DANCING CULTURAL MEMORY: THREE CONTEMPORARY CHOREOGRAPHIES INFORMED BY A MIGRANT EMBODIMENT OF "HOME"

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Abstract

This paper analyzes how memory is performed through the creation of three contemporary dance-based choreographies: *Lejania (Distant), Memory Lane* and *ImShift*. Influenced by Afro-Venezuelan movement and contemporary dance, I explore specific locations where memory is stored in the body. All three choreographic case studies have pronounced motifs of white cloth, partial nudity, shadows and percussive rhythms. This analysis spring boards from leading scholars that write about issues of embodiment, cultural memory and diasporic performance such as Guillermo Gómez-Peña, Diana Taylor, Coco Fusco and Gloria Anzaldua. The dynamic movement vocabulary creates a body bilingualism that draws from the dancers' personal lives and each author's issues of living in the margins of mainstream society, belonging and challenging Latin American immigrant stereotypes. This paper examines the historical knowledge and shared sense of identity that is embodied and expressed in the performances.

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Table of Contents

Abstract……ii
Acknowledgements…… iii
Table of Contents……iv
Introduction……1
Literature Review……4
Chapter 1: **Cloth, Containing of Memories**……...7
Chapter 2: The Explorations……..12
2.1 Autobiographical Solo: *Lejania (Distant)*……....13
2.2 Group Choreography: *Memory Lane*……15
2.3 Self Produced Show: *ImShift: Living In The In-between & the Ritual of Affirming Identity*……..18
2.4 The Lens of Mixed Media and Idendity……22
Chapter 3: Process and Delivery……..……...24
3.1 Developing a Solo: Improvisations Exploring Four Elements……..25
3.2 A Solo Duet……...27
3.3 Collective Memory: Fragmentation/Disjunction and Non-linearity….29
3.4 A Passage of Moving Stills……...32
3.5 Rupturing Tradition Through Folklore……34
3.6 The Shadows of Our Lineage……...37
3.7 Memory Lane……....40
3.8 ImShift: Linguistic Cross-dressing ……..41
3.9 Truth and Reconciliation ……44
Chapter 4: Memory and Community……47
4.1 A Full Circle - Back to Community……..50
4.2 Locating Memory……..56
Bibliography……60
Appendices
Appendix A: [Cacao harvesting Photographs by Victoria Mata]…..……....63
Appendix B: [Rehearsing 'Culo-e-Puya' in Caracas, Venezuela]……....64
Appendix C: [*Memory Lane:* Program notes and inspiration]…..……..65
Appendix D: [*Memory Lane:* Storyboard of vignettes]……....66
Appendix E: ["Memory Lane" write up by Alex Duarte Laudon…….....67
Appendix F: [*Imshift:* Program (Dovercourt House) and Poster]……..68
Appendix G: Detailed Acknowledgements……71

Yo no se donde nací,
Ni se tampoco quien soy.
No se de donde he venido
Ni se para donde voy.
Doy gajo del arbol caído
Que no se donde cayó.
?Donde estarán mis raices?
Soy gajo de arbol caído
Que no se donde cayo.
?Donde estarán mis raices?
?De que arbol soy rama yo?[1]

Introduction

The magic of creating choreography often lies in the process itself, and not the final product. This phenomenon is explored in my York University MFA in Contemporary choreography extended essay entitled ***Dancing Cultural Memory: Three Contemporary Choreographies Informed by a Migrant Embodiment of 'home.'*** The research and analysis presented here is a documentation of the lives of (performing) Latin American women and the support of a transgendered identified collaborator all of whom currently reside in Toronto and who are an extension of me, the choreographer. Collectively, we are tangled extractions of history, piecing together the remains of our lingering generations.

This paper reflects on invigorating writers and how they relate to my choreography. Since the turn of the century, new ways of thinking about the knowledge archived in the body have suggested new approaches to cultural memory that take a closer look at the

[1] Excerpt of a traditional pre-Colombian creation myths also known as coplas. Eduardo Galeano, *Memoria del Fuego*, de (Buenos Aires: Siglo XXI Editores, 1985) 7. Translation: I don't know where I come from, Or who I am, I don't know where I have come from, Or where I am going. I am a branch of the fallen tree Which I don't know where it has fallen. Where are my roots? I am a branch of a fallen tree Of a tree, which I don't know where it has fallen. Where are my roots? What tree am I a fallen branch from?

relationship between pedagogy and scholarship.[2] Scholars and researchers in the field of performance Studies such as Gomez-Peña, Coco Fusco, Helen Nicolson and Diana Taylor have been rapidly shaping and pushing the boundaries of the interdisciplinary state of Latin American performance studies.[3]

In the following four chapters, I share my creative process that is both individually and the collectively informed. The first chapter describes the tools and aesthetic of each choreography, as well as the parting intention that influenced the creation. Chapter 2 elaborates on the scholarly influences that created a platform to analyze my artistic work in a global dialogue with other performance academics. Chapter 3 unveils the challenges and tensions that surfaced with each choreography. In the last chapter I identify where memory is located in the bodies for the individual dancers involved in this research, all of whom have Latin American migrant experience. With this work I honour the fears, challenges and triggers the dancers and I urgently faced during the creation process for each choreography. As Latin American performers who have crossed borders, our memories are tightly woven into every action of our bodies and all that is created from them: our dreams, our aspirations and sometimes, our limitations. As we move and create, we stir up generational trauma, fragments of truths and stereotypes we bear in the membrane of our skin. My methodology for creation involved a combination of movement improvisation, writing exercises, guided one-on-one text and movement exploration and regular trouble shooting.

Gloria Anzaldua dedicated *This Bridge We Call Our Backs*, to the "luchadoras que nos dejaron un legado de protesta y activismo por el medio de la pluma"[4] and "the

[2] Carol L Bernstein, "Beyond the Archive: Cultural Memory in Dance and Theater." 3.2. *Journal of Research Practice*,1-15 (Bryn Mawr College. Bryn Mawr: PA, 2007) 1.

[4] Translation: The fighters that left us the legacy of protest and activism through a pen and writing.

responsibility of marking the journey and passing on the torches and rituals left by those who have already crossed many types of bridges."[5] Similarly, the work produced during the second year of the Masters program at York University was dedicated to those who have journeyed, crossed borders and built the foundations for my existence in Toronto; to the individuals who continue to provide a platform for me to breathe in safety, ensuring that I don't get lost. As migrant bodies we are always shifting, and in that unsettlement we cradle an ancestral history of past-generation displacement. I explored these experiences, mainly by embodying nostalgia and the spectrum memories of 'home.' With love, respect, and gratitude this is my understanding of how Dancing Cultural Memory demonstrates a shared cultural, ancestral and spiritual language embodied in our gestures, rhythms and the textured layers of a collective corporeal experience.

"Risk everything on one statement, complete, focused entirely, and pressure towards being itself." -Patricia Beatty (1985)

[5] Gloria Anzaldúa and Cherrie Moraga preface, *Foreword to the Second Edition. This Bridge Called My Back: Writings by Radical Women of Color. 2nd* ed. (New York: Kitchen Table,1983) 5.

Literature review

My MFA extended essay titled: ***Dancing Cultural Memory: Three Contemporary Choreographies Informed by a Migrant Embodiment of 'home*** is rooted in a pool of scholarly work primarily from the United States with some works from Canada and Latin America. In the early throes of my research and choreographic development, I was focused on the integration of social justice with dance as a way of conceptualizing nearly a decade of my work in Toronto. Naomi M. Jackson's book, *Right to Dance: Dancing for Rights* (2004), introduced me to the importance of Canadian-based scholarly work and provided me with the important historical background of the right to dance publicly and privately in Canada. I was further exposed to the weaving of politics and performance with Diana Taylor's research on the body as a vessel for performing a repertoire of thought & memory in T*he Archive and the Repertoire: Performing Cultural Memory in the Americas.* Taylor's work, which examines the ways in which performance draws on embodied memory, cultural heritage as a mode of agency, and resistance among displaced populations in the Americas, directly inspired the creation of my self-produced project *ImShift.*

Scholars Guillermo Gomez-Peña, Cherrie Moraga, Gloria Anzaldúa and Coco Fusco each articulate a pivotal theoretical analysis of the Latin American Diaspora experience. Coco Fusco's bold presentation of writing confronts the reader with the crudity of culture wars in the USA, which gave me an impetus for also speaking boldly about the migrant experience, which contrary to some assumptions, is not always a happy journey. Guillermo Gomez's handbook, *Exercises for Rebel Artists: Radical Performance Pedagogy* and *This Bridge Called My Back: Writings by Radical Women of Color* by Cherrie Moraga and Gloria Anzaldua, provide a platform to understand the ongoing negotiation of leadership, power, cultural differences and acceptance that I am constantly navigating as a

choreographer rooted in collectivity and collaboration. Gloria Anzaldua's *Borderlands = La Frontera* is one of the most gut-wrenching compilations of literature that I have ever read. Anzaldua's first-hand accounts of border crossing stories in *Borderlands = La Frontera,* left me with the urgency to choreograph a performance based on border crossing. Another staple reading, which contextualized the complexity of the nuances of both experiencing oppression and being an oppressor, is Paolo Freire's *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, which provides a critical analysis of the relationships of power and privilege.

Issues of belonging, adaptation and decolonization are reoccurring in my research and creation. As a person of mixed-race identity, I related strongly with Linda Tuhiwai Smith, a leading theorist on decolonization of the Maori in New Zealand. Smith offers a counter-story to Western ideas about research and knowledge. Smith's book *Decolonizing Methodologies* became specifically important in the creation of "Memory Lanes," where I was confronted with the historical trauma that dancers embody. Her writing, much like Cassie Premo Steele's, references the unexplainable connection to ancestral knowledge as a tool for healing from our traumas. Steele's book, *We Heal from Memory*, exhibits the work of world-renowned writers and poets who speak of restoring the body's capacity to use creativity as power. Similarly, Helen Nicholson's chapter titled "Re-locating Memory: Performance, Reminiscence and Communities of Diaspora" offers tangible examples of the transformative and healing powers of resituating and re-telling memories in a community context.

Positioning my choreographic work in a Canadian platform was challenging, considering that the majority of academic work on dance, performance and choreography is published in the United States and Europe. As a result, I regularly referenced Canadian Choreographer Patricia Beatty's work *Form Without a Formula,* when creating all three

choreographic pieces referenced in this extended essay. *The Intimate Act of Choreography,* by Lynne Anne Blom and L. Tarin Chaplin, is an essential handbook for choreographers and anyone undergoing a process of creation. Blom and Chaplin provide insight and examples of how to approach creativity and development from a sensible, imaginative and esthetically pleasing perspective. Alongside Jonathan Burrows's *A Choreographer's Handbook,* Beatty, Blom and Chaplin provided a constant reference point to reflect on my artistic integrity by offering metaphors, inquiries and imagery that supported, challenged and inspired the creation of "Lejania (Distant)," "Memory Lane," and "ImShift."

Eduardo Galeano's writing, *Las Memorias del Fuego* and *Open Veins of Latin America* lent an imaginative yet graphic journey of Latin America, which provided an abstracted, poetic expressions of the continent. The compilation of books, monographs, research reports, and graduate theses in Michael Doucet's Bibliography on Immigration and Settlement in the Toronto Area, 2nd ed. became an anchoring resource during the development of my thesis. Doucet's compilation provided varied perspectives of historical and contemporary sources, which focus on the construction and deconstruction of Latin American identity in the North.

Chapter 1:
Cloth, Containing of Memories



Memory Lane. Dancer Irma Villafuerte and Rehana Tejpar, Photo by Victoria Mata

The choreographic case studies presented in this paper are inspired by my lasting memories of growing up in Venezuela. Each choreography embodies its own authenticity, but all create a dialogue between "the-self" and "the-other" in the transitional process of migration, settlement and border crossing. The signature artistic element of the long white cloth held the dancers metaphorically and physically with their memories.

As an indigenous identified Venezuelan-Canadian-Queer artist I am inspired by the construction and deconstruction of identity and history. I explore these constructions through dance, performance, installation and redefining the traditional definition of stage. Due to the multiple intersections of identity that I hold, I have an eclectic concept of home, status, citizenship and nationality, which are continuously being refined through my practice as a dancer and a choreographer. The long white cloth that is woven throughout the choreographies is an exploration of my skin, my memories, my language, my history and my lenses as forms of borders.

Mestizaje and hybridity are two words that are used interchangeably to categorize and understand the Latin American experiences with migration and assimilation. However, each one of these terms present conceptual problems to some Latin Americans living in the Diaspora. Personally, my research and ideology is more aligned with the philosophy of viewing Latin American diasporic identity as "living in the in-between"[6] of two cultural realities rather than being a *mixture* of two cultures or *embodying parts* of two cultures - which the first ideologies imply. Positioning myself as a mixed-race, Canadian born and Venezuelan raised woman means that I am claiming what theorist Linda Tuhiwai Smith

[6] Diana Taylor, *The Archive and the Repertoire: Performing Cultural Memory in the Americas*. (Durham: Duke University Press, 2003) 97.

perceives as a "genealogical, cultural and political set of experiences."[7] Smith is a leading theorist on decolonization from New Zealand, whose work offers a counter-practice to Western research methodology. Her long-term commitment to sharing knowledge of indigenous tradition in academia provides an alternative platform for research and analysis. For researchers like myself of mixed backgrounds, Smith's work provides an encouragement to reclaim indigenous understanding of knowledge.

The white cloth, in the three choreographic cases outlined in this paper, represents a container or the idea of a place where memory is stored. The white cloth also represents the relationship between "the self" and "the other" of the Latin American immigrant and the dialogue between the old and the new. The dancer's interaction with the cloth, how the body surrenders into or resists against the cloth, mimics the tensions of migration, settlement and everyday experiences in the Diaspora. In other words, it represents the connection between who we were before migrating and the re-constructed self in the new settled home.

Cheryl Stock, a cross-disciplinary associate professor at Queensland University crystallized the migrant experience as: "whilst the body and movement are still central to the above understandings of choreography, notions of coordination, connectivity, and the management of complex interdisciplinary systems are equally significant in the creative process and the emergent definitions of what choreography (is)."[8] The white cloth, as a result, has evolved to represent the process of transformation in the diaspora. The white cloth explores preservation of culture and memories while also manifesting the umbilical connection to the past. Thus, the white cloth became a practical way to understand and

[7] Linda Tuhiwai Smith, *Decolonizing Methodologies: Research and Indigenous Peoples*, 2nd ed. (London ; New York : Zed Books, 2012) 12.
[8] Butterworth, Jo and Liesbeth Wildschut, eds. Contemporary Choreography: A Critical Reader. *(*New York, NY: Routledge, 2009)183.

visualize "the interplay of present and past in socio-cultural contexts."[9]

Exploring how the skin contains memory is a theme that has recurred in my choreographic work. Throughout these three choreographic pieces I have been working with the metaphor of the skin as a membrane; in that our skin acts as a wall that gives form and shape to our selves, a structure containing the parameters of our identity, our learnt behaviors, our lived experiences and, more deeply, a vessel that stores our memories of "home". In the past, I have used clay as a metaphor of 're-applying' my pre-colonial and post-colonial indigenous and African history, which has been lost. However, through the creation of the three choreographic case studies, my interest grew in the cradling of what is embodied by wrapping and cocooning the dancers. Furthermore, an interest to juxtapose the reclamation of history and memory by removing what is assimilated became more important in each piece, hence the motif of the removal of clothes and exposure of nudity.

Knowing that "each perceiver imaginatively grasps the symbolic abstraction that the artist puts forth,"[10] I have had to remain open to a wide range of audience interpretations of the cloth and the nudity. One of Beatty's closing remarks say, "Nature is our perfect model for integrity (not civilization)."[11] Nudity for me, was the most direct way of representing the exposed feelings of the migrant experience through the process of assimilation to North American Culture. Nudity was also a way to share with the audience the 'bare' or 'raw' feeling of cultural memories, the sensations that are felt at the surface of the skin. One of my dancers, Rehaja Tejpar eloquently described the sensation of dancing cultural memory as

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[9] Astrid Erll,Ansgar Nummimg, and Sarah B. Young. Ed. *Cultural Memory Studies: An International and Interdisciplinary Handbook, Media and Cultural Memory (*Berlin/New York: de Gruyter, 2008) 2.

[10] Lynne Anne Blom and L. Tarin Chaplin, *The Intimate Act of Choreography (*Pittsburg: University of Pittsburg, 1982) 125.

[11] Patricia Beatty, *Form Without Formula: A Concise Guide to the Choreographic Process* (Toronto: Dance Collection Danse Press/es,1994) 59.

a thread that connected her to her many places of origin and her family's ancestry. For Heryka Miranda, memory was also related to images. In her case, however, it was a collection of images, feelings and palpitations that she explained she didn't always know their origin, but always reconnected her to a sensation of home.

I found myself challenged by the decision of costuming my dancers both in *Memory Lane* and *ImShift.* The discomfort led me to explore the bareness of the dancer's skin. The removal of clothing became a motif that threads through all three choreographic case studies. This removal represents the exposure of our vulnerabilities and the removal of the shaming that is acquired or experienced during our assimilation process and the negotiation of our identity. I found that nudity in the three choreographic case studies was the most direct and honest way to express the vulnerability of dancing memories of 'home.'

Chapter 2:
The Explorations



ImShift. Dancer Victoria Mata, Photo By Alexandra Gelis

2.1 Autobiographical Solo: *Lejania (Distant)*

Lejania (Distant) explored the sensations of "home" in a state of constant movement inspired by lasting memories of Venezuela. This autobiographical solo performed memories of my childhood through a distillation of time juxtaposed by a chaotic score of traffic jams, adamant street vendors and over-exaggerated silhouettes of beautiful women in large flowy skirts. *Lejania (Distant)* introduced the 40 foot-long white cloth which is intigrated in all three choreographic case studies.

The long white cloth first appeared stretched across the stage diagonally creating a separation of space between what is in front of and behind the cloth, insituating a passage of sorts. Through the projections of slow-moving silhouettes and the wrapping in and out of the cloth, I intended to lead the audience through a journey of sensations that constantly float in my memory. Supported by the mish-mash soundtrack, I wanted the audience to journey through the sonic landscapes of my childhood, summoning the sounds of trees, food, warmth, chaos and heat.



Memory Lane. Dancer Isabel Estrada, Photo by Alexandra Gelis

The impetus for creating *Lejania (Distant)* was prompted by Professor Carol Anderson,[12] who assigned me the task of investigating my individual identity as Victoria the artist, outside the collective structure by which I had primarily been shaped artistically. For nearly a decade, my work as a choreographer has been established in the community arts and arts education sectors. I have established prominent relationships and partnerships with cross-disciplinary artists in the Greater Toronto Area curating festivals, delivering dance workshops, co-founding and directing two community-arts collectives and choreographing for political campaigns. Working with newcomers, youth, migrant workers, women and the alternative education community has provided a place for me to belong as a professional artist in Toronto. In the environment where I began my career as a choreographer, the personal and public were tightly woven, making the creative process elaborately entwined because of the collective nature of community arts. Consequently, my sense of self is highly collective and it is not a familiar process to create as an individual.

The summer preceding my second year of the MFA program, I spent two months in Venezuela traveling back and forth between Caracas, the capital, and a small town on the coast of Venezuela called Tapipa. The physical re-connection to 'home' profoundly informed many of my artistic and embodied expressions in the creation process. In the capital, I was an understudy with Los Vasallos de Venezuela, one of the country's most important contemporary-folklore dance and percussion companies. I studied under the mentorship of the company's choreographer Nahiti Ortega, who is a designer and the creator of the folklore skirts used in my choreographies. In Tapipa, I harvested cacao and was exposed to daily percussive sounds from the country's only all-woman Afro-Venezuelan percussion group, *Las Eleguas*. Tapipa is home to this folkloric percussion group. Many of

[12] Professor Carol Anderson is an Associate Professor of Modern/Contemporary Dance, Choreography, Dance Writing at York University.

the group members are ‘cacaoteras’ or cacao-farmers., The cacao-harvesting was often accompanied with singing and drumming. During one of the long and tedious harvesting days, the daughter of one of the cacaoteras began to sing a song called, “Venezuela.” Greiverly Jose Marcano Verde had learnt the song in school and performed it throughout the region. The lyrics take the listener on a journey through the plains, rivers, Amazon forest and Andes mountains. The combination of her voice, the lyrics and the intense humidity of dusk intensified the impact this song had on me.

Due to the current heightened political climate of Venezuela, I wanted to expose the audience to an alternative experience of the country outside of media images of riots that we have been bombarded with. Ms. Verde’s song, the beautiful long white skirt, the suspended white cloth and the oceanic rhythm that accompany the projections of water was my attempt to transcend the political and governmental chaos of the country and share with the audience the sensual, intimate, delicate and celebratory memories that the skin holds of ‘home’, of Venezuela.

2.2 Group Choreography: *Memory Lane*

Memory Lane is a series of nostalgic vignettes exploring the construction, deconstruction and re-construction of memory within the migrant body. Five Toronto-based Latin American dance artists performed at the Sandra Faire and Ivan Fecan Theater, dancing fragments of embodied nostalgia, trauma, pain, loss, community, gain, pride and transformation. The movement vocabulary draws from contemporary dance forms with an

"expressionist emphasis on shape, and evocations of Afro-Venezuelan folklore traditions both rhythmic and gestural."[13]

Through improvisation that was both physically and verbally informed, we localized where memory was retained in the body. By weaving the gestural expressions of the individual dancer we sketched a collective remembering of 'home'. During the creation process, the individual and collectively driven memories were staged using the imagery of surrender, suspension, fragmentation and rootedness.

The inspiration for *Memory Lane* emerged one afternoon after walking through a neighborhood in Caracas, Venezuela. My face was drenched in sweat. When I sat down to rest, I surrendered to all the senses around me. The air was thick, hot and still. The street noise was calm. Faint, far away sounds of broken radios, lazy traffic sounds and front-patio conversations filled the air. My head leaned heavy over an old wooden bench. I leaned back and closed my eyes, paused and inhaled. In that very moment, a memory was being formed, one that I would summon in the future. As I moved through my thoughts, these questions surfaced: Where was my body storing the memory? How would I access it in the future? What is the relationship between memories and nostalgia? How do shared memories contribute to the construction of community building and new settlements of home? These questions led me to investigate how performers who have migrated to Toronto perform their memories: How is dance used to connect with memories? Patricia Beatty in *Form Without Formula: A Concise Guide to The Choreographic Process* wrote, "a choreographer must

[13] Mika Lior, "*Interview with Maria Victoria Mata, Choreographer and Creator, Memory Lane." Conference Proposal: Symposium on Embodied Artful Practices*. Canadian Society for Dance Studies/la société canadienne d'études en danse. (Toronto, York University, 14 Jan. 2014).

find movement that is revealing of inner nature, of exact emotional states."[14] As I sat on the wooden bench, I documented the physical and emotional state that my body was basking in. The goal: to reproduce this state in the opening scene of *Memory Lane.*

The six dance artists casted for *Memory Lane* were carefully chosen because of our direct and intimate history. Together we have built community while challenging our sense of our Latin American identity in our new home, Toronto. We have firmly rooted in our new country while maintaining multiple linkages to our homeland and rigorously sewing together fragmented pieces of generational memory. Blom and Chaplin concur that casting friends and people we know can be "seedling for a dance"[15] because of their personal abilities, tendencies and idiosyncrancies. These women are not simply contracted dancers, they are an extension of me and an extension of my hyphenated Canadian identity. We have woven a connecting continuum between the past and the present that inspired the creation of *Memory Lane.*

The central questions for all three choreographic case studies were:

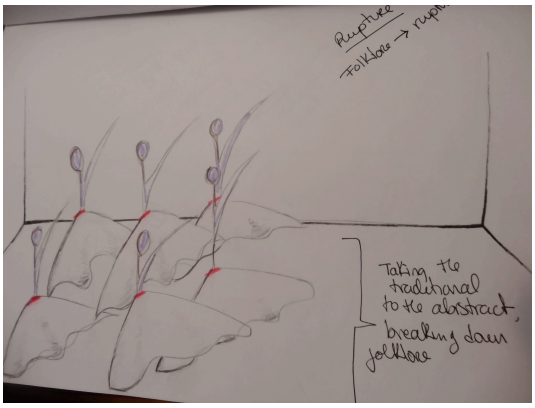
- Where do we as migrant bodies hold memories in our bodies?
- For migrant artists, performers and dancers, how are memories performed or transmitted through staged work?
- What are the gestural preferences or patterns that transmit these memories?
- How are memories re-created, erased and/or preserved in the body over time in a new settled 'home'?

I was not concerned with the linearity of the choreography, instead, I wanted to re-create vignettes of memories, both near and far. In my previous choreographic case study I aimed to simplify my ideas. In *Memory Lane* I aimed to stage all the ideas that circulated

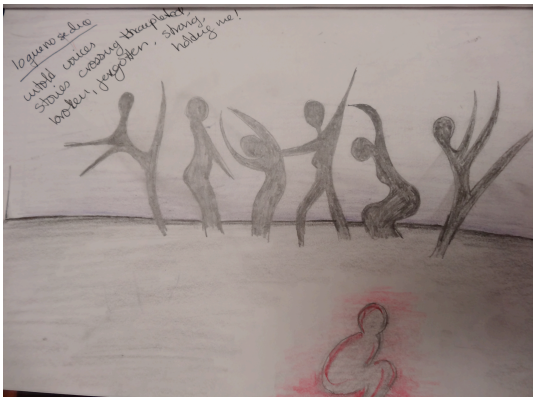
[14] Patricia Beatty, *Form Without Formula: A Concise Guide to the Choreographic Process* (Toronto: Dance Collection Danse Press/es,1994) 31.
[15] Lynne Anne Blom and L. Tarin Chaplin, *The Intimate Act of Choreography (*Pittsburg: University of Pittsburg, 1982) 186

my thoughts. I was advised regularly in the program to 'simplify' my ideas and to say more with less. However, I embraced the fragmented imagery that had been surfacing, and applied it as an aesthetic statement. The questions stated above were explored through five sequential vignettes that embrace the disjunctive effect of embodied memories of 'home.'

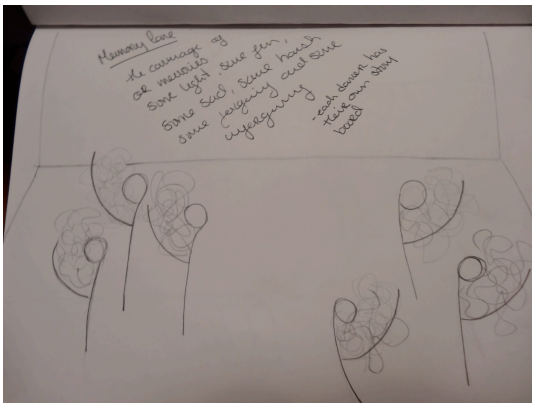
Sketches of Vignettes



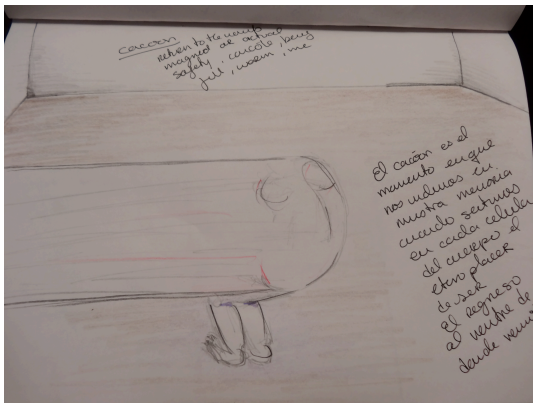
Scene 3: Folklore



Scene 2: Shadows



Scene 4: Memory Lane



Scene 5: Cocoons

2.3 Self Produced Show: *ImShift: Living In The In-between & the Ritual of Affirming Identity*

ImShift is as much my autobiography as it is a documentation of a shared history with some Latin Americans in Toronto. *ImShift* journeys through the experiences of border crossings and the processes of settlement from South to North America as lived by

immigrants and first generation Latin American-Canadians. *ImShift* is a culmination of nearly a decade of choreographic ideas framed in this essay/thesis within the academic context of Cultural / Latino / Border / Women's / Performance / Integrated Media studies. The artistic style of *ImShift* itself crosses many borders, creating a platform for diverse audiences to relate with the central themes.

ImShift is a visceral mixed media dance performance that integrates percussion, installation, projection, and theatre. We examine the 'shifting' identity of Latin Americans living in the Diaspora. Our "social identity and subjectivity are always precarious, unstable, contradictory and, in the process, the individual is always the site of conflicting forms of subjectivity."[16] This multi-disciplinary performance explored the boundaries and intersections of performance, migration, history, and border crossing in the Americas. Additionally, it explored the idea of my body as the home of my displaced identity. *ImShift* is a tribute to the multitudes that have generationally crossed borders through the Americas: To the many who have lost their lives in the attempt, to those who have rejoined loved ones; to the ones who are forgotten, to those we remember; to the ones who have risked everything, to those whom have gained it all. *ImShift* was performed from March 4-6 2014 at three locations across the Greater Toronto Area (GTA) and was presented by multi-disciplinary, multi-ethnic, and multi-talented Latin Americans from Oakland and Toronto.

ImShift has two sources of inspiration beyond my personal lived experiences as a Queer, Latina, and Canadian woman. The first inspiration is performance scholar and professor Diana Taylor's internationally renowned book *Archive and the Repertoire,* which explores the embodied memory and history of the Americas through various performances tactics. Taylor highlights how the two words, "*Mestizaje" and "Hybridity"* are used

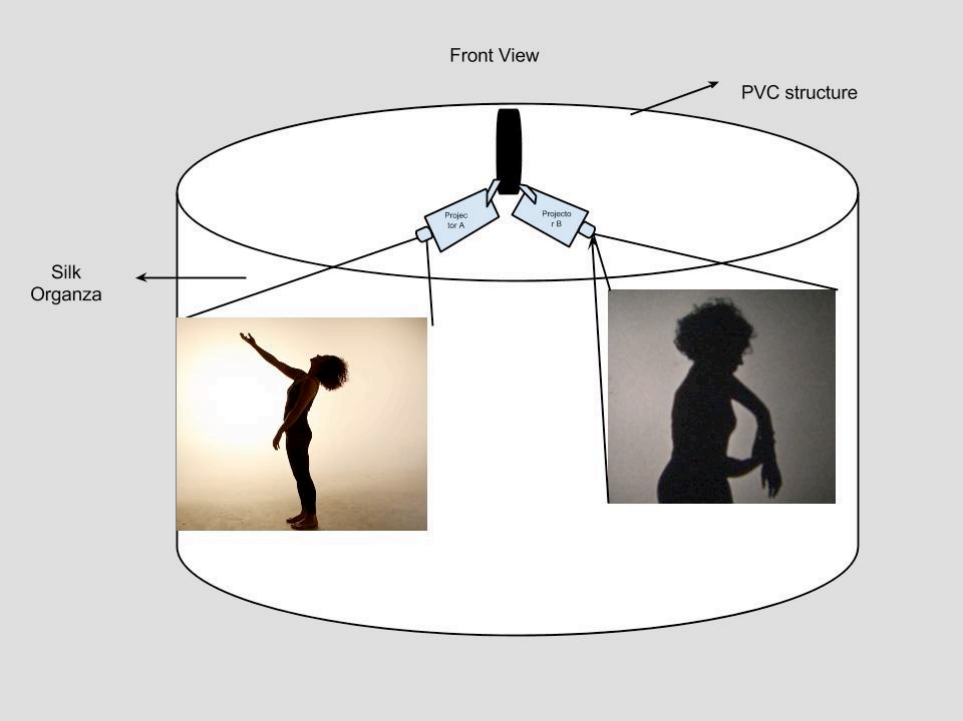
[16] Coco Fusco, *English Is Broken Here: Notes On Cultural Fusion in the Americas* (New York City: New Press, 1995) 33.

interchangeably to categorize and understand Latin Americans experiences with migration and assimilation. She furthers that Latin Americans are increasingly claiming an identity of the "in-between" rather than "hybrid" or "mixed". In this work she uses the word *"*Neplanta*"* to explore, describe and further understand the context that performing artists like myself permanently live in (97). The concept of "Neplanta" creates a tangible theoretical framework, which searches to reclaim an identity of the "in-between". It describes perfectly the space where I exist; being a Canadian-American-Venezuelan of hyper-mixed ethno-racial background, hyphenated identities are no longer enough.

The second inspiration: coffee-table conversations about Latin American history, cultural roots, memory and the construction of community with Alejandra Higuera, visual artist and co-creator of *ImShift*. This was a series of conversations born from the urgent need to vent about the challenges that Higuera and I faced in maintaining our artistic integrity within the academic environments we were both enrolled in. We discovered that our ritual of self-affirmation while growing up is a repeated action that re-affirms our self esteem and was a common practice in our attempt to overcome the systemic challenges we faced in our lives. "Rituals are ingrained in everyday activities" and some are evoked in everyday actions (like smiling and eating) while others are associated with "rites of passage" like birthdays, baptisms and other ceremonial activities.[17] For Higuera and me, affirming our ability to succeed as artists and as Latina-Diasporic women is part of our daily practice. More important than the affirmation of our individual ability to succeed was the ritualistic reminder that we are part of a movement of women that are "collectively and globally re-thinking and re-inventing new individual and collective identities and "transformational

[17] Victoria Singh and B.C. Western Front Vancouver, *Ritual in Contemporary Performance: A Document of the Contemporary Ritual Series, 05/02/02-11/20/03*. (Vancouver: Western Front Performance Art, 2005) 6

alliances." [18] Through the ritualistic practice of self-affirmation we challenged systemic barriers and created art that transcends borders.

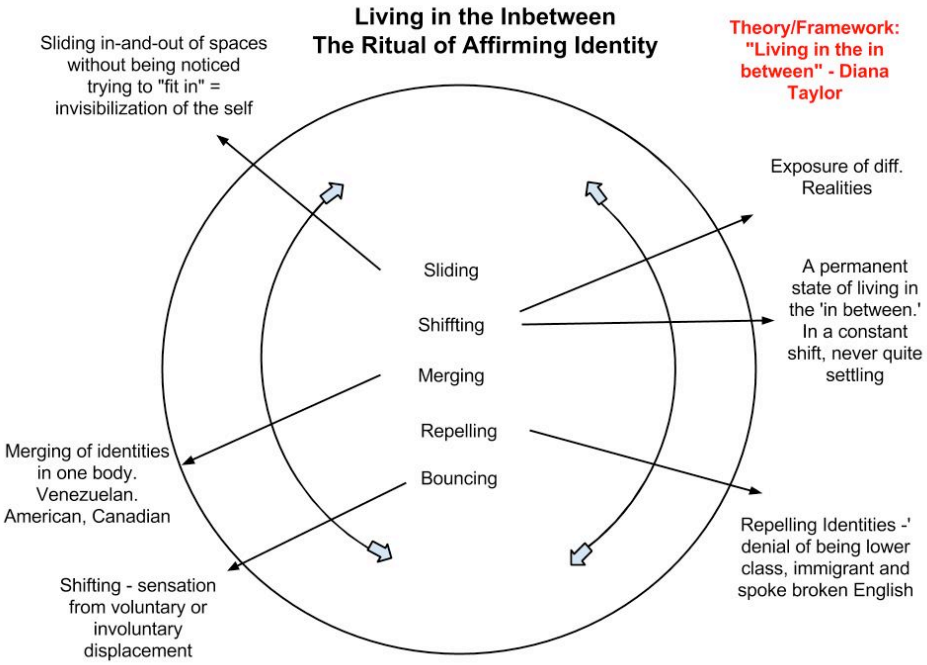


Originally *ImShift* was intended to be performed inside a suspended semi-transparent cloth screen where the audience stood or sat on the outside looking in. The vision was to install two rotating projectors that overlapped at opposite ends of the circle, creating shifting imagery while enhancing the sensation of constant motion and the sensation of displacement. However, after brainstorming our finances, we realized that this vision would not be feasible with the resources at our disposal. This vision, however, became a conceptual goal we continued to strive for. Out of this circular-never-still imagery I extracted the movement vocabulary for the running and the shifting of bodies.

Higuera and I share a history of growing up in Latin America, living in the United States, and finally settling in Canada. The constant mobility in our lives has positively

[18] Sigh 20

contributed to our ability to adapt and embrace variant concepts of "home." "Living in the in-between" as Taylor describes it, embraces the complexity of embodying identities and cultural traits from both South and North America, never quite identifying fully with either culture and always presenting aspects of both. Thus the symbolism of the circle- and associations of constant, sliding, rotation, and shifting became a focus for what we hoped the movement and imagery vocabulary would evoke. Five words encapsulated the experience of "living in the in-between" as Latin Americans in the Diaspora:



2.4 The Lens of Mixed Media and Identity

Identity is the essence of a person. It is both socially crafted and innately defined. In my experience of working with a broad diversity of choreographers, I have observed that identity is a by-product of accumulated lived experiences that define a choreographer's culturally constructed voice. As a choreographer I inherently carry my multi-faceted and multi-cultural upbringing, which brands my eclectic personality and complex identity.

Having grown up in Venezuela, the United States, France, and Canada, my voice and identity as a choreographer unveils unconventional and controversial perspectives on history and our day-to-day realities, as well as unique projections of my socio-political-intellectual-emotional and spiritual aspirations. The hybridity of being a choreographer, performance-installation artist, dancer, muralist, urban planner, and arts facilitator is imperative to my art form. These identities support, inform, and interlace the development of each of my choreographies. As a result, I stage dynamic tensions that are enhanced and supported by the integration of mixed media.

Chapter 3:
Process and Delivery



ImShift. Tech Crew: Joanna Duarte Laudon; Lights. Janet Romero, Stage Manager; Alejandra Higuera, Co-Creator and Projections; Jackeline Rago, Composer. Photo by Alexandra Gelis

3.1 Developing a Solo: Improvisations Exploring Four Elements

Unique to this creation process, I did not have a storyline or subject to begin choreographing with. I only had a task: to explore my individually driven creative process without the collaboration of other artists or outside eyes. I did not have a clear intention about my solo piece. Instead, I had an inner drive, which Blom and Chaplin explain is just as important as any other impetus for creating choreography.[19] In the beginning, I was daunted by the studio space. It felt too big and my movement exploration was lacking purpose. With time I settled into patterns, movement phrases, imagery, and themes, which finally grew into a sequence of actions augmented by sound, props, projection and supporting performers.

The creation process began with a series of improvisations exploring four elements:

1. Unveiling my creative voice as an artist separate from the collective creation,
2. A live recording of Greiverly Jose Marcano Verde's song about Venezuela's landscape,
3. Six Venezuelan folkloric dresses,
4. 50 feet of thin crude canvas.

Stepping into a studio to create a solo was absolutely terrifying. To overcome this pressure, I initiated every session by lying down on the ground, turning off the lights and listening to the live recording by Greiverly Jose Marcano Verde. From this state, I improvised movement wearing a large Venezuelan Folklore skirt, listened to Ms. Verde's

[19] Lynne Anne Blom and L. Tarin Chaplin, *The Intimate Act of Choreography (*Pittsburg: University of Pittsburg, 1982) 8

track. Sometimes I allowed the skirt to guide my movements without any sonic support as a means of exploring how my body would dance memory. Gómez-Peña and Sifuentes explain in *Exercises for a Rebel Artist,* that "ritualizing the use of objects and costumes in performance is an ancient practice which can be found in most forms of indigenous theater throughout the world."[20] Even though I did not grow up harvesting cacao, my body has embodied the cultural and ancestral memory of this practice. Accessing the continuous motions of cultivating cacao was enhanced with Ms. Verde's track, allowing my body to become a transmitter of distant memories of Venezuela.

Stephen Nachmanovitch in his book *Free Play: Improvisation in Life and Art* calls this state a "workmanlike attitude."[21] Nachmanovitch separates the subject (the choreographer) from the object (the work) as a way of making the work something other than her. Each day I chose three elements from the improvisation that resonated with me. The number three was arbitrary, but the task, a strict goal. Each day, I reviewed the actions I chose the day before and explored the movement with each one of the four the elements outlined above. Slowly, but surely, I began envisioning glimpses of the choreography.

Dance scholars and choreographers Berstein and Gómez-Peña discuss how interdisciplinary dialogues are integral to the tracing and discovery of sites in our bodies that are home to our cultural memories.[22] Berstein makes an important contribution to the field of performing memory by suggesting that cultural memory is rooted [in] conceptualizing memory as a writing of the body. Similarly, Gómez-Peña, works from a pedagogical

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[20] Guillermo Gomez-Peña and Roberto Sifuentes, *Exercises for Rebel Artists: Radical Performance Pedagogy* (London; New York: Routledge, 2011) 8.
[21] Stephen Nachmanovitch*, Free Play: Improvisation in Life and Art* (Los Angeles: New York: J.P. Tarcher, Inc., 1990) 10
[22] Carol Beirnstein, "Beyond the Archive: Cultural Memory in Dance and Theatre," *Journal of Research Practice* 3.2 (Bryn Mawr College. Bryn Mawr: PA, 2007) 2.

perspective, which recognizes our embodied knowledge as the sole writer of artistic creation, transcending boundaries of nation, gender, and racial identity.

My goal was to stage the spectrum of tender, faint and emotionally charged memories of growing up. The movement vocabulary was derived from real life events that happened in my childhood. Some memories seemed fictional because of their distance. In a review of Cinthya Hopkins' *Accidental Nostalgia,* Judy Bauerlein, explains that memories "crack open personal narratives that leak out of archetypal truths..."[23] Similarly, I became attached to the sequential imagery of the tensely stretched cloth, and repetitive ritualistic motions. Each one of these elements became pivotal in my attempt to enact the labyrinth of memories of Venezuela and dance that my soul still holds.

3.2 A Solo Duet

> *"I watched as your story came to life and how your relationship grew to the cloth. There was a sense that we needed to gain the trust of each other - you, me, and the cloth - in order for the stories and the memories to reveal themselves. The cloth represented spirit, ancestry, longing, belonging, and security. As I handled the cloth on the other end I felt overcome with emotion and a sense of power, like being held as I supported your movements."*
> Aemilius Ramirez (Performer, Lejania (Distant))[24]

Understanding the usually hyphenated Latin American Canadian identity means accepting an expression of multiple and distinct paradoxes. Recently, after reading Cherríe Moraga's *A Xicana Codex of Changing Consciousness: Writings, 2000–2010,* I adopted the rejection of using a hyphen in between identities when referencing a person's mixed origins. I have always felt uncomfortable hyphenating my name because it gave me the sensation of

[23] Bauerlein, Judy, *Cynthya Hopkins: Accidental Nostalgia.* Issue 27 (Theater Forum; June 2005) 3.Print.
[24] Aemilius Ramirez, "A Quote From You." Message to Victoria Mata. 25 Mar, 2014. Email.

being half of one thing and half another, erasing one's perception of the self as a whole. For Moraga, not hyphenating names is an act of solidarity with all the writers of colour that emerged from people of colour movements in the 1960's. For me, it has become a subtle form of resistance against generations of invisibility, oppression and genocide that I believe we, as Latin Americans, are responsible for acknowledging and respecting.

Dialogue about the use of hyphenation and the creation of alternative identity representations that reject its traditional use, deeply informs my solo piece. As a Canadian-born Venezuelan living in Toronto, I live in perpetual nostalgia for my 'home' in Venezuela. When I am in Venezuela, I miss the comforts of the north. Living in the diaspora has taught me to console my grief by relying on my body to nurture the 'other' me that is depleted. The line between two hyphenated names propelled me to investigate the use of a cloth as a metaphor of the hyphen.

The impetus for the creation of my solo performance was to find my individual creative voice. However, the mechanics of working with the cloth required a second individual to be a support. What seemed to be a simple task of stage assistance, transformed into a much deeper and meaningful duet as a result to the intimate and trusting relationship between dancer and support. It is with such deep meaning this relationship built, that making Ramirez's physical body on stage visible proved too overwhelming at this time. As a result I chose to only make myself visible on stage.

The twirling, wrapping and suspension of my body as I danced with the cloth established a dialogue between Ramirez and me. Tugging from behind the wings, Ramirez counterbalanced my weight, by pulling on the cloth and sustaining a steady tension, which allowed me to alternate from surrendering into and suspending away from the cloth. Ramirez came to represent a live umbilical connection to a place that seemed far away.

Lejania (Distant) transformed into a three-way dialogue between the 50 foot-long white cloth, Ramirez and me.

For Ramirez and myself, gaining the trust between the two of us was the second biggest challenge in this piece. Ramirez explains to me in a debriefing of the creation process that he had to stay focused on watching my movements intensely so that he could guide the cloth and dance with me. The eye contact between Ramirez and me was crucial to the depth of trust. Even when Ramirez was in the wings during the performance, I had to imagine looking at him in the eyes and maintaining the one-to-one connection. I was never dancing by myself in this solo.[25] The invisibility of the cloth's origin hidden in the wings became symbolic, both of the past from which I came and the future ahead of me creating a continuum between the past and the present.

3.3 Collective Memory: Fragmentation/Disjunction and Non-linearity

Fragmentation, disjunction and non-linearity are signature/recurring themes in my choreographic work. In reading some of the current scholars from the Latin American Diaspora, I discovered how settlement occurs in the constant shifting of identity construction and re-constructions. Like many of the writers in Anzaldua and Keating's compilation, *This bridge we call home,* I am part of a generation that is "split into a multiplicity of pieces marked by the many forms our identity takes."[26] In the past two years, while refining my

[25] Lighting designer Melissa Buckley, also became a pivotal fourth element in making memorable moments come to live on stage. Intimately illuminating the stage, Buckley utilized light and dark contrasts, enhancing a play with shadows, that intensified the muscularity and the contours of the body while juxtaposing the music beautifully.

[26] Gloria Anzaldúa and Cherrie Moraga, preface, *Foreword to the Second Edition. This Bridge Called My Back: Writings by Radical Women of Color. 2nd* ed. (New York: Kitchen Table,1983) 19.

artistry in the Master of Fine Arts in Dance Program at York University I have repeatedly exposed the audiences to sensations of 'shifting identities' and 'fragmented realities.' In all three choreographies, I worked with fragmented scenes and stayed away from linear storylines. Working with vignettes allowed me to experiment with quick changes of the emotional states from scenes. Lastly, the movement vocabulary that I explored altered from extreme slow-motion to fast rhythms with jagged and tense chaotic sequences. My choreographic intention was to highlight the disjunctive relationship of memory and its impact on the hyphenated fragmented identity.

Evely Alsultany is the author of a chapter in *This Bridge Called My Back* titled: "In Los Intersiticion: Recasting Moving Selves" where she writes about the strength of fractured identities and the urgency to embrace it. She argues that mixed raced people construct "fractured identities"[27] with complex identities that are not easily simplified or categorized linearly. Alsultany's chapter deeply moved me and echoed Diana Taylor's concept of the "living-in-the-in-between" identity of Latin Americans in the Diaspora. The constant shifting between notions of belonging creates an unsettled, yet diverse sense of being. Choreographing *Memory Lane* in five vignettes was the most direct way of staging my embodied fragmented identity and the dancers' multitude of origins and senses of 'home.'

A commonality amongst the dancers and myself was the collective experience of memories as disjointed and sparse. Some memories we discussed seem very far away almost on the verge of disappearing. Others felt quick and uplifting, heavy and traumatic, or faint and tender. The feeling of disjunction, however, became a motif that evolved into a larger challenge. Each one of the dancers experienced moments during creation where they felt challenged and emotionally stressed with feelings of disconnection. A challenging

[27] Anzaldúa and Moraga 107

choreographic moment was replacing one of the dancers the night before our tech run. This situation occurred because one of the dancers became increasingly restrictive in her movement while cocooning and wrapping herself with the white cloth. The white cloth became such a troubling reflection of her distress that we mutually agreed she withdraw from the project. This experience was an important reminder that as a choreographer, I have to be more than a director and better understand the needs of the dancers I am working with. When working creatively with memories, spiritual and instinctually driven creative processes are essential.

As choreographers we have to be quick problem solvers. The obstacle of finding a last minute dancer forced me to re-choreograph a section of the piece in under four hours. Because of the short time frame I had to work with the new dancer, I focused on creating movement that was gestural and focused on her attributes. Within minutes of exploration, I noticed the flow of her long hair and began finding a deeper symbolism for hair in the storyline. What resulted was a profound discovery of hair as an expression of where memories are stored.



Memory Lane. Dancer, Juanita Suarez Tellez. Photo by Michael Bisnauth

3.4 A Passage of Moving Stills

I settled on the idea of staging localized memory, which Taylor refers to as "archived memory", and embarked on the process of finding choreographic systems of transmission to stage a collective memory composed of individual journeys. I took the aesthetic qualities of my solo piece *Lejania (Distant)* and deepened the metaphors and movement of a slowed down memory. My goal in the opening scene of *Memory Lane* was to stage a hot afternoon in a town in Latin America, where time feels like it is paused and the heat makes the air feel thick like molasses.

The most challenging part about the scene was getting the dancers to move in a still slow motion. At first, slow motion translated on the dancers bodies as real time, even though they thought they were moving in slow motion. We learned quickly at the first private showing of the work in progress of *Memory Lane* at the Dovercourt house that the reason why dancer Joanna Duarte Laudon's movements were so believable, was because of the memory that she tapped into throughout the scene. The more simple and precise the dancer's movements, the more believable the scene became. Most importantly what made her action intriguing was her immediate transportation to the streets, smells, sounds and tastes of Havana, Cuba. During the talk back after the work in progress showing, choreographer and dancer Carlos Rivera asked the following questions: Where was each dancer situated? What was their surrounding like? What were the smells and sounds like? Were they alone or in a crowd? What was the sole action they had chosen? Why was that an important decision?



Memory Lane. Dancer, Isabel Estrada. Photo by Edison Duenas



Memory Lane. Dancer Rehana Tejpar and Joanna Duarte. Photo by David Hou

Rivera's questions propelled me to think about the perception of time differently. I began to understand how the utilization of time in my piece could be perceived as a fragmented continuum, recognizing the distortion of each dancer's world, the collective world and the time and space shared with the audience. Defining the environment and simplifying the actions of every dancer allowed for the opening scene to embody a story. For some of the dancers, the imagery of molasses slowed down their movement, for others giving counts for the path of movement offered a more comfortable structure. Each dancer surrendered to the task of moving in extreme slow motion differently, but all reached the common goal of staging a distant-far-stagnant memory.

3.5 Rupturing Tradition Through Folklore

The intense sensorial experience of life in Venezuela is poetically shocking. In one day, one can experience complete serenity and then moments later, be navigating through streaking cars, loud horns, suffocating pollution, yelling passengers and animated "comae's."[28] Memories of Venezuela manifest both in my daily actions as well as in my staged work. Performing cultural memory is a multidisciplinary and interdisciplinary field that Astrid Erll and Ansgar Nunning explain in *Cultural Memory Studies: An International and Interdisciplinary Handbook.* In the introductory chapter Erll states that the strongest and most striking studies in cultural memory performances are based on an interdisciplinary exchange. This explains my need for *Memory Lane,* to incorporate shadow work, the use of cloth, folkloric and contemporary costuming. While dance and choreography are central forms of execution, the skirts, cloth, shadows and lighting design are all intricately crucial to its staging *of Memory Lane.*

The second scene presented elements of classical traditional steps of the "Culo-e-puya" excerpts and contemporary dance. The "Culo-e-Puya" is one of the four main drum "toque" or beats that is played alongside the production of cacao in the region of Barlovento. The evolution of the "Culo-e-puya" and their songs in Venezuela are representative of Venezuela's culturally diverse population and complex colonial history. Additionally, the production of cacao in Barlovento represents a resilient history, which I share with pride living in the diaspora.

The skirts were designed by Venezuelan choreographer, dancer and mentor Nahiti Ortega. Ms. Ortega is the choreographer and costume designer of one of Venezuela's most

[28] "Comae" is a Latin American colloquial term to address a good friend. Usually, women on the streets or non-family related close friends will call each other "comae."

important Folkloric Dance and Music Ensembles called *Los Vasallos del Sol.* This 25-member group interprets diverse musical traditions that speak of local heritage in many different parts of the country, from the Afro-Venezuelan rhythms of the Caribbean coast to the Llanera Ballads of the inland plains.



Memory Lane. Dancers, Isabel Estrada, Joanna Duarte Laudon, Rehana Tejpar. Photo by David Hou

The use of traditional Venezuelan folkloric skirts anchored the scene into a particular cultural context. Most people would not be able to tell the difference between a folkloric skirt from Venezuela, Colombia or Mexico. In this instance, I embraced the western stereotypes of Latin American folklore, giving recognizable imagery to a Torontonian audience, but also creating an opportunity for me to play off the expected, and to later alternatively present unexpected contrasts. For example, the transition from the first two scenes, the dancers are almost still and then they suddenly break into a loud sequence with big movements projecting a lot of energy and providing an element of surprise. Another example is when dancer Rehana Tejpar suddenly enters stage right walking backwards after having just experienced a scene where many bodies portrayed an emotional urgency through shadows.

Since, in my choreography, it is through women's bodies that *Memory Lane* was presented, I showed glimpses of the plagued hypersexualization of the Latina Body in mainstream culture and the erasure of difference. A primary goal of this work was to approach stereotypes and break them down in unexpected ways. The "sexy Latina" phenomenon is something the dancers and myself have had to grapple with. At different times in our lives we have fiercely rejected this stereotype and at other times, we have done everything to become that public expectation. I found fascinating how quickly the dancers were ready to explore the contradictions between traditional and contemporary the movement in the choreography.

Some of the questions that I used to choreograph were: What makes performing cultural memory in a private setting different than a staged setting? What impact does the audience have on the ability of migrant bodies to perform what is expected versus what is desired? What is the difference between the private and public performance? Can we perform the stereotype as an enacted form of deconstruction?

The folkloric scene is filled with contrasting and unexpected movement vocabulary. It plays with the repetitive freezing of dancers' bodies while simultaneously having another dancer still moving. Playing with the idea that 'exotic' garments (of the Latina woman stereotype) can wholly represent a mosaic of cultures and identities in a mainstream aesthetic, this movement vocabulary alludes to the constant struggle of navigating through the constructed narratives of Latina Women. Alternating from fluid movements of the skirts to staccato footing of the traditional "Culo-e-puya" to frantic repetitive upper torso contractions created contrasting image with the homogeneity of their dresses. This offered a subtle disruption to dominant racialized binaries and visual representations of culture that

frame Latina Woman while still exposing the audience to one of Venezuela's most complex and historically important percussive traditions.

3.6 The Shadows of Our Lineage



Memory Lane. Still Shot Image by Victoria Mata, video by Ayelene Liberona

The third scene of *Memory Lane* represented the 'frontera' history: the history of border crossing that characterizes the Latin American diaspora community. This scene staged of the passages from the global south and the mobilization or displacement to the global north. Anzaldua bluntly refers to the border as *"*la herrida abierta (the open wound)"[29] Migration, mobility and displacement are woven through our lineage as Latin Americans. In *Borderlands/ La Frontera,* Anzaldua's personal testimonies of family and friends' border crossing realities have a collective significance for the Latin American diaspora community. The task for this scene was for each dancer to tap into her ancestral and historic lineage. The dancers' shadows represented the masses of people that cross the Mexico-USA border daily. Dancer Irma Villafuerte tapped into the memory of her grandmother who disappeared during the civil war in El Salvador. For Villafuerte, dancing is often a channel to remember her grandmother and her family's resilient history of war and survival. In the case of Isabel Estrada, she dedicated this scene to the thousands of people

[29] Gloria Anzaldúa*, Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza*. 3rd ed. (San Francisco: Aunt Lute, 2007) 9.

who put their lives in danger when crossing borders to reach North America. Because she is part of a small percentage of Guatemalans who migrated to Canada safely and by air, she felt it was an important moment to reflect on the bravery it takes to flee home. My goal for this scene was to construct a collective memory through the compilation of individual stories. I was also staging the concept of "counter-memory," which scholars Smith, Taylor and Fusco (to name a few) explain is the exposure and reclaiming hidden or unspoken stories of the past. This scene gave tribute to generational stories of resilience and resistance that the dancers carry in their lineage.

The dancers explored movement vocabulary that began with improvisational gestures that represented stories of individuals in their family. With some of the dancers I underwent a one-on-one directed movement exploration. In these explorations I asked questions about family members, sounds, tastes, colors, and sensations of 'home.' Through gestural responses, the dancers had to respond to my directions by moving either a voluntary or a directed body part. After many repetitions, the dancers began to identify the primary gestural vocabulary that they wanted to piece together in a movement phrase. Each dancer embodied a different story and collectively projected ghostly, deranged shapes. The dancers' shadows echoed centuries of border crossing that Latin American history is characterized by. The stories embodied in the shadows were both retellings of our ancestral stories as well as subliminal recounts of dreams and sensations. Tapping into the subliminal sensations, emotions and visions of unknown origins drove the creation of movement from a place of embodied memory. This was conveyed through isolated, gestural movement vocabulary that each dancer navigated as they glided across the stage weaving in and out of multi-dimensional projected silhouettes.

In the studio, we used a bright white construction lamp, which we used to cast shadows onto one of the walls of the studio. In the Sandra Faire and Ivan Fecan Theater, a white scrim was flown in and out at about half-way down. The scrim stretched across the entirety of stage. Upstage of the scrim, towards the back of the stage, five Fresnel lights were placed on the ground and angled slightly up to avoid blinding the audience. It was challenging for the dancers to run this scene without previous rehearsals.

We learnt that the closer the body was to the scrim, the smaller but more defined the silhouettes appeared. When the dancers got closer to the light source, which resulted in everyone being aware of where all the dancer's shadows were at all times. One of the most visually satisfying and magical accidents was the disappearing and reappearing of shadows as they floated across the stage. The scene of the shadows, although technically one of the most challenging and daunting scenes, manifested exactly how I had envisioned it in my initial drawings.

An important contribution to the success of staging the shadow scene, was meeting with William Mackwood, Professor and Lighting Director of 'Body of Minds.'[30] Anticipating the high technical needs for *Memory Lane*, I met with Professor Mackwood in the beginning stages of my creation process to understand the technical limitations and opportunities at the Sandra Faire and Ivan Fecan Theater. At this point, I had already generated a storyboard, which was very useful in communicating with Professor Mackwood the artistic vision. Generously, he facilitated the use of a scrim and a private session to explore the visual effects of the Fresnel lights and the cloth. I was paired up with Lighting Designer Kyle Morton who not only incorporated Mackwood's lighting suggestions was committed to staging my evolving needs and making sure my artistic vision was reached.

[30] 'Body of Mind' is the name York University used for the second showing of the graduate program at the Sandra Faire and Ivan Fecan Theater.

Like in my solo performance *Lejania (Distant),* the lighting design was a remarkable contribution for enhancing the contextual layers of the choreography and creating warm, sensual and inviting environments on stage.

3.7 Memory Lane

Parting from the notion that the body acts as a vessel that transmits the performance of memory, the movement vocabulary that we explored in the third scene was tapping into the emotional experience of nostalgia. In a workshop with choreographer Debbie Wilson, I explored different ways of carrying the white cloth that I used in my solo piece *Lejania (Distant)*. In my solo I developed a spectrum of movement vocabulary as I wrapped myself in the cloth and counterbalanced my weight with the resistance created by my performance partner, Ramirez. However, I never detached from the cloth, nor did the cloth disconnect from its place of origin offstage. In my exploration with Wilson, I discovered that the weighted sensation of carrying mounds of cloth between my arms and on top of my head allowed me to immediately tap into a deep, vulnerable emotional state. Similarly, the dancers had a visceral emotional reaction, every time they improvised while carrying the cloth on their head.

In my attempt to sculpt a thought-provoking visual landscape challenged by unexpected movement vocabulary, I discovered that walking backwards allowed each dancer to evoke the delicateness of surrender. By walking backwards, the dancer's back and scapula became pressing and important to the observer's eye. The fourth scene in *Memory Lane* required the most concentration on the breath and the connection to the floor. Walking backwards while holding piles of white cloth on their head was disorienting and both dancers had to work diligently at walking slow, connected to the ground and leading

with their backs. The dancer's connection to their breath, as Lynne Anne Blom and L. Tarin Chaplin explain, "has a strong sense of beginning, middle and end." [31]

Using partial nudity assisted the connection of deep breathing and staging the dancer's breath. My vision for incorporating the white cloth, both in this scene as well as in the closing scene of cocoons, was to expand on my solo piece and create physical and emotional extensions of the dancers on stage. The cloth began to take on a character of its own and at times it felt as if I was choreographing with another dancer. Every time the dancers stepped on stage, both in the studio and in the rehearsal, the manipulation and surrendering into the cloth enacted a different embodiment.

3.8 ImShift: Linguistic Cross-dressing

ImShift was the platform where dance, performance arts, and multi-media arts are perfectly woven onstage like "linguistic cross-dressing."[32] The Latin American diasporic condition, is firmly in a "*van y ven"*[33] state, where each of us is constantly negotiating notions of identity, culture, and community. Our continued engagement in dialogue about these notions indicate, according to Coco Fusco, that we are not ready to give them up.[34] In the compilation of cultural politics essays called *English is Broken Here,* Fusco brings forth some of the most forward thinking writers who are deciphering the current politics of mixed-raced Latin Americans living in the United States. Fusco, like Taylor bridge

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[31] Lynne Anne Blom and L. Tarin Chaplin, *The Intimate Act of Choreography (*Pittsburg: University of Pittsburg, 1982) 26

[32] Diana Taylor,*The Archive and the Repertoire: Performing Cultural Memory in the Americas* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2003)

[33] "van y ven" is a Venezuelan colquial phrase that referes to something shifting or constantly going back and forth

[34] Coco Fusco, *English Is Broken Here: Notes On Cultural Fusion in the Americas* (New York City: New Press, 1995) 21

ideologies of 'living-in-the-in-between' and border politics from all over the Americas through interdisciplinary *conversatorios,* gatherings, world-wide.

ImShift had many interdisciplinary scenes where at least three artistic forms are fused together. In one of the scenes, Alejandra Higuera, videographer and poet, is projecting a video collaboration with visual artist Sebastian Labaronne of images of travels through Central America. "We realized that the piece was about a journey... the journey that never ends.... of birth and re-birth and the many faces of that journey," stated Higuera, explaining the inspiration for the piece. As the video was projected onto the back screen, which stretched across the stage, Higuera and our stage manager Janet Romero read from a microphone off-stage the excerpts below. Simultaneously, I wrapped my self in a long white cloth off to one side of the stage. As I wrapped myself slowly, I witnessed the faces and the voyages of the video. As I rolled and unraveled on stage, composer, Jackeline Rago stepped on stage and played traditional Folkloric Venezuelan maracas while circulating clockwise around me as I folded the cloth at my feet.

<u>Spanish in Her Tongue (en dos lenguas) by Janet Romero</u>
I was the perfect immigrant child
at 9 years old the envy of every classmate
desired child of every immigrant parent
pronounced my y's as should be – you – yellow – yarn
understood the difference and knew when to use – make and do
and never ever engaged in unrelated dialogue while in class
i was a fraud the successfully adapted immigrant child is a fraud
busy trying to be too much of this (holding medal)
and not enough of "that" that was andrea maria jose and rosita
piel canela pelo negro ojos de almendra y ni una palabra de ingles en sus labios
just arrived from somewhere in the south afraid of cold words that had no meaning
traveled in a pack to shield each other from the north american wind and frozen glares.

<u>Intersecciones/Intersections by Alejandra Higuera</u>
I know I'm Colombian
Except I don't know all of my relations
I can not trace them
I can not reach them, yet
I know what I have to do

But the winds push me to other places first
Places where I'm going to find lessons that will have me ready to get there…….
To understand my mix
My roots are not just linked to the North of South America
They link me with Africa and Europe
Therefore I'm liked to most of the people in Latin America
Our bloods have met At different intersections
The more I intersect
The more I understand how alike we are
The more I close my eyes
And look inside I see …The reflection of all of us in me

ImShift is a collection of migrant stories told through the lens of six Latin American women. *ImShift* presented three autobiographical solos that told the specific migration and settlement stories of the dancers: Migrant *Memories, Echo, Lejania. Migrant Memories* is a memoir of Juana Irma Cisneros Ticas, a *desaparecida* (disappeared woman), from the Civil War in El Salvador. This solo re-lives the memory of Juana as her granddaughter passes through foreign lands repeatedly unveiling and grieving the loss and of her grandmother. ***Echo*** addressed the hypersexualization of Latin American women and the infinite reproduction of cultural stereotypes through a comedic and sensual play with ripe bananas. *Lejania (Distant)* explores the sensation of "home" while embodying settlement in constant movement.



ImShift. Dancer, Irma Villafuerte. Photo by Alexandra Gelis

3.9 Truth and Reconciliation

ImShift staged death and the celebration of the afterlife in more than one scene. How memory is passed on from generation to generation is unknown. Diana Taylor confirms that "trauma is experienced belatedly or continually embodied, whether it resides in the archive or only in the repertoire."[35] First in Villafuerte's solo and then with the musical textures, colors, and original soundtracks by Jackeline Rago, we evoked the culture of procession in Latin America. In particular her re-creation of "Travesia", a Venezuelan folk-song about crossing the extensive plains of Venezuela, evoked deep emotions and melancholy in remembering the bloodshed that run through the veins of Latin America. This scene aligns itself with the work of many other performances, which explore and embody the process of "Truth and Reconciliation" in Latin America and that were invited to perform at the Aluna Theater, *Panamerican Routes Festival*.

[35] Taylor 2



ImShift. Dancers, Victoria Mata and Amanda Paixao with Composer Jackeline Rago. Photo by Alexandra Gelis

Performing at the *Panamerican Routes Festival* was also a political act in and of itsself. Presenting at the festival meant being part of a movement of artists stitching a global reality that envisions a new Latin American condition free of victimizations and full of empowered and diverse visionaries like Diana Taylor, Violeta Luna, Ulises Fernández, and Diego Stocco, to name a few. Simultaneously, the festival gathered some of Toronto's most ground breaking Latin American and allied performers dedicated to staging memory and human rights. The festival gathered a "broad range of political practices in the Americas exercised on human bodies from pre-conquest human sacrifices, to Inquisitorial burnings at the stake, to the branding of slaves, to contemporary acts of state sponsored torture and disappearances.[36]" Sharing a stage with *Yuyachkani*, a collective theatre group from Peru physicalized the global family of Latin American performance artists invested in memory. The play they presented, *Antigona*, was about the truth and reconciliation process in the wake of Peru's bloody history of colonial and civil conflict.

[36] Brian Batchelor, "Yuyachkani, Antigona, and memory in Peru," aluna blog. Aluna Theater. Web. (6 Mar. 2014) February 18th, 2014
[36] Ibis



"*Antigona."* Photo by Elenize Dezgeniski



Diana Taylor. Screen shot image by Victoria Mata from Keynote Speech at Panamerican Routes Festival 18 Feb. 2014

Through the integration of mixed media, dramatic lighting design and an abstract artistic quality, *Yuyachkani'*s performance of echoed the political, personal and economic crisis that I aimed to stage in *ImShift***.** I utilize the stage to show urban audiences the multiple ways of being Latin American. One of the most memorable experiences of presenting at the festival feeling was being part of a group of performers and scholars that draw on agency, strength and resistance. Professor Diana Taylor of New York University and the Hemispheric Institute for Performance and Politics in the Americas delivered a keynote speech titled "Archive Things," in the same theater where we performed *ImShift*. Taylor was part of a series of talks and presentations about the current state of performance organized by Daniels Spectrum with the help of Native Earth Performing Arts, The University of Toronto, York University, Brock University, and Artscape.

Chapter 4:
Memory and Community



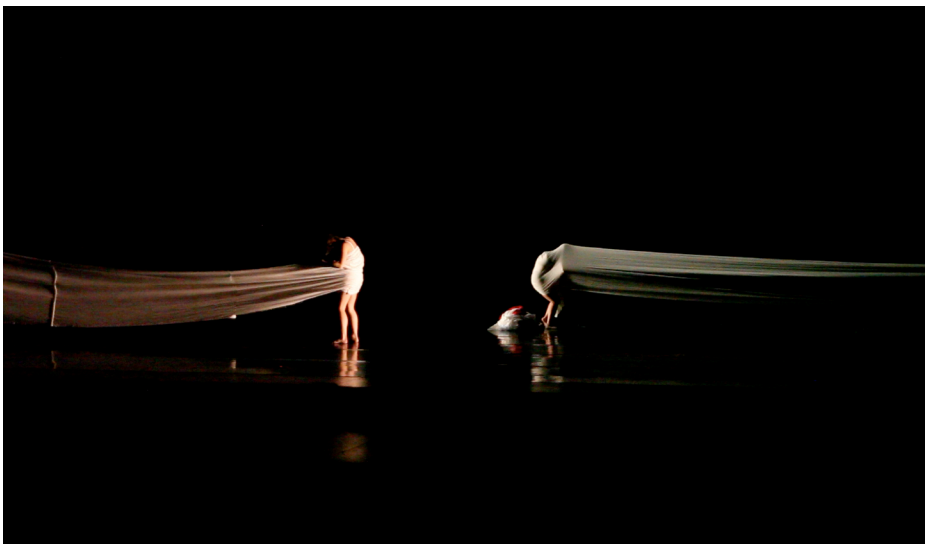
"I wouldn't speak
your awkward tongue
for years
refused your ugly syllables
and answered with my own.
Lingering in the lushess
of my tropical tones
I licked the edges
of understanding
the cruelty into your eyes.
I was forced to forget
the fruits of my childhood.
Transplanted and trained
like exotic tree
I adapted but never
flourished
without Brasilian soil,
Brasilian heat.
Like the flavors I've tasted
in so many dreams-
goibada and abacati-
the past surrounds me
soft as Portuguese,
with words of healing poetry"
-Luisa Mindlin, *Identity*[37]

Choreography is about taking risks. In creating my three choreographies, I was exposed to the power of imagination and perception of audiences in Toronto. Even though, in *Lejania (Distant)* I choreographed with culturally specific nuances. I learnt that the imagery of the shadows, the slow-motion and the tension-driven movement vocabulary were well received by the audience. Because my goal was to create an autobiographical piece, I made the decision to accommodate my artistic needs first and then the audience and leave the audience with sensations of something far away, almost intangible and nostalgic. For the few Venezuelans and some of the Latin Americans in the audience, the music and

[37] Juanita Ramos, *Compañeras: Latina Lesbians: An Anthology* (New York: Routledge, 1994) 35.

costuming I chose was as they expressed, a gift. I wanted the 'Latinos in the house' to feel reflected and identify with the cultural aesthetics.

Memory Lane concludes with an image of two cocoons symbolizing the wrapping of memoirs and generations of silenced stories that are lost in translation in the crossing of borders. I wanted the audience to be left with pulsating womb-like imagery that could invite them to feel the serenity of surrendering. Dancing in the form of 'cocoons' embraced surrendering into counter-memory and the cradling of the diasporic identity.



Memory Lane. Dancers Isabel Estrada and Irma Villafuerte. Screen Shot image taken from video recording by Ayelene Liberoa

Constructing the closing scene of the cocoons was no exception to the need for precision. Like in my solo work *Lejania (Distant),* a second body was required to pull the cloth from behind the stage in order to create the tension needed to dance with the cloth. Both Irma and Isabel developed a dialogue with their supporting dancer with whom they negotiated the use of cloth, their relationship to space and the physicality of the movement shaped stills. In order for the cloth to remain taught and the dancers to present an appearance of comfort, the two dancers had to be completely focused on one another during

the scene. Because *Memory Lane* was choreographed with the intention of staging imagery-lead vignettes, the precision of the movements and the composition of the still images were crucial. The dancers had to train their bodies to lead their movement with their ribcage, while keeping a strong connection to the ground with their feet, which had to remain expressive, light and ready to twirl in and out of the cloth. Choreographing cloth work with Irma and Isabel was a challenging and lengthy process; one that needed at least two more months of added exploration for the dancers to fully understand their own weight in relationship to the cloth and the supporting dancer. Directing the dancers to 'give into' the cloth was more challenging than I had anticipated. I invited the dancers to "surrender into the cloth" and "suspend into space" hoping to inspire more fluidity and smoother transitions. I discovered the importance of using my hands to touch the dancer's torso to localize the area they needed to lean into the cloth with. Negotiating weight, tension, contraction, length, subtlety, suspension and resistance were explored to create two short phrases which were later interwoven with the oceanic sound spaces of the music track, resulting in the evocative imagery of umbilical beings returning to a serene place of home.

4.1 A Full Circle - Back to Community

In the community arts setting in which I have worked for nearly a decade, the personal and the public are woven into one entity. The stage, for me, becomes a place to share my stories, which are at the same time stories of the Latin American community. This community has supported my work unconditionally and created "a process that simultaneously builds individual mastery and collective cultural capacity."[38]

[38] Don Adams and Arlene Goldbard, *Creative Community: The Art of Cultural Development* (New York, NY: Rockefeller Foundation, Creativity & Culture Division, 2001) 20.



ImShift. Dancers, Victoria Mata, Irma Villafuerte and Amanda Paixao. Photo by Merlina, *Rock Sin Banderas*

The integration of the community (or public space) and the personal offers the potential for re-imagining realities and transforming possibilities that positively impact people's lives. In her book *New Creative Community: The Art of Cultural Development*, Arlene Goldbard brings to light the many initiatives worldwide where community, art making, and social change co-exist, intricately co-creating positive impacts on the lives of both the community and the artist. She refers to this as "community cultural development". She explains that "as the phenomenon of globalization accelerates, trailing protest in its wake, community cultural development practice has become more and more widely respected by activists and their supporters as a powerful means of awakening and mobilizing resistance to imposed cultural values."[39]

As a choreographer, many questions arise through understanding community participation and how to integrate this practice: How can the tightly woven relationship of private and public space(s) be transferred onto a 'mainstream' stage? How can the

[39] Don Adams and Arlene Goldbard, *Creative Community: The Art of Cultural Development* (New York, NY: Rockefeller Foundation, Creativity & Culture Division, 2001) 20.

integration of non-academic community and their experience be transferred to institution like York University? *ImShift* was a reminded that the voices of these communities belong anywhere and everywhere; that as a choreographer I need to trust my artistic integrity and follow my visions. Producing and performing three nights of *ImShift* taught me, yet again, the power of community and an audience's trust.

*ImShift***,** is a fast-paced, visceral experience that is aimed to incite emotion and the representation of Latin Americans in Toronto. The writing of Angelica Ne, a Toronto-based Brazilian percussionist, the morning after witnessing ImShift at the Panamerican Routes Festival, best exemplifies this in a poem. In her poem, she addresses the impact of being represented on a contemporary stage by other artists and the sensation of transformation that she felt. She compares the feeling of watching the show as to the moment right before it is going to rain, a moment of transformation. She had never experienced her migration story represented on stage and witnessing *ImShift* impacted her in unexpected ways.

> *"O dia acordou abafado com a neve ainda caindo. As bicicletas, encobertas e despertas, estacionadas.*
> *O ar, relutente e o sorriso alheio levando tempo pra vir. O som, espaçado, aguardando o floco deitar no chão e desmanchar. Morrer e aguardar o branco estabelecer a textura que deseja. Ontem, a Noite informou o mundo sobre Mudanças.*
> *Depois das Cinzas, sobra só o pó.*
> *O mundo anda abafando, mas logo se cansa."*
> -Angelica Ne[40]

Peeling the map from the ground and wrapping the white lines around our bodies echoed the suggestion that not even the shifting of borders would allow Latin Americans to relinquish them all together.[41] Borders define 'us' as a migrant population settled in North America. Whether by marriage, exile, voluntary migration or displacement, borders keep us

[40] Angelica Ne. Facebook. 5 Mar. 2014 <https://www.facebook.com/amanda.paixao.9678?fref=ts>
[41] Coco Fusco, *English Is Broken Here: Notes On Cultural Fusion in the Americas* (New York City: New Press, 1995) 27

simultaneously connected and separated from 'home.' As much as I fundamentally, philosophically and politically do not believe in borders, I am arbitrarily controlled by them every day. The complexity of border crossing, and the conflicts they constantly evoke, are wrapped up in our collective memory as Latin Americans living in the North.

The obsession with borders, whether the rejection or the implementation of them, is an historic conflict that is rooted in the colonial history of Latin America. Arbitrary lines divide families, displace communities, and portray genocidal operations throughout the Americas. Acknowledging the violence and complexity of borders as they detain, shape, and impact the reality of Latin Americans who live in the borderlands is a collective responsibility. Although I agree with Sandoval-Sanchez's concept that home, desire, [and] memory are imaginary borders which only exist in our mind,[42] I find it vital to acknowledge how for some, their lives are defined by "La Frontera."

> *"Memory happens in the present, but recalls, incorporates and appropriates the past. Cultural memory is performative. It involves transmission of culture through bodily practices."*[43]
> *- Rick Knowles*

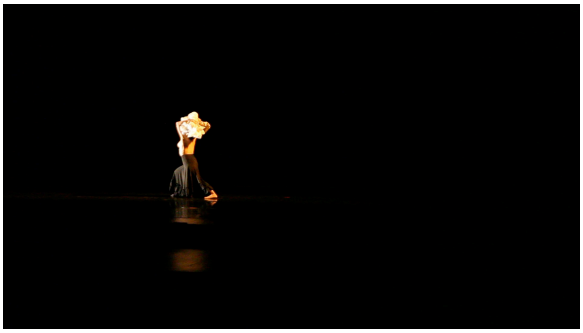
Issues of embodiment, cultural memory, diaspora and transnationalism have gained international attention in academia and leading researchers are shaping, challenging and redefining contexts of cultural and performance studies. It is exciting to be linked to a global community of researchers and performers inquiring into the complexities of how the body stores and performs memory. I have concluded that my default for involving history in my work has less to do with maintaining artistic integrity and more to do with a post-

[42] Alberto Sandoval-Sánchez and Nancy Saporta Sternbach, *Puro Teatro: A Latina Anthology* (Arizona: University of Arizona Press, 2000) 319.[42]
[43]Rick Knowles. "Performing Intercultural Memory in the Diasporic Present: The Case of Toronto." In *Performance, Embodiment and Cultural Memory.* Edited by Colin Counsell and Roberta Mock (New Castle, UK. Cambridge Scholars Publishing) 2009.

colonial cultural identity that acts as an umbilical cord to the inherent historical memory of Latin America.

Investigating how "performance transmits memories, makes political claims and manifests a group's sense of identity,"[44] has been central to the creation of the three choreographic proposals presented in this paper. The style of performance I chose to research is a Venezuelan-Folklore-informed contemporary dance. My work requires articulation of the feet and hands by maintaining a steady tension of these extremities. The imagery I worked with isolated different parts of the body. For example in *Lejania (Distant),* walking behind the cloth exposed the feet, demanding a focused intension of their performance. In *Memory Lane,* the manipulation of the cloth both with the dancers walking backwards and the dancers who were cocooning had to be very expressive of their hands and feet because their legs or torsos were covered. In *ImShift,* walking on the outline of the America's border, required the movement to be led by the fingers and the toes. I also investigated tension by exaggerating the contractions of the back and the chest throughout the three choreographies. The articulation, isolation and synchronized sequences between these body parts allow for "gestures and habits, in skills passed down by unspoken traditions, in the body's inherent self-knowledge, in unstudied reflexes and ingrained memories."[45] My lived experiences growing up in the "in-between" of Venezuela, the United States and Canada have manifested in my feet and my chest.

[44] Diana Taylor,*The Archive and the Repertoire: Performing Cultural Memory in the Americas* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2003) 96
[45] Taylor 22




Memory Lane. Dancer, Rehana Tejpar. Photo by Ayelena Liberona
ImShift. Dancers, Irma Villafuerte, Victoria Mata and Amanda Paixao. Photo by Alexandra Gelis

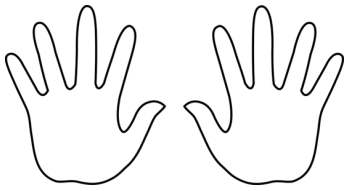
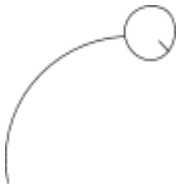
In Colin Caunsell's introduction to the scholarly compilation of *Performance, Embodiment and Cultural Memory,* he discusses the in-between's that Toronto migrant communities are constantly negotiating.[46] The transient nature of migrant bodies contextualized the importance that I place on certain aesthetic choices such as the bare feet of the dancers. The development and creation of my three choreographic works affirmed Taylor's theory that gestures, movement, dance, songs and other art disciplines are transmitters that offer alternative perspectives to understanding historical processes. In the case of Joanna Duarte, one of the dancers of *Memory Lane,* she explained in a rehearsal the dichotomy of gestures that surfaced for her when dancing memory. In her sequence of actions, she used chest-collapsing movement that contrasted with the hip and shoulder-led, festive and big Afro-Cuban movements. Ms. Duarte had never danced memory before and she frequently spoke of the juiciness she felt when dancing memory.

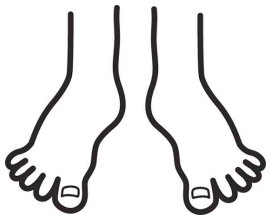
Memory Lane, in particular, revealed a coding of movement that seems to be the beginning of a much bigger project. For the purpose of this extended essay I have identified the general gestural expressions that become transmitters for accessing memory. The grouping of gestural expressions that surfaced through the creation process of

[46] Taylor 9

choreographing the three pieces was both fascinating and informative. There is a commonality between one's hands, feet and the senses when working with accessing the storage of memory in the body. I began a chart to track the dancers' general locators of memory. Over the course of four months and twelve artistic collaborators this is where dancing cultural memory is localized in the dancers' body:

4.2 Locating Memory

Image of gesture	Name of body part	Themes
	Hands	Earth, Ancestry, History, Feeling connected to the stories of the land, Labour, Bloodshed
	Concaved Chest	Pain, Loss, Shame, Not Knowing enough about history, War, Nostalgia
	Curved out Chest	Pride, Joy, Dance, "Latinidad," Family, Drums, Celebration, Music



Feet — Ancestral history, Strong, Pride, Knowing our roots, Earth, Dirt, Miles of walking, Blood, Slavery, Belonging



Nose/Nostril — Food, Coffee, Cacao, Street vendors, Pollution, Grandmother's scent, A lover, Mi amor, The Airport, My home, You, Me, Not here, Sweet



Hair — Extended History, The hidden Stories, Indigenous Pride, Self Love, Slavery, Goddesses, Latina, Freedom, Me, Rivers, Oceans, Trails traveled

Movement awakens the senses of not just the dancer, but also the audience; this exchange creates opportunities for stories to be told, transformation to occur, and empowerment to be felt. A common theme in my creative processes is dissecting the complexity of colonialism and its unseen imprints on our day-to-day lives. My goal is to move away from the victimization of the immigrant or the migrant experience as I refer to it

in this paper. My intention is to attempt to communicate the agency of immigrants, which is often neglected while acknowledging that this population is one that is marginalized and face ongoing oppression.

In the Latin American community in Toronto, as in to many populations in this city, there is the reality that people live on the margins of category. Community becomes a backbone to our integrity and as Coco states, "We have been making art about this process: about the process of healing, articulating, subverting, reinventing this relationship with the cultural other."[47] The constant deconstruction and reconstruction of identity has been an anchoring reference point for the creation of the three choreographic case studies presented in this extended essay. For artists of the Diaspora, like myself, we are in a constant search to decipher and make sense of belonging.

The art of choreography becomes an intricate journey where public and private are all at once, the vehicle, the route and the destination. When the support of our origins and community are not present, we must redefine and reconstruct our understanding of community and sense of belonging. After all, change and evolution are a constant for every person; artist and scholar alike. As choreographers of the Diaspora "identity and intercultural dance is a site of ongoing transformation through construction, deconstruction and reconstruction, both conscious and unconscious."[48]

In this paper I presented how as Latin American performers, our memories are tightly woven into everyday actions. I identified where memory is localized on the body, through the lens of a group of dancers who have all experienced migration. By embodying nostalgia and sensations of 'home' I choreographed three pieces that staged the experience

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[47] Coco Fusco, *English Is Broken Here: Notes On Cultural Fusion in the Americas* (New York City: New Press, 1995) 148

[48] Jo Butterworth and Liesbeth Wildschut, eds. *Contemporary Choreography: A Critical Reader (*New York, NY: Routledge, 2009)

of crossing borders, fragmented identities, generational trauma, and the stereotypes we bear in the membrane of our skin. Although I state throughout this paper that we are a community characterized by the shifting state of 'living-in-the-in-between,' I conclude that we are not restricted to this experience. Instead, 'living-in-the-in-between,' is the place where we start creating from, thus contextualizing an aesthetic of Latin American Art in Toronto that is visceral, evolving and not yet fully rooted.

Deslenguadas. Somoslos del español deficiente.
We are your linguistic nightmare, your linguistic aberration,your linguistic mestizaje, the subject of your burla.
Because we speak with tongues of fire we are culturally crucified.
Racially, culturally and linguistically somos huérfanos
we speak an orphan tongue.
– Gloria Anzaldúa[49]



ImShift. Dancers, Victoria Mata, Irma Villafuerte and Amanda Paixao. Photo by Alexandra Gelis

[49] Gloria Anzaldúa, *Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza*. 3rd ed. (San Francisco: Aunt Lute, 2007) 80

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Appendix A: [Cacao harvesting Photographs by Victoria Mata]









Images (Clock-wise from top to bottom)

1. The cacao fruit raw in shell, cracked open.
2. The cacao fruit pre-picking
3. *Tigre*, cacao farmer from Tapipa, Venezuela. Drying the cacao after fermentation.
4. *Carlixta Palacios,* Percussionist and singer from the all-women's Afro-Venezulean group *Las Elegguas*.

Appendix B: [Rehearsing 'Culo-e-Puya' in Caracas, Venezuela with Nahiti Ortega]









Images (Clock-wise from top to bottom)

1. Choreographer and mentor of *Los Vasallos de Venezuela,* Nahiti Ortega. Designer of Skirts for Three choreographic case studies presented in this paper.
2. Dancer, Misset Parata and Laura Lasala rehearsing "Culo-e-Puya" with Nahiti Ortega (Caracas, Venezuela).
3. Dancer, Victoria Mata and Laura Lasala rehearsing "Culo-e-Puya" with Nahiti Ortega (Caracas, Venezuela).
4. *Los Vasallos de Venezuela* open company rehearsal and community class.

Appendix C: [*Memory Lane:* Program notes and inspiration]

Memory Lane

Choreographer: Maria Victoria Mata

Interpreters: Irma Villafuerte, Heryka Miranda, Rehana Tejpar, Joanna Duarte-Laudon, Isabel Estrada

Costume Designer: Nahiti Ortega, Disenos en Movimiento (Venezuela)

Music: Compilation edited by: Victoria Mata, Excerpts by: Tierra; Tan Solo Tierra-Marta Gomez (2012); La llegada -Humberto Alvarez (2012); and Lejania- Jackeline Rago (2013)

MFA Supervisor: Professor Holly Small

Mentors and Outside Eyes: Carlos Rivera, Ayelen Liberona, Jose Carret, Mercedes Bernardez, Debbie Wilson, Narmee Gricel Severino, Carlixta Palacios, Misset Parata, Las Aleguas, Los Vasayos de Venezuela & Jackeline Rago.

Production Assistance & Baby Care: Nico Contreras, Joce Tremblay, Kiera Shaw and Rosina Kazi

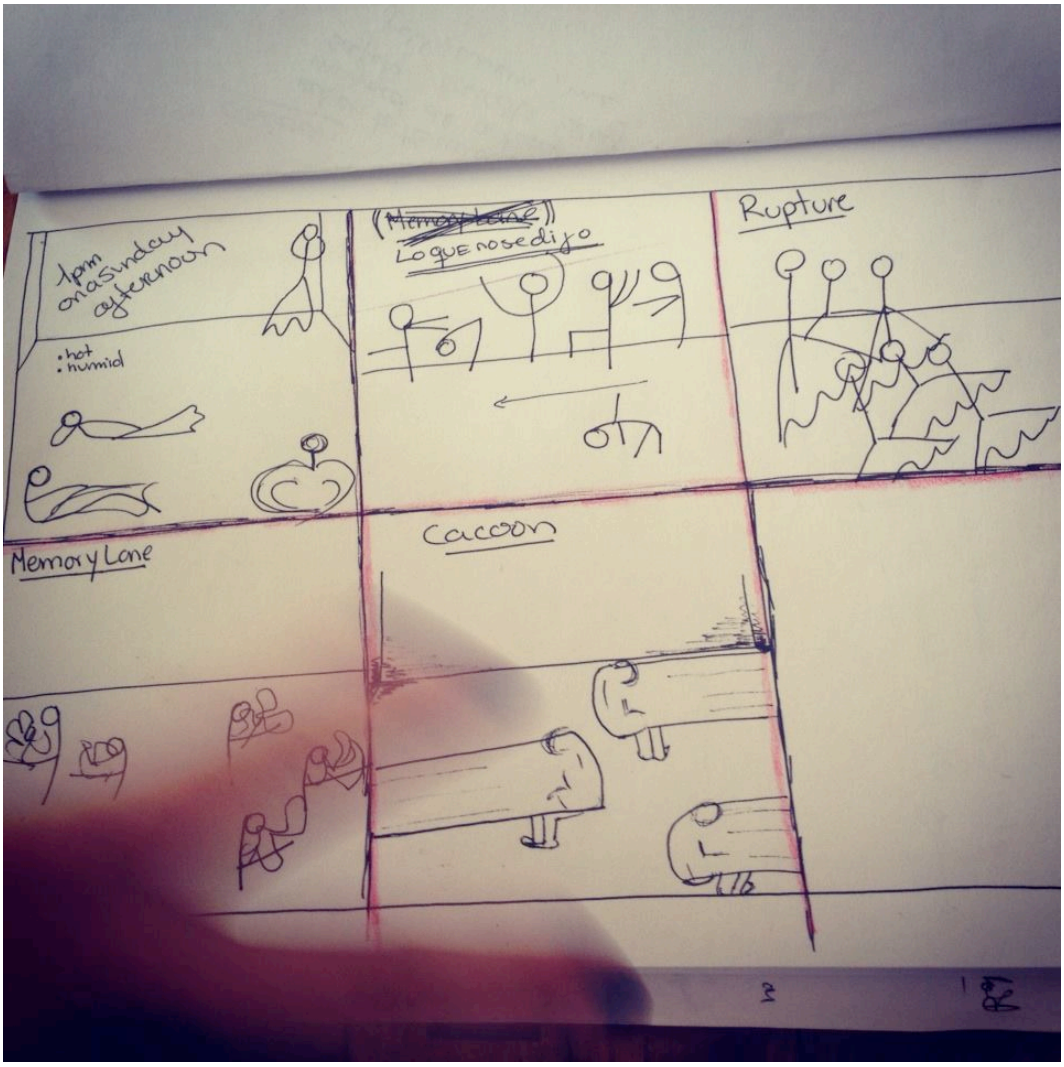
Memory Lane is a series of nostalgic vignettes exploring the construction and reconstruction of memory through the migrant body. Five Toronto-based Latin American performers undergo an intimate collective voyage of cultural memories that are archived, negotiated and re-created in the vessels of our skin.

The inspiration: a hot summer day in Latin America, 2pm. How does the body retain memory and comforts nostalgia? How does collective memory sustain identity? In fusing verbal and movement based exploration with sensorial exercises localized where the dancers retained memory. I used imagery of "surrender," "suspend," "fragment" and "rootedness."



Inspiration for first vignette of *Memory Lane:* Victoria Mata and Jackeline Rago in Petare, Caracas-Venezuela. Photo by Misset Parata.

Appendix D: [*Memory Lane:* Storyboard of vignettes]



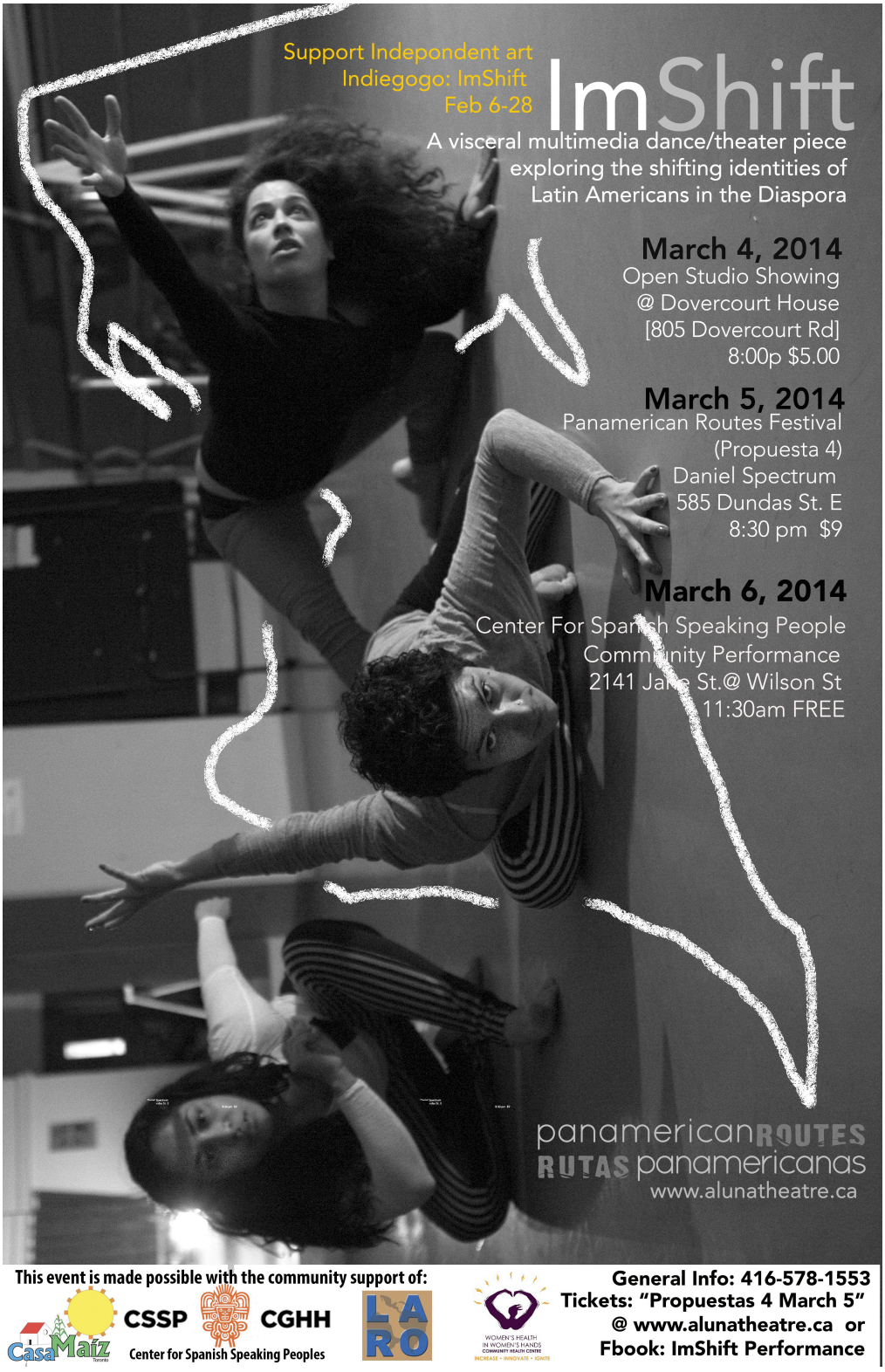
Appendix E: ["Memory Lane" write up by Alex Duarte Laudon]

Memory Lane

Here lie my thoughts upon the Memory Lane dance performance. Let it be known that a brief introduction was provided to the audience authored by the choreographer so that these ideas are at least not without some guidance.
The piece commences with the dancers on stage in various positions in various corners of the stage. The lighting I believe is set to invoke a sunrise and morning feel. This portion of the dance represents the period in the dancers' lives in their respective homelands. Everything is familiar to them and their movements are smooth and peaceful. The early morning lighting perhaps represents the "early" portion of the dancers' lives. The dancers' skirts are white and folkloric in design and I believe they are the embodiment of the dancers' Latin American roots, which at this point envelops them constantly like clothing.
The white color will continue to symbolize their roots throughout the piece, perhaps with different intentions at different points throughout the piece. In the beginning the white perhaps is harkening to a time of innocence that is their Latino American childhoods. Later in the play when their past is overwhelming them like a large bundle obscuring their face, the white color is a harrowing color evoking the ghastly and specter-like imaging of their lost heritage. In the final scene the white linens enveloping the dancers is unclear but perhaps a cocoon image was trying to be evoked.
I don't recall a lot of the beginning portions of the dance routine at this moment, but I do remember the stark contrast when the stage got very dark and a back screen descended upon the stage. The music became very dark and atonal and the tone of the presentation became nightmarish and full of the terror. This scene I believe represented the actual turmoil and stress occurring at the point of departure in migration. The dance is expressing the physical severing of the artist from their homeland and the trauma it is causing to the dancers. The main dancer undresses herself further demonstrating the loss of their homeland that was unconsciously tied to their own identities as symbolized by the white skirts. The other dancers are behind the white screen casting ghastly silhouettes that at times appear otherworldly and malformed. They are their immediate fears, anxieties and sense of loss made present on stage, contorting the human body. The solo dancer is on the right side of the stage alone seated on her knees slowly, slowly uncovering her torso in her dance. Her stark nudity is portraying how vulnerable and totally exposing the migration process can be for migrants, and especially for women.

Alex Duarte Laudon
March 28, 2014
Toronto

Appendix F: [*Imshift:* Program (Dovercourt House) + Poster]



ImShift - The Ritual of Affirming Identity

A York University MFA in Choreography and Dance Dramaturgy Production

A visceral dance performance that integrates percussion, installation, projections and theater. We examine the 'shifting' identity of Latin Americans living in the diaspora and the constant re-defining of our relationship to 'home' and settlement. Through the ritualistic practice of self-affirmation, one can challenge systemic barriers and create art that transcends borders. This multi-disciplinary performance incites the boundaries and intersections of performance with migration, history and border crossing in the Americas.

ImShift is a tribute to the multitudes that have crossed borders through the Americas. To the many that have lost their lives in the attempt, to the ones who have rejoined loved ones, to the ones who are forgotten, to the ones we remember, to those whom have risked everything, to those whom have gained it all

"Our bodies are home to our displaced identity" Victoria Mata

Artistic Director/Choreographer:
Victoria Mata (Venezuela-USA-Canada),
Artistic Director/Visual Artist:
Alejandra Higuera (Colombia-USA-Canada),
Dancers & Creative Collaborators:
Irma Villafuerte, (El Salvador-Canada)
Amanda Paixão (Brazil-Canada)
Victoria Mata (Venezuela-USA-Canada)
Music Composition:
Jackeline Rago (Venezuela-USA)
with excerpts from **LayLowProductions** (Canada-Colombia)
Stage Manager: **Janet Romero** (Chile-Canada)
Assistant Production & Lights
Joanna Duarte Laudon (Cuba-Polonia-Canada)
Community Liaison:
Allyson Trunzer
(Antigua-Barbados-Germany-Canada)
Supervisors Professor Holly Small and Professor Darcey Callison, York University

About our solos, videos & music

Migrant Memories is a memoir of Juana Irma Cisneros Ticas, a desaparecida (disappeared woman from the Civil War in El Salvador). This solo re-lives the memory of Juana as her granddaughter passes through foreign lands repeatedly unveiling the loss and grievance of her grandmother,
Created and danced by Irma Villafuerte
Poetry by Ana Cisneros and Irma Villafuerte, Haiku intro by Esteban Aguilar Projection Created by Alejandra Higuera
Voice by Gricel Severino and Irma Villafuerte

Echo by *Amanda Paixão & Alejandra Higuera*, uses bananas in droste effect to question tradition as an infinite reproduction of cultural stereotypes.
Sound Track: "Las Venas Abiertas" by Mas Aya

Immigrant is a collision of words and video by *Alejandra Higuera* & *Janet Romero*, an interpretation of the first generation immigrant experience from the lens of women in Toronto.
Images by *Sebastian Labaronne & Alejandra Higuera*
Sound Track: "Way Up" by *Gustavo Santaolalla*

Lejania (Distant) explores the sensation of "home" while embodying settlement in constant movement. Inspired by lasting memories of Venezuela, this solo piece investigates performance of cultural memory through mixed media and movement.
Interpreted & Created by Victoria Mata
Music (recorded & live) by Jackeline Rago

Musical textures, colors and original soundtracks by *Jackeleine Rago*. **Cantos de Trabajo** (Venezuelan Folklore) evoking the "Travesia" (crossing) around the huge plains of Venezuela with images of the tropical "Sabana" landscape, flower's fragrance, melancholic, longing feelings.

This series of performances would not have been made possible with out the support from everyone who contributed to the indiegogo campaign, our families, our lovers, our partners, our mentors, our friends and our volunteers!
THANK YOU THANK YOU THANK YOU ALL!!!

Appendix G: Detailed Acknowledgements

There are two women who are responsible for my curiosity about dance and the desire to examine the world around me. My mother, Milena Mata-Geary, whom I began my migration process with upon conception and my aunt Zaida Mata Soledad whose creativity and brilliance has nourished my artistry for 33 years. My father Scott Geary and brother Marcos Geary Mata, thank you for your unconditional support.

The completion of my Master could not have been possible without the unconditional support from Cayla Casciani, who has laboriously supported me through endless hours of editing, conceptualizing, organizing and anchoring my academic and professional growth since 2001.

Paige Cardinal, Joanna Duarte-Laudon, Isabel Estrada, Heryka Miranda, Amanda Paixao, Melina Pereira, Aemelious Ramirez, Rehana Tejpar, Juanita Suarez Tellez, and Irma Villafuerte: I take off my hat and bow to you all for your brilliance and generosity over the last two years as interpreters in my choreography. You have each surpassed my expectations of you as dancers with your talent and resilience. I have grown exponentially as an artist, as a choreographer, as a director, as a working professional, as an academic, as a dancer, as a friend, as a colleague, as a community member and as una hermana Latina because of my journey with each one of you! Your stories, your memories, and your ancestors are honoured in these pages and will no doubt inspire all who read this paper. *Mis otras hermanas y hermanos*, the sisters and brothers with whom I share a migration story and who have been part of building a home with me in Toronto: Fernanda Yanxapaxi and Sarah Shujah you are the family that sustains me on a daily basis.

As a choreographer, I am eternally indebted to the following collaborators and creative partners: Alexandra Gelis, Alejandra Higuera, and Janet Romero. Thank you for embarking on this journey of many unknowns and thrills. Together we have entwined our embodied memory with the alternative construction of diasporic history in Toronto. You have inspired me more than you can imagine and in return I am eternally committed to your growth.

The talented composers Humberto Alvarez, Marta Gomez, Lay Low Productions, Jackeline Rago, Greiverly Jose Marcano Verde, and Los Vasallos de Venezuela, your brilliance elevated my choreographic work and further stimulated the senses of the

audiences. For the breath-taking poetry of Angelika Ne and the heart felt writing of Alex Duarte Laudon: Thank you. Your writing was a reminder of the transformative power of art. David Hou, Edison Duenas, Michael Bisnauth, Lisseloth Berenice Torres Gutierrez and Juan Pablo Pinto, your ongoing documenting support has been crucial for the creation process of my choreographies.

Nahiti Ortega, thank you for designing the white skirts. Witnessing them at the Maclean Performance Studio and at the Sandra Faire and Ivan Fecan Theater at York University, was an injection of pride. We crossed borders and brought a little bit of Afro-Venezuelan art and tradition to Toronto. Much of the inspiration behind the work produced in the three choreographic case studies are my lived experiences with my Venezuelan counterparts and artistic mentors: Carlixta Palacion, Angel Palacio, Alicia Palacio, Las Eleguas (Venezuela's national all-women's Afro-descendant traditional percussive group), and the national contemporary-folklore dance company, Los Vasallos de Venezuela. You are my *brujula*, the compass that keeps me grounded.

It takes a community to raise an artist and there are a handful of individuals who have stood strong and supported my explorations and presentations during this masters program in various ways, from helping to showcase the work, to helping run a fundraising campaign, to documenting my work. *Mil gracias* to the following individuals, my behind-the-scenes extraordinaire: Joy Adjemian, Nico Contreras, Coralia Cortes, Kate Fraser, Rosina Kazi, Mika Lior, Joana London, Joce Tremblay, Allyson Trunzer. Bea Pizano and Trevol Swellnous, Thank you for your vision and tireless efforts in bringing to Toronto the Panamerican Routes Festival; for gathering artists, visionaries, amateurs of performance arts; and for deciphering of Latin American identity and cultural memory. Lilia Leon and Norma Araiza: thank you for inspiring me with your wise words and creating a space for me to reflect on my own thoughts and inspirations.

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Last, but absolutely not least, I want and need to thank my two grandmothers, who although not blood related, have held me financially, morally, spiritually, and emotionally during the pursuit of my masters, even while having absolutely no idea what I was getting into. Catherine Geary and Nana Esperanza: thank you from the bottom of my heart for creating a 'home' feeling.