and ethnic representation on the global stage. Similarly, the art of tap dancing share historical difficulty in the preservation of its Black cultural heritage. It traces its origins back to the enslavement and displacement of African people across the Atlantic.²³ Like the Garifuna, forced assimilation to unfamiliar customs and lifestyles, their sense of community and way of life was disrupted. In response, tap dance emerged as a form of resistance, allowing them to hold onto and honor their memories and traditions. Both People of the diaspora, despite being an integral part of their nation's fabric, they are often marginalized and face significant challenges in preserving their traditions, religious practices, and dance.

The feature film *Garifuna in Peril* (2014), directed by Ali Allie and Ruben Reyes, sheds light on the preservation efforts of the Garifuna. The films follow two brothers, Ricardo, residing in the United States, and Miquel, in Honduras. Through

²¹ Paul Gilroy, *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness* (London: Verso, 1995).

²² Sarah England, “Negotiating Race and Place in the Garifuna Diaspora: Identity Formation and Transnational Grassroots Politics in New York City and Honduras,” *Identities* 6, no. 1 (June 1999): 5–53, <https://doi.org/10.1080/1070289x.1999.9962635>.

²³ Hilton, Leon. “Tap Dancing America: A Cultural History by Constance Valis Hill. 2010. New York: Oxford University Press. Xvi+ 441 Pp., Illustrations, Notes, Index. \$39.00 Cloth.” *Dance Research Journal* 44, no. 1 (2012): 114–18. <https://doi-org.proxy-um.researchport.umd.edu/10.1017/S014976771100043X>.

their lens, themes of transnationalism, land displacement, and tourism are explored. According to the film, the preservation of the Garifuna language, dance, food, rituals, and music is in jeopardy.²⁴ The complexities of contemporary threats such as poverty, corruption, violence, and tropicalization have forced significant populations of Central Americans to flee their native land.²⁵

Author Keri Vacanti Brondo, in her book *"Land Grab: Green Neoliberalism, Gender, and Garifuna Resistance in Honduras"*, investigates national identity that favors Indio-Hispanic mestizaje. The Honduran government has fashioned a national identity that has neglected the presence of Blacks. This marginalization forces the Garinagu to be in an asylum, drafting their best efforts to preserve their culture and occupying a racial-cultural class lower than the Indio-mestizo. There has been some progress in recent years, with more Garifuna people occupying leadership positions in government. However, this progress has not yet resulted in meaningful advancement.

Garifuna in Peril and Brondo share major concerns about the ethics of land displacement of the Garifuna people from their coastal ancestry. These threats are not only cultural but also economic. For example, Canadian investment developer *RECAP Investments Inc.* has owned 600 acres of land along the coast of Trujillo since 2008. RECAP offers villas and eco-development opportunities. The website homepage offers this short description:

²⁴ Ali Allie and Ruben Reyes, "Garifuna in Peril," *Tubitv.com*, 2012, https://tubitv.com/movies/341514/garifuna_in_peril.

²⁵ Por Azam Ahmed, Katie Rogers, and Jeff Erns, "El Camino de La Caravana Migrante: De Disputa En Honduras a Escándalo Internacional," *The New York Times*, October 26, 2018, sec. en Español, <https://www.nytimes.com/es/2018/10/26/espanol/caravana-origenes-honduras-trump.html>.

"Situated on a 4.5 km fully private beach along the Caribbean Sea, Trujillo Beach is a stunningly beautiful community. With Beachfront Condos, villas, lots, private homes, restaurants, pools and amenities, this is a true tropical 600 acre eco-paradise getaway. Explore nature at its best with exotic birds, hiking trails, and monkey tours all on-site.

*Trujillo Beach launched in 2008 and is Recap's flagship community in one of the most emerging real estate development locations in Central America."*²⁶

The Garinagu people are constantly under attack and being displaced. I was saddened to learn that outsiders were exploiting the lands of my ancestors without investing in the community. By residing far away from my home country, there is a disconnect that I and other immigrants experience due to overriding efforts to assimilate to a host country. What is often lost in one's uprooting is the understanding of the effects of day-to-day life in our native land. Although I was far from my homeland and these forms of exploitation, I had the curiosity to find out more: Who is selling the land, the government? How are patronatos leaders selected? Are there laws that favor foreign developments? What is the relationship between luxury resorts and neighboring pueblos? Are these relationships mutual? I was curious about these themes, which Ricardo tried to address in *Garifuna in Peril* after his brother was tricked into selling the land, forcing a return to his pueblo. The political legislation of the Honduran government continues to forcefully displace the Garifuna community from their historically controlled coastal territories.²⁷ Brondo explains that eco-

²⁶ RECAP Investment Inc. <https://www.recapinvestments.ca/trujillo-beach-honduras>

²⁷ Keri Brondo Vacanti, *Land Grab: Green Neoliberalism, Gender, and Garifuna Resistance in Honduras* Tucson: University Of Arizona Press, 2013.

tourism and marine research are buzzwords that justify the western invasion of Garifuna territory. Despite constant turmoil, the Garifuna people continue fighting to make their voices heard and preserve their culture. Many tias, grandmothers, fathers, and Buyei are leaving for New York, Houston, and Louisiana, keeping the culture vibrant in every *paso de mascaro*, and *plato de machuca*. Every time I visit Limon, it feels like a cultural discovery that gets me closer to my family's core cultural values and ancestors, often informed by dance, music, drum circles, and rituals.

The invasion by powerful nations into vulnerable states is not uncommon, leaving people and their communities in disrepair. It is worth noting that the United States was distantly allied with fascist President Ubico in Guatemala. Ubico was a brutal leader to the Guatemalan population, specifically to the Mayan people. Mayans were forced to submit to provide labor to large foreign landowner corporations by vagrancy laws. The United States failed to intervene, pushing immigrants North to pursue opportunities for a better life. Central American countries suffer an imbalance because of the intervention of the United States into foreign policy justified by the protection of their interests.

Garifuna in Peril extends an intimate invitation to the Garifuna diaspora and its challenges and cultural practices. In the opening scene, the viewers are welcomed into a traditional pueblo where the Garifuna language, music and dance, and family prevail. One particular moment of spiritual practice is called Dugu, and the role of the Buyei is potent. The film depicts Ricardo returning to the village from the United States to fix his brother Miguel's misdeeds of selling ancestral familial land without the elders' permission and seeking advice from the *Buyei*. A *Buyei* exists in Garifuna

communities and serves as the linkage between the living and our ancestors. In the scene, the *Buyei* women perform a brief ritual by blowing liquor onto an altar with lit candles. This ritual continues to be practiced among Garinagu community.

In 2002, I attended Dugu in Harlem, New York City, the most concentrated Garifuna population outside Honduras.²⁸ It was in the early evening, in an apartment crowded with people. It felt like it was a celebration. There was food, dancing, and drumming. All of the women wore traditional Garifuna garments, and *pañuelos* covered their heads, showing reverence. I was playing outside with cousins and friends with similar migration stories. Suddenly, all the music stopped. I went inside and a woman was sitting on a chair in the middle of the room. She seemed possessed as if she was speaking for someone else; her tone of voice was unusual, it was deeper, darker, slower. The family who had performed the Dugu was asking for advice and guidance on matters I was too young to understand or even care about.

To offer more context on this ritual, Oliver N. Green expands in great detail:

*“Language, music, and spirituality in ritual expression are essential components of culture and society. The maintenance and retention of these components affect processes of enculturation and preservation of social values. Ritual participants believe that without singing, drumming, and rattling, dugii-the most salient ancestor propitiation rite Garinagu-could not be performed. Furthermore, they believe that without the ritual, the culture-as it is known today-would cease to exist. To better understand and interpret how music and ancestor spirit possession in this rite reinforce social values, concepts concerning the reorientation of time, cultural relativism, and consanguineous descent are discussed.”*²⁹

²⁸ Stone Center for Latin American Studies Tulane University, “Teach Central America: Exploring Garifuna Culture,” The Stone Center, December 8, 2021, <https://stonecenter.tulane.edu/teach-central-america-exploring-garifuna-culture>.

²⁹ Oliver N. Greene, “The ‘Dugu’ Ritual of the Garinagu of Belize: Reinforcing Values of Society through Music and Spirit Possession,” *Black Music Research Journal* 18, no. 1/2 (1998): 167, <https://doi.org/10.2307/779397>.

Greene's depiction supports what the encounter I witnessed as a young child. This was the Garifuna manifestation of retention of culture and spirituality despite their demographics. In addition, *Garifuna in Peril* speaks to the struggles of Garifunas preserving culture in maintaining the cooking tradition of cassabe, singing parranda songs and keeping the role of the griot. My family continues to make efforts to keep these traditions alive, however, the discourse of our Blackness within the parameters of Honduras continues to be marginalized. The Honduran government has not yet recognized how to uphold the fact that in 2001, the Garifuna language, music, and dance were officially proclaimed by UNESCO a "Masterpiece of the Oral and Intangible Heritage of Humanity."³⁰ UNESCO recognition demonstrates the importance to supports diversity and uphold the contributions of the Afro indigenous population to its national ethnic and racial composition.

³⁰ UNESCO, "Language, Dance and Music of the Garifuna," ich.unesco.org, 2008, <https://ich.unesco.org/en/RL/language-dance-and-music-of-the-garifuna-00001>.

Mi Vida, in Rhythm breaks the fourth wall to tailor an audience experience to be intimate. As the artistic director of my work, I curate performance that draw the audience to my lived experiences of watching my parents dance in the living room



Figure 5 Scenic design sketch for *Mi Vida, in Rhythm*

and seeing my uncle *chapiando el patio* harvesting the crops with a *machete*. Many Latinos share my experience. As a bystander, I observed that our dances are deeply rooted in our traditional ways of ritual, religion,

celebration. When we dance, our lineage and bodily memory are inevitably reflected. Africanist movement calls for a communal experience. In my experience, community traditions have been the primary form of passing information. Therefore, the design of *Mi Vida, in Rhythm* was vital in facilitating the audience's vantage point where they feel ownership and proximity to clothing hanging in the backyard or sitting at a jazz club.

The Kogod Theater at the University of Maryland, where “*Mi Vida, in Rhythm*” was performed, was transformed into a vibrant jazz scene, reminiscent of a hurricane-ravaged town that has repositioned itself at the center of entertainment. Salvaged artifacts such as baskets, barrels, and chairs gathered from various locations signified the creativity and steadfast resilience of the Latino people. This resilience has been

tested throughout history with colonialism, suppression, invasion, war, and tyranny, among numerous human rights violations by foreign governments. The scenic design included a replica of my home's main door in Honduras, a clothes line with sheets hanging that also served as a canvas for media to be projected. There was a bar from Harlem that was used as a sand pit to layer another element of sound, and the main stage that symbolizing the coming of age and the finding of one's identity.

The use of a proscenium theater would have distanced the audience's experience. In contrast, an immersive theater experience required piloting the audience's navigation of the space and relationship to the performer. The initial scene of my work takes place in Honduras and involves the planting of crops and the choreographies of labor rooted in the practices of Hondurans in their efforts to be self-sustaining. The intention is for the audience to feel the vibration of every beat projecting from the dancing bodies in the space, to be close to the heavy breathing and quick custom changes in plain sight, as the space becomes activated by chronological shifts in time, sound, and identity with photographs, live music, or warm lighting.

Mascaro & Tap Dance

Ultimately, tap dance and *Mascaro* meet at the crossroads of the Africanist. These specificities assist me in understanding tap dance's learning and conditioning practices. The through line stems from understanding musical dialogue and call-and-response between the dancer and the percussionist from *Mascaro*.



Figure 6 Mascaro dancer wearing traditional garments of skirt, mask, ribbons.

Scholars such as Marshall and Jean Stearns declare six characteristics and aesthetic features when discussing African diaspora dances. These contributions are: 1) the dance in its most raw state by dancing on the naked earth barefoot. The African style is flat foot. 2) African dances are performed in a position where the knees are bent, and the upper body is brought forward and down to demonstrate the fluidity of the African style. 3) African dance imitates animals in realistic details.

Further, in the African repertoire, many animals, such as eagles and rabbits, are portrayed in the dance. Africans often danced to their deities to ask for a good hunt and give thanks for a good hunt. 4) African dances places great importance on improvisation. Improvisation, again, demonstrates the fluidity of daily life. Improvisation symbolizes the power to an individual to express their individuality. Furthermore, the ability of improvisation is vital to the performance of the Black arts. 5) African dance in centrifugal; Its movements proceed from the hips.

The performance's first half features *Mascaro*, a traditional dance of the Garinagu people. The movement is characterized by rapid bouncing of the feet, interacting with the reverberation of beans echoing from the footing of the wooden board. *Mascaro* traditionally dances to the up-tempo beating of Garifuna drums, and the colorful custom and accessories such as seashells on the ankles and multiple ribbons. The movement becomes more intense with the increasing velocity of the drums, the flickering red light, and thunder rain.



Figure 7 Traditional Mascaro mask use for performance.

The fast bounce of the feet is sometimes interrupted by the play of musical syncopation of the feet and the occasional crossing and turning of the upper body. *Mascaro* is a full-body performance with a keen sense of music and bodily coordination. *Mascaro* dancers are masters of improvisation, as this dance is not choreographed or taught but is learned in a community through festivities and trading steps. The embodiment of *Mascaro* requires an immense amount of control, stamina, creativity, and the percussionist is responsible for interpreting the musicality of the moving body in the drum. Every sound is generated by the dancer, who spearheads their conversation. In Africanist aesthetics, musicality and movement go hand in hand. One cannot exist without the other. The primal percussiveness of stomping, flipping, and stepping is the starting point. The showcasing *Mascaro* serve as the



Figure 8 Gerson Lanza dancing Masacaro, as the opening scene of *Mi Vida, in Rhythm*

starting point to trace the evolution of my sounding and moving body, simultaneously connecting the African diaspora and its existence in Latin America. Eventually, as time progressed, the audience began to connect the dots of my preparation and calling to tap dance, and in reality, despite the demographic distance between tap dance and me, I was already a recipient of its teaching.

The costume has a ribbon theme

originates in extends the traditional garments of *Mascaró*. Its presence symbolizes remembrance of the Garifuna culture and an effort to highlight Black indigenous performance practices, as well as the Garifuna language that is being spoken and projected from the overhead speakers during these beginning scenes. As someone situated in between two related yet distinct Africanist dance styles, it was important for me to examine the potential links between forms of artistic expression that conveyed both resistance and the preservation of culture. These themes were integral to the message I aimed to convey in *Mi Vida, in Rhythm*.

Chapter 3: Choreographies of Labor

Back in La Ceiba, five hours east by car from Limon, the coastal metropolis, and my home, we all contribute to the chores. The limited resources of third world living force us to become sustainable by using the resources provided by the land. There were several of these labors we performed as a household, and several

choreographies of labor shown in the work in an effort to transport the audience into my childhood memories in *Mi Vida, in Rhythm*. These choreographies were washing, folding, sorting, and hanging clothing alongside harvesting of beans.

Including these choreographies was important to me because it allows the



Figure 9 My grandmother Portana Ruiz dancing at a party in Limon, Honduras, on the right, Isabella Grady with a traditional Garifuna Skirt in Mi Vida, in Rhythm.

viewer to travel into time and to understand how the movement and sounds, later featured in my work, extend from these choreographies. The chore of washing clothing in third world countries during the early 90s was not similar to that in the West. Performing the task of doing laundry entails walking, choosing the right rock, and gossiping. It all starts with gathering dirty clothes, then begins with a short walk of five city blocks to Rio Crangrejal, the local river often used for showers and a food source for fishing and shrimp. Once there, maternal figures socialize and negotiate

who will take which rock to start the rigorous movement of the upper body, massaging the dirt out of the clothing on the rock's flatbed. Once we finish washing, we track our way home to dry the cloth on the clothing line on the back patio.

In *Mi Vida, in Rhythm*, performer Isabella Grady begins the experience by her hair using an African print cloth in a delicate and precise manner to protect her hair from the sun. This intentional act invites the audience to explore the politics of Black bodies and their self-care and beauty practices. Those unfamiliar with the Black experience of labor, skin, or hair may not have a close-up view of these practices and choreographies. The moment when the central light focuses on the wrapping of Black women's hair provides an intimate glimpse into the preparation that takes place before tackling household chores.

As a young child my family and I practiced sharecropping. There was a plot of land in front of my childhood home that the owner leased to the people who lived nearby. The mutual agreement was that, in return for planting, the families would maintain the property by cutting the grass. For nearly a decade, my family planted beans, corn, watermelon, and other crops stored during winter months. My brothers and I were responsible for protecting the crops. The choreographies of planting ask for the piercing of the ground, bending over to plant the seeds, and covering the seeds with soil. The harvesting of beans is by far one of the most challenging tasks.

Mi Vida, in Rhythm, offers the choreographies of beans and the tools use for harvesting such as a small sack and a *garrote* (wood stick). In third-world countries like Honduras, processing beans by hand is a common practice. Harvesting red beans in Honduras typically involves several steps. The first step is to plant the beans in

well-draining soil that receives plenty of sunlight. The beans are typically planted in the early spring and take several months to mature. Once the beans are mature and ready for harvest, the plants are cut at the base and the entire plant is pulled from the ground. The plants are left to dry in the sun for several days, allowing the beans to dry out in their pods. After the beans have had time to dry out, the pods are removed from the plants and placed into large sacks. The sacks are then beaten with a stick or other tool to separate the beans from the pods. Beating the sack can be quite physical, as it requires a significant amount of force to break open the pods and extract the beans. This process is typically done by hand and can take several hours to complete, depending on the harvest size.

Once the beans have been extracted from the pods, they are sorted by hand to remove any damaged or discolored beans. The beans are then typically stored in a cool, dry place until they are ready to be used. While the process of harvesting red beans in Honduras can be labor-intensive, it is an important part of the country's agricultural economy and a traditional practice that has been passed down for generations. Despite the rise of modern machinery and technology, many people still prefer to process their beans by hand as it is seen as an important part of our culture and heritage.

The musical journey of *Mi Vida, in Rhythm* begins with the rhythmic sound of el *garrote* hitting the sack. This beat is the foundation of our musical composition. In our culture, music is intertwined in everything we do, even in the seemingly mundane task of harvesting beans. The beat of the sack inspired me to create a syncopated rhythm with simple patterns that are easy to follow. My goal was to create a bridge to

musical comprehension that was accessible to all before evolving into more complex and intricate patterns.



Figure 10 On the right-hand side you see Gerson Lanza and Isabella Grady performing everyday task such as sorting bedding garments to then hang to dry. On the Left: is Gerson Lanza using the garrote to beating the sack creating to separates the be

Once bodily memory lives it is non-dependant on its demographic location. My experience of living and harvesting crops alongside my brothers and father are choreographies that continue manifesting in my bodily movement. These choreographies are embedded into the history of my family; my artistic work seeks to uphold these choreographies on the same level of importance as other rhythmic, embodied expressions and is central to my inquiry as a tap dancer and scholar.

When immigrants from Honduras and other places with similar experiences move to New York, the way we do everyday tasks, such as washing clothes, changes. A part of my choreographic practice is to commemorate this ordinary routine, its transformation, and how it differs in communities where this task is no longer performed as it once was. By tracing this evolution, we can discover new possibilities

to explore the immigrant experience and the lingering effects of internal labor practices. The next iteration of *Mi Vida in Rhythm* would include this exploration of specific choreographies of labor and concepts of adaptability.

Segundo Encuentro

As I grew older, my taste for television naturally changed. I became interested in live television, game shows, and sometimes noticieos. Honduran television in the 90s leaned heavily on re-runs of shows from other parts of the world. For example, The Sesame Street episode with The Hines brothers was initially filmed in 1979, eleven years before my birth. There was a variety show, which, of course, at the age of ten, I was not aware these were pre-recorded. Once again, my father and I watched religiously. The show was a weekly talent competition where aspiring performers worldwide came to showcase their skills in front of a live audience.

The audience was electric —and always ready to be entertained. The moment the show began, the camera would pan, catching hundreds of people standing on their feet, cheering and clapping with eagerness, similar to if they were at church. The crowd looked identical to me in skin tones, hair, and smiles, but their wardrobe, accessories and style looked very different from those in my surroundings. They all looked so good that you could nearly imagine how good they smelled.

The Master of the Ceremony for the evening usually wore an outfit similar to a nation's President, elegant and bold. They started by making the audience laugh with jokes and push lines while introducing the house band. The house band included

an electric bass guitar, drums, piano, and a few horns for melodic support. The house band was funky, and uniquely embodied. Every time the camera would pan over their section of the stage they would be making faces and dancing with their instrument, selling a funky groove that was impossible to fight against. The audience, with unmatched energy, understood the groove and the music's purpose. In addition to honing an energetic crowd, they were involved throughout the entire show, providing musical support and cues to guide the energy in the space.

At the show, each performer was given about 60 seconds to showcase their talent to the audience. The performances ranged in quality, with some performers telling jokes, dancing, playing an instrument, or singing. This was a significant opportunity for these aspiring artists to achieve their dreams. As with any competition, the level of talent varied. Some decisions are more difficult than others. However, this competition was set apart because the audience served as the ultimate judge. They decided in real-time who advanced and who got eliminated. If the audience enjoyed the performance, they cheered and applauded, but if they did not, they expressed their dissatisfaction with a "boo." It was a demanding audience, but for those who managed to win them over, it was a chance to make history.

While my dad and I frequently disagreed with the audience on who deserved to be booed off the stage, I'll never forget the energy of those moments when the Sandman came floating out from stage left, effortlessly tap dancing in perfect, elaborate rhythms, sweeping the unwanted talent off the stage.

The Sandman consistently achieved flawless victories whenever he took the stage. The audience's response was akin to that of a game-winning penalty in the

final World Cup match. The Sandman's character varied due to the decades of existence, but the job description remained unchanged. The older performer possessed a rhythmic and syncopated style, while the younger performer incorporated modern, flashy moves and acrobatics, such as descending from the balcony using a stair-like structure.³¹ I was equally amused by both performers and intrigued by the hundreds of sounds generated from their bodies without disruption of their upper half.



Figure 11 Omar Edwards dancing at the Apollo Theater as Sandman dancing a contestant of the stage.

Growing up in Honduras with my father as my sole caretaker presented a challenging transition when we moved to the United States. My mother had immigrated to America to provide a better life and a chance at the American dream. Despite my father's new reality as a sole caretaker, he took care of us with the support of our neighbors and provided us with guidance and wisdom. He reminded me frequently of his belief that "hijo, hay que educarse para ser alguien en esta vida," which translates to "son, you have to educate yourself to be someone in this life."

³¹ Basia Winograd, "Omar the Tap Dancer from the APOLLO THEATER EPK," [www.youtube.com](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-gz25GLYYtI), 2014, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-gz25GLYYtI>.

My mother, a former teacher in Honduras, had to work as a home attendant in the United States to support us from afar. The job was demanding with long hours and an unregulated schedule that was the polar opposite of her career dedication to teaching. Despite the distance and her voice of exhaustion, she reminded us that "algun dia estaremos juntos," which means "someday we will be together." I remember tightly holding the light blue rotary dial phone she had sent in a "baril" along with Christmas ornaments and new clothing for my siblings and me that year.

In 2001, I joined my mother in the United States, a reunion ten years in the making. Although I am grateful for her immense sacrifices to give us access to the American Dream, the drastic change was formidable. Adapting to a new culture, leaving my friends, and most importantly, my father, was a demanding task for an eleven-year-old. The culture shock was grand, and I felt like I was in quicksand, constantly battling to seek freedom from the barriers that kept me hostage. The most significant barrier was the language barrier. I felt like giving up. However, witnessing my parents' sacrifice taught me the value of perseverance and hard work. Giving up was not an option; I had to make my parents proud.

Adjusting to America was incredibly difficult but I was saved by Wadleigh Secondary School for the Performing and Visual Arts - and the tap dance I learned there. We sat cross-legged on the stage for the first tap class, my stomach filled with nerves. When our instructor walked in, I knew I was in the right place - it was Omar Edwards, the Apollo Amateur Night's Sandman. It is hard to describe the peace and connectedness that his entrance made me feel. English is not a prerequisite to dance, and there was something that flowed through Omar that also flowed through my

teenage self - something that moved like blood, something that we shared before we could share words. There was the man I once knew through television from my living room, now instructing me step by step on how tap dance embodies the beat embedded in the choreographies of labor I had been performing all this time. My curiosity for tap dance grew immensely, steering me through the agitations, insecurities, and fears of my adolescence in a new country.



Figure 12 Gerson Lanza observing suitcase descending.

Chapter 4: What is the American Dream?

I utilize my immigrant story to represent the broader communal experiences of pursuing the American Dream. I use tap dance as the central rhythmic force to performatively explore these narratives around opportunity and progress. Having left my native country, I understand that this disruption results from the intricate interplay between choice and necessity.

The migration of Central Americans toward the United States is often viewed as a journey to a promised land. Unfortunately, since the 1980s, Central American countries have been plagued by wars and civil strife caused by foreign governments.³² These countries have suffered from negative depictions and political campaigns that portrayed them as savage while targeting the United States as an audience to exploit them. As a result, Central America has been left in a state of disrepair.

The United Fruit Company, an American banana harvesting corporation, is responsible for exploiting land, people, and resources in Central America, using the exotic “Chiquita Banana” trope as a marketing strategy. However, this seemingly harmless approach aimed to influence consumer perspectives of Central America while making foreign lands ready and ripe for consumption. The United States’ intrusion in Central America, socially supported by the United Fruit Company’s marketing strategies, led to depletion, crippling, and the loss of self-sustainability for Honduras, Guatemala, El Salvador, and Nicaragua, ultimately uprooting their chance at true independence.

A close reading of the United Fruit Company’s marketing archive reveals its innate appetite for American imperialism. For example, the “Lady in the Tutti-Frutti Hat”, fully elaborated in the film “The Gang’s All Here” seductively presents bananas through its leading star, Carmen Miranda. Miranda, a fair-skinned woman, is accompanied by tamed monkeys, and the ad makes use of racialized casting, with the character of Miranda juxtaposed with “less pure” yet cheery, darker-complected men

³² Juan Gonzalez, *HARVEST of EMPIRE: A History of Latinos in America*. (S.L.: Penguin Books, 2022).

who are loyal, strong, and ready to serve.³³ This symbology reflects the sociopolitical climate in the U.S. at the time, with darker-complected people positioned as second-class citizens.

The United Fruit Company's pushed propaganda performed as tools to display the abundance of untapped resources within Central America and lure white Americans into exotic lands in the film “The Gang is All Here”. The company's intent was to create a monolithic perspective that Central America was ridden with savage-like, uncivilized, and illiterate people, justifying their monetary greed to grow their empire without offering anything in return.

In addition to blatant racialized propaganda, the U.S. also took a hands-on approach to disrupting the sociopolitical structures of El Salvador, Nicaragua, and Guatemala. For example, land disputes and the governance of banana crops assisted in the Guatemalan Civil War, the bloodiest war in Central America. The U.S. intervention in Guatemala resulted in a CIA–sponsored coup in 1954, which led to the removal of elected president Juan Jos Arévalo. The U.S. intervention worked to protect their investments and financial gains at all costs.

In El Salvador, General Maximiliano Hernández Martínez, a North American henchman, ruled with an iron fist, making way for fourteen families to house all government power. With the backing of the U.S., Martínez wiped out a lineage of Pipil Indians who protested progressive labor laws while working for U.S. mining and fruit corporations. In 1979, a coup erupted into a civil war, and the United States viewed the common folk's rise during this sensitive political time of the Cold War as

³³ Twentieth Century Fox Technicolor, “The Gang’s All Here,” 1943.

a threat to democracy. This threat validated their intervention to pump billions of dollars into the Salvadoran government of the 70s to stop the rise of communism, collectivism, and socialism according to their beliefs.

In Nicaragua, the U.S. allowed a tyrant to commit atrocities with their silent stamp of approval. The Civil War of Nicaragua was ignited by those opposed to the Somoza family tyranny. The uprising of the common Nicaraguans against the elite families was viewed as a socialist uproar, giving the U.S. a reason to assert its power as the protector against communist ideologies of the Western hemisphere.³⁴ The U.S. provided war aid and military training to the Somoza's armies to eradicate any threat to their financial interest.

Although Honduras remains free from civil war, its diplomatic non-aggressive role boosted the banana industry affecting the Garifuna way of life.³⁵ One national strain that escalated was the disputes for land ownership between the Garifuna people and the Honduran government. Garifuna communities have historically lived in coastal areas, where they fish and farm the land. However, large-scale development projects, such as tourist resorts and agricultural business, have led to the expropriation of their ancestral lands.³⁶ The Honduran government has also failed to recognize their land rights, which has resulted in violent evictions and displacements of the

³⁴ Incarcerated Nation Network INC Media. 2020. "Harvest of Empire the Untold Story of Latinos in America." YouTube Video. *YouTube*. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5gW84cAN2Pw>.

³⁵ Keri Brondo Vacanti, *Land Grab: Green Neoliberalism, Gender, and Garifuna Resistance in Honduras* Tucson: University Of Arizona Press, 2013. Pg 37-52

³⁶ Gómez, Maynor. 2024. "Garífunas Protestan Exigiendo El Cumplimiento de Las Sentencias de La Corte IDH." *Diario La Tribuna*. April 12, 2024. <https://www.latribuna.hn/2024/04/12/garifunas-protestan-exigiendo-el-cumplimiento-de-las-sentencias-de-la-corte-idh/>.

Garifuna people.

Recently conflict continues to manifest for the unjust criminalization of Garifuna leaders who defend ancestral land and human rights. Many have been arrested and charged with fabricated crimes, such as drug trafficking and terrorism, in an attempt to silence their activism.³⁷ The Honduran government has also been criticized for failing to investigate cases of violence and human rights abuses against the Garifuna people, including the killing of community leaders and activists.

The tension between the Garifuna people and the Honduran government has been ongoing for decades, and despite international pressure and calls for justice, the situation remains unresolved. The Garifuna people continue to resist the expropriation of their land and the violation of their human rights, and their struggle for justice and recognition continues.³⁸ This violation of their human rights and cultural practices and the government's negligence have resulted in a significant increase in the migration of Garifuna to the United States. In addition to a push for representation in government, the arts have served as a form of resistance and healing to voice pride, honor, and cultural preservation initiatives in songs, dance, and language.

Despite the trek's length or destination, leaving home represents the separation of one's comfort zone. In *La Jaula de Oro* (2013) director Diego Quemeda-Diez draws attention to the life of migrant children desperate to reach a new beginning as

³⁷ Anonymous. 2023. "Killing of Activism and Violence against Social Leaders and Garifuna Members Continue across Honduras." Civicus, Monitor Tracking Civic Space. September 30, 2023. <https://monitor.civicus.org/explore/killing-of-activists-and-violence-against-social-leaders-and-garifuna-members-continue-across-honduras/>.

³⁸ Keri Brondo Vacanti, *Land Grab: Green Neoliberalism, Gender, and Garifuna Resistance in Honduras* Tucson: University Of Arizona Press, 2013. Pg 37-52

their ancestral lands fall victim to decades of foreign companies exploiting the land.³⁹ Besides capturing the grueling realities of abuse and survival of a group of three children on a transnational journey, Quemada-Diez creates cinematographic emotional pivots. These pivots ask viewers to "carry on" despite the horrifying lived moment in the film, like the protagonists had to in the journey North. These moments in *La Jaula de Oro* include murder, human and sex trafficking, and corruption and violence. This film was instrumental in crafting *Mi Vida in Rhythm* because it supplied tools and mentorship in the craftsmanship of visceral responses and emotional shifts similar to the narratives of undocumented immigrants in real time as spaces became activated.

Mi Vida, in Rhythm documents the south-to-north corridor of undocumented migration through the linear locomotive movements of dancer Charlene Cowan and myself. As we move, we bring a suitcase into the space to serve as our dance partner. The suitcase resembles the one my siblings and I used when we migrated to the United States in 2001. It was an orange suitcase with a sturdy handle at the top for carrying, a rectangular shape, and metal straps on the exterior to secure it. While it was durable and functional, it lacked sufficient space to hold the belongings of all three of us. Through this duet, we aim to depict the separation of a family, with one member taking a risk by embarking on a journey while the other stays behind.

Many of my childhood friends have taken this journey, and most of them are men. On the journey to the United States, women run a higher risk of becoming

³⁹ Quemada-Diez, Diego . 2013. "La Jaula de Oro." Video.

victims of abuse. In her book, *Central's America Forgotten History: Revolution, Violence, and the Roots of Migration*", Chomsky unpacks the violence and horrors migrants face in their pursuit of a better life, specifically women and children, as they fall victim to sexual abuse in detention centers.⁴⁰ Despite their gender, some people have successfully reached the USA, while others have been detained in border states, deported, or have died trying.



Figure 13 Charlene Cowan and Gerson Lanza interact with suitcase performing a duet in *Mi Vida, in Rhythm*

The sensation of uprooting, grief, and displacement are woven throughout the movement in *Mi Vida, in Rhythm*. As the audience experiences the themes of love, family, friendship, and empathy, a vital message shines through - the imperative need to migrate. The suitcase opening is the culmination of this movement, symbolizing a

⁴⁰ Aviva Chomsky, *Central America's Forgotten History: Revolution, Violence, and the Roots of Migration* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2021)

fresh start. Both *La Jaula de Oro* (meaning "the golden cage") and *Mi Vida*, in Rhythm , confront the "American Dream," revealing how it can trap immigrants in undesirable jobs within a capitalistic system. Sadly, immigrants continue to be labeled as job-stealers and threats in the United States' rhetoric, despite being at the heart of its foundation.

After a few years witnessing my single mother, responsible for her three children in New York City, I became more aware of my mother's words, "Ay Gerson, si tu supieras." After years of being a primary school educator, my mother made the difficult decision to transition to a role as a home attendant in The United States. In this position, she dedicated herself to caring for elderly and disabled individuals, taking care of their cooking and cleaning needs. While it was not her ideal career path to care for strangers, my mother put her heart into her work and took pride in making a positive impact in the lives of those she served. All this to assure she would provide for her children.

*Well, son, I'll tell you:
Life for me ain't been no crystal stair.
It's had tacks in it,
And splinters,
And boards torn up,
And places with no carpet on the floor—
Bare;
But all the time
I've been a 'climbin' on,
And reachin' landin's,
And turnin' corners,
And sometimes goin' in the dark,
Where there ain't been no light.
So boy, don't you turn back;
Don't you sit down on the steps,
'Cause you finds it's kinder hard;*

*Don't you fall now—
For I'se still goin', honey,
I'se still climbin',
And life for me ain't been no crystal stair.*⁴¹

Conclusion:

In August 2009, at around 5 am, my mother dropped me off at Penn Station with two large suitcases, a one-way train ticket to Winston-Salem, North Carolina, and a hundred-dollar bill. As a first-generation student, I imagined college would be like the movies: large quads, marching bands, and competitive sports. Wake Forest University did not disappoint. With my hair grown out in a perfect afro sphere, it didn't take me long to find my people among the 5% of the student body that were Black or Latino. Wake Forest only had the thinnest threads of the African Diaspora - and I often felt too Black for the Latinos and too Latino for the other Black students - but during my time at WFU, my artistry started to take shape and to focus intensely on my experience as an Afro-Latino Honduran immigrant living in the United States.



Figure 14 Picture on the left is my sophomore year at Wake Forest University, posing for the Magnolia scholar headshot. The Magnolia is a scholarship targeting first-generation students at Wake Forest University which provides aid to support their success.

⁴¹ Langston Hughes and Little Owl House, *Mother to Son* (Little Owl House, 2023).

During my first year at WFU, the curriculum offered one tap class, and I was excited. Soon, I found out I was in a class of my own, surpassing the skills of the adjunct faculty. I quickly learned that in contrast to the various forms of concert dance prized and featured by elite institutions, tap dance is often considered vernacular or common. While the hierarchy of that ordering has been clear as I have pursued a living in tap, what is less clear to me is the strength of the wall that separates one from the other. Is this like the fence between good neighbors - mutually agreed upon by those on both sides? Or is it more akin to the line between Harlem and Morningside Heights - an invisible line that exists to make one side comfortable by excluding the other? Or is it like the line that attempts to separate where my people, the Garifuna, live from the rest of Honduras - a porous, changing line and ultimately a fiction?

Mi Vida, in Rhythms, and the expressive art forms of *Mascaro* and tap dance, serve as resistance to preserve cultural identity. Despite the presence of African diasporic influences across various communities, the intersectionality of Blackness is often seen as a threat rather than a valuable contribution to art, music, dance, and intellectual understanding. These unique forms of art connect to my personal history and embodiment. As an intentional disruption to the systemic erasure of Black Dance, and Latinidad in higher education spaces, *Mi Vida, in Rhythms* symbolizes a call for change. Collaborating with sound, media, lighting, and costume designers created a dynamic world that captured the performative evolution from Honduras to New York, centering the identity despair of belonging yet honoring the Garifuna and Honduran culture. With this iteration of *Mi Vida, in Rhythms*, I showcased the possibilities of

harmonious coexistence between vernacular and concert dance while also providing valuable tools for future dance practitioners. Though the journey was difficult, these collaborations opened the door to candid conversations, advocacy, inclusion, and discovery for an environment that can withstand and support marginalized art forms, changing the dance studies field and performative possibilities.

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