DANCE LANGUAGE AND MULTICULTURAL MOVEMENT

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Abstract – This article is an excerpt of a longer essay originally written as my *Women studies*' Master thesis at City University's Graduate Center in New York City in 2004. It attempts to trace the short-lived impact in the early 1990s the cultural movement *multiculturalism* had on cultural politics and the arts community in general, and in artists like myself, a New York transplanted Brazilian dance artist, in particular.

Keywords: multiculturalism, primitivism, "others", cultural revisionism, appropriation.

Linguagem da dança e movimento multicultural

Resumo – Este artigo é um excerto de um longo ensaio originalmente escrito como minha dissertação de mestrado *Estudos sobre a mulher*, no City University's Graduate Center, da cidade de Nova York, em 2004. Propõe delinear o breve impacto vivido no início dos anos de 1990, trazido pelo *multiculturalismo* na comunidade cultural e política em geral e em artistas como eu mesma, uma bailarina brasileira transplantada para Nova York, em particular.

Palavras–chave: multiculturalismo, primitivismo, "o outro", revisionismo cultural, apropriação.

INTRODUCTION

This essay will analyze the trajectory of modern dance from its emergence at the turn of the 20th century to the 10 years of multicultural cultural policies that shaped the art form from the mid-1980s to the end of the 1990s. I will analyze the relationship between modern dance and the modernist movement shaping society since then to contextualize contemporary dance and the stringent cultural and political perspectives affecting the practice and discourse of the art form today.

The goal of this project is to investigate the relationship between the relatively isolated position dance occupies in the United States now and the cultural environment as responsible for the discipline's lack of interaction with questions that surpass specific formal/aesthetic concerns and address a larger cultural discourse. For the purpose of this investigation I will concentrate on the

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"question of identity" as a site of struggle that emerged during the civil rights movement in the 1960s and later characterized the multicultural movement by defining aesthetic/artistic directions that expanded the standard artistic discourse and practice and positing dance in relationship to a larger cultural/political context.

My interest in juxtaposing dance with social/political factors stems from my own belief that the slow ideological shift towards conservative dogma in the cultural politics of the last decades in the U.S. is partially connected with the strangling of critical thinking in the arts today. This period also coincides with my own journey as a young dancer who moved North from Brazil looking for the motor that engendered modern dance as the 1980's began. As I moved to New York City from Rio de Janeiro I had no clear idea of what I was getting into. It was not until recently, after twenty years of working as a transplanted dance artist in the United States (co-conspirator of my artistic collaborations, educator, mother and thinker) that I started investigating how non-Western, non-European cultures have inspired and/or been uncritically appropriated and incorporated into the West's modernity project and, consequently into the culture of dance, from the early days of modernism to the present. By elaborating on the parallel narratives of dance history and personal memoirs that make up this project, I do not desire to perpetuate the meshing of these two narrative lines but instead I hope to extricate the personal from the historical and establish an intellectual foundation for a much needed informed analysis of a field and artistic practice that have been intrinsically entangled with the "individual artist narrative" from the beginning.

It is also my wish to distinguish the institutional ideology structuring the art world from the efforts artists have invested in expanding normative frames to carve a space for themselves. Towards this goal I will be investigating dance's past and present, practice and discourse, and critical theories that have emerged in the academy as useful tools to facilitate the incorporation of dance back into a wider cultural dialogue.

The difficulty in theorizing questions that go beyond formal structures and aesthetic theory in dance, is perhaps due to an attitude at times fostered within a circle of dance reviewers whose approach has favored a precise description of the work on stage rather than a critical analysis of the subject matter and the role it plays in producing meaning in dance. Therefore as a preliminary step towards the implementation of the discipline's critical voice and body, I would like to propose a theoretical framework to better articulate dance discursively and encourage its participation in the dialogue on culture, race, and power. This framework will be composed by elements of race and cultural theory, choreographic aesthetics and the various forms of dance training that have informed modern dance's trajectory as it established itself as an "an indigenously American" art form from the start. My goal here is to translate the physical experience of dance, choreography, and performance into critical discourse to render the conversation on dance as stimulating as the discursive practices of other artistic disciplines. Considering the position dance occupies in the larger cultural world today, this essay aims at reinstating it as a cultural phenomena by establishing a dialogue between contemporary dance and cultural theories.

My interest in combining dance with intellectual discourse is a consequence of my own artistic practice as a choreographer who envisions the body and dance as signifiers that go beyond formal concerns. It is my hope that this interaction between dance discourse/ practice and cultural theory will inspire a revision of dance works and their position in the dance cannon, and introduce a new culturally informed approach to dance writing. In structuring the theoretical ground for understanding dance as culture, an analysis of the relationship between art and politics will feature prominently in this essay. In broader terms, this paper will concentrate on identifying and articulating the relationship between dance and the social sphere.

As a counterpoint to theoretical frames, my goal with this essay is to make visible the physical body, forcing the weight and texture of bones, muscles, flesh, ideas and feelings to surface and impact theoretical language's cerebral articulations. Although this intellectual "body" will be constructed to cultivate a methodology that considers both the physical aspect of movement as well as the context for its performance, I am aware that written language can weigh down the kinesthetic experience of dancing and reduce the ephemeral sensation of moving into an intellectual/ linguistic exercise. After all it has been previously noted by modern and postmodern choreographers alike that dance is about dancing as much as writing is about writing even if the writing is about the dancing, and vice-versa.

Yvonne Rainer (1974, p. VII), one of the founders of the Judson Dance Theater, speaks on the subject in her introduction to *Work 1961-73*:

> When I first started dancing in performances, someone said "But she walks as though she's in the street". If it could only be said "She writes about her work as though she is performing it", I would be happy indeed. That such a thing was possible. It goes without saying that a dance is a dance and a book about dance is a book.

As another expression of a similar desire to define dance in its individuality, dancer/choreographer Douglas Dunn, asked by photographer James Kostly to write a tribute to Merce Cunningham for his 1975 book *Merce Cunningham,* composed a poem that started like this,

> Talking is talking
> Dancing is dancing

And by including,

> Talking is not dancing
> Dancing is not talking (KOSTLY, 1975, p. 39).

Dunn also affirmed the independence of the two activities.

The radical difference between dancing and "theorizing" dance has probably kept these two activities clear of each other. In other words, as verbal and written languages have been privileged over non-verbal expressions in most western cultural environments, it is important to establish the autonomy of each activity in order to avoid emphasizing the power of language over movement.

Dance scholar Susan Leigh Foster, reflecting on the anxiety generated by the usage of spoken language in dance, interprets the anti-intellectual attitude some contemporary choreographers have towards articulating their work, as an attempt on their part to preserve the non-verbal purity of dance. In her book *Reading dancing,* Foster (1986, p. XVI) observes "how the notoriously discreet choreographer Merce Cunningham refrains from discussing his work publicly, [Cunningham] wants the dance to speak for itself in a language all its own". Few scholars have addressed the subtle suspicion towards language that exists both in the artistic practice as well as in the critical dance writing and, as a result, some choreographers and dance writers' reluctance to analyze ideas informing dance works is an attitude rarely challenged in the dance world today.

In the December 1993 *Dear Santa* column in the Village Voice, reviewer and choreographer Gus Solomon Jr., asked *Santa* for more money, more dancing, and less "political posturing" in the work of "downtowners". A similar tone was struck in the same column by Debora Jowitt who requested that *Santa* tell "bright choreographers that the world may not need more playwrights". Dance critics' typical refusal to discuss works that engage with "political themes" and language, is best illustrated by the infamous Arlene Croce's New Yorker review of choreographer Bill T. Jones' piece *Still/Here* at the Next Wave Series at Brooklyn Academy of Music in 1993 (CROCE, 1995, p. 54-60). Based on the company's long process of interviews with terminally ill patients throughout the country (and on Jones' own experience living with HIV, and the loss of his partner/collaborator Arnie Zane to Aids), the piece combined Jones' abstract choreography with video testimonial excerpts of patients' interviews. Protesting the performance but "reviewing" it nonetheless, Croce argued that terminally ill patients were not a subject fit for performance pieces and, given the work's tragic content, what Croce called "victim art," an impartial reviewing process would not be possible making the only "acceptable" response for such projects a positive review.

The resistance to discuss works that deal with issues outside the pure movement realm seems curious to me considering the interest contemporary dance writers nurtured for the work of the Judson Dance Theater, the 1960s avant-garde dance and performance group known for challenging established notions about the role of the body in dance, and for blurring the line that separated performance from life outside the dance studio. It is this ambivalence towards conceptualizing bodies as cultural/political signifiers that define, and are defined, by the cultural vortex of society, that I detect in the current discourse and practice of dance that I am interested in unpacking in this essay. The unwillingness most contemporary critics have to explore innovation in the realm of ideas is equally strange considering the tradition of rebelliousness that has been a tenet in the history of modern dance from the start. Notwithstanding the characteristically disparaging attitude adopted by newcomers against the previous dance movement, some dance writers profess to know

what dance is or is not, and considering the resistance I mention above, choreographers' recent inclination to address social/political questions is one category of dance making critics have collectively agreed to dismiss as irrelevant dance work.

Declaring the benefits of a descriptive style, most dance critics today choose to describe what they can "capture" in a piece rather than to venture into analyzing what the movements might allude to in terms of meaning. Marcia B. Siegel (1979, p. XV), a leading dance critic and founding member of New York University's Performance Studies department, in her preface to *The shapes of change* declares that:

> A critic of dance is in some ways a self-appointed historian. None of the documentary devices presently in use is as accessible, as highly developed, or as reliable as good on-the-spot dance criticism [...] our job is to capture some essence of the dance [...] our writing is directed toward this rather than to the more cool and Olympian certitudes of critics in the other arts.

Unlike other critics who contextualize their subject in a larger cultural arena and interpret it accordingly, Siegel believes dance critics should commit to an "immediacy and accuracy of observation". This position presupposes a hierarchical order of interest where the preservation of choreographic structures is privileged over the analysis of ideas expressed in these structures. In Siegel's concept of dance criticism, descriptive styles endowed with scientific precision can "impede the extinction of yesterday's dance" (SIEGEL, 1979, p. XV). And the ability to preserve what she calls "yesterday's dances" through impeccable observation supersedes the discussion of ideas embedded in those "old dances". But if dance is to be re-introduced as an active contributor to the cultural conversations today, the critical discourse analyzing its activities ought to be upgraded to a language capable of both "capturing" the movement performed on stage as well as the contemporary intricacies they allude to.

My interest is to ultimately discuss the current historical moment where I live and create work; therefore my goal with this essay is to address the relationship between modernism and multiculturalism as cultural movements that defined modern dance – the phenomenon of modernity that urged artists to look "elsewhere" to find an aesthetic alternative to their Christian humanist heritage in the early twentieth-century years as explained by Terri A. Mester in her *Movement and Modernism,* and again during the multicultural movement in an effort to expand a narrow Eurocentric ideology.

THEORETICAL FRAME

In terms of methodology, my objective here is to introduce my theoretical frame to explain how it will facilitate my approach to the subject of this essay. I will carefully articulate the ideas and concepts from Multiculturalism as I will be interacting with these ideas in this essay.

MULTICULTURALISM

It is in an intersectional space, circumscribed by a leftist ideology and the politics of identity that I have chosen to situate this project. A territory also shaped by concepts articulated in Critical Race Theory (CRT), a theoretical body (created primarily by intellectuals of color in law schools) that challenges ways in which race and racial power are constructed and represented in the American legal culture and in American society in general. CRT argues that contemporary attitudes of color-blindness are "not only the expression of a particular color-consciousness but the product of a deeply politicized choice" (CRENSHAW et al., 1995), and like multiculturalism, it advocates that historical context included in the analysis of the relationship between race and society focusing on race as a crucial element determining the cultural and social fabric. And finally CTR is responsible for my understanding of multiculturalism as carrying on Civil Rights' original mission of racial equality while advocating for cultural diversity and inclusion.

Taking into consideration the intersection between politics and identity, and the historical parallel between the Civil Rights and the multicultural movements, this theoretical space will be infused with a "post-multicultural" perspective. While this perspective encompasses Civil Rights' and multicultural goals of equal access, it simultaneously signals the passing of time and identifies the present reality as no longer informed by a multicultural consciousness. Notwithstanding the politically deflated version of "happy-go-lucky-melting-pot" multiculturalism, I will use "post" in this essay to suggest that even benign articulations of diversity might have been too subversive to become truly integrated into the political consciousness of the art world when it should have been. Albeit farcical representations of multiculturalism may attest to the movement's de-radicalization through history, the loss of a specifically racialized consciousness characteristic of that movement is a setback to this country's goals of equal access. For the purpose of my arguments here I will consider the de-radicalization process experienced by both movements as a reaction to their perceived role as subversive events that confronted the real demographics of the United States. After all, the characterization of multiculturalism as a threat to this country's artistic standards was mostly voiced by cultural workers and critics whose practices were the target of the multicultural critique.

Although multicultural societies have been in existence since before the beginning of the European maritime expansion in the 15th century, and the word multiculturalism evokes a multiplicity of meanings, in this essay I will use it to refer to the multicultural movement that specifically impacted the art world roughly from the early 1980s to the late 1990s. This "multiculturalism", a cultural policy that addressed lack of diversity in the art world, referred to notions of race and ethnicity, identity and culture, liberation and oppression, center and margin, local and global. And while it established "either/or" as categories of analysis (i.e. belonging to either the center or margin of a particular situation), part of its ideological project was to expand binary definitions and integrate the multitude of social, political, racial, and sexual locations into the critical analysis of spe-

cific subject/individuals. Multiculturalism, in its critique of the western canon and revision of the Eurocentric doctrine, affected the arts community as a whole, and my life in particular as a result. Therefore, my interest in this period is both personal and historical and it suits my desire to address the interdependence of both narratives in this essay.

By pushing beyond aesthetic and formal questions, multicultural politics expanded ideological and formal disciplinary borders and re-defined dance differently from the Judson Dance Theater, its 1960s avant-garde predecessor. Although sharing similar critiques of the power/cultural hegemony in the United States, the Judson Dance Theater did not concentrate on the actual political meaning ascribed to the dancing body outside the performing arena. Focused on the politics of the personal experience, and impacted by the anti-Vietnam war and feminist movements, the Judson artists experimented with the aesthetic and formal borders circumscribing their existence and only indirectly reflected the political crises affecting the world. Years later, multiculturalism in dance and performance, certainly indebted to the Judson legacy of rebelliousness, concerned itself with the multiplicity of meanings inscribed in the dancing/performing body vis-à-vis identity and culture. Multicultural artists meshed their work with personal narratives and literal attacks on the political system of this country. Fearlessly wearing their racial and social location on their bodies, dancers, performance artists, and choreographers of color started to make work about race, sexual, gender, and ethnic identity and directly addressed slavery, colonizing narratives, and current political situations fueled by racism in the United States.

Therefore by contextualizing the dismissiveness of dance discourse towards "political" content that exists in some dance works in a post-multicultural space, we can plausibly interpret this resistance as a backlash to the multicultural policies. In this context it is not surprising to realize that the goals constituting the multicultural movement have been re-fashioned today by the same cultural institutions to project an ideology that uncritically subscribes to the concept of globalization and construes multiculturalism as a cultural strategy that supposedly aims at expanding the idea of internationalism rather than addressing the domestic problems of under representation of non-white artists (i.e. the slogan created by the St. Marks Church's Danspace series – "*Think Globally, Dance Local*"). Given this historical trajectory, a "during and after multiculturalism" analysis can provide a rich context for the development of this essay. For this theoretical frame one of my main sources will be Ella Shohat and Bob Stam's *Unthinking Eurocentrism* book, which undertakes the trajectory of the multicultural movement throughout history. The analysis of the colonialist project and their investigation of the representation question have shaped both my practice as a choreographer and my thinking as an educator.

By including a "post-multicultural" perspective, this project will contain both my disappointment with multicultural critics who fought tooth and nail to ensure that a multicultural agenda would not be instituted in this country's prominent cultural and educational venues, as well as with multicultural practitioners who ultimately neglected the movement's long term goals and endorsed the transformation of serious discussions on cultural diversity into a superficial demonstration of toke-

nized change. This essay will also acknowledge multiculturalism's vibrant short-lived history and pro-active strategies for change. For it is impossible to address the current impoverishment of dance discourse and practice without recalling more intellectually inspiring moments when multiculturalism challenged the foundations of the cultural world as it were.

THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN PRIMITIVISM AND MULTICULTURALISM: MULTICULTURALISM, A MOVEMENT THAT SHOOK THE FOUNDATIONS OF MODERNITY

I will structure this chapter as a journey in reverse applying some of the techniques I learned in dance composition to exercise my fluency in moving forward to study the more recent multicultural movement, as well as backwards to examine the West's fascination with "others" that so exemplified the primitive movement at the turn of the twentieth century. In other words, I will start by concentrating on multiculturalism to investigate how the West construed the place of the "other" in more recent cultural history and segue into the primitive movement to unearth cultural influences of so-called primitives that shaped the West's cultural pantheon of aesthetic tendencies.

My interest in the cultural phenomena of primitivism and multiculturalism lies in their similarities and function of drawing out the "other" to define the "self", which attests to the intrinsic relationship of the two terms and the West's ongoing fascination with "others". But given their location as bookends to the twentieth century, this essay will concentrate on these movements as they shaped and impacted modernism and influenced modern and postmodern dance. At the turn of the century primitivism served to preserve nineteenth-century's pastoral ideals while it metamorphosed itself into modernity, and at the end of the century multiculturalism provided a supplementary support that helped deliver a transient sense of community for a de-centered world where confrontation with the "other" could no longer be prevented But each of these movements have also produced a false sense of security as they raised unanswerable questions that spelled out the conflicted nature of the relationship between "us" and "them".

For the purpose of this essay, I will approach multiculturalism as an ideology that emerged in the 1980s as an alternative to the Marxist rhetoric of revolution and liberation that was such an intrinsic part to the history of insurgencies and regime changes in Latin America, and to the history of the communist revolutions throughout the world. No longer accommodating the necessary terms for understanding a globalized postmodern world, the language of class struggle was slowly replaced by the language of identity politics whose categories of race, gender, and sexuality seemed to better address the needs of an ever-changing world (SHOHAT; STAM, 1994, p. 338). Jointly with the question of identity that was materializing at the same time, multiculturalism confronted political implications around the production of knowledge problematizing what was defined as knowledge and questioning the apparatus that defined it as such.

In their book *Unthinking eurocentrism,* Ella Shohat and Bob Stam (1994, p. 342) scrutinized identity politics' probing questions of "who speaks, when, how, and in whose names?" and warned readers that its ensuing push for self representation in so-called marginalized communities, a program for identity "emancipation", could eventually essentialism a person of color's identity into the narrow space of "only Latinos would speak about Latinos, African-Americans about African-Americans and so forth...". In an effort to present a balanced view on the question of identity, Shohat and Stam (1994, p. 342) highlighted the contradictory nature of identity politics by positioning the essential goal of "speaking for oneself" in relationship to identity perspectives advocated by poststructuralist feminists, gay/lesbian, and postcolonial theories which: "have often rejected the articulations of identity, and biologistic and transhistorical determinations of gender, race, and sexual orientation, [but] have at the same time supported affirmative action politics, implicitly premised on the very categories elsewhere rejected as essentialist".

Although difficult to disentangle and impossible to fully comprehend, if we focus only on certain perspectives, the question of whom speaks for whom and who produces and validates culture is one that should be properly contextualized within this country's recent history of cultural revisionism which, in a sense, emerged as a practice out of the multicultural movement. It is only within the revisionist project that the cultural and political transformations put in motion by identity politics and multiculturalism can be fully understood in their intrinsic contradictions. So when Shohat and Stam (1994, p. 343), in their hope to substantiate identity politics, wondered if the fear of "appropriating" (with its legacy of erasure of non-European cultures) could eventually produce "a form of mental segregation and the policing of racial borders, a refusal to recognize one's co-implication with otherness?", they circumvented the ranging debates on cultural appropriation and naively subscribed to the one-dimensional belief that identity politics, if not controlled, would turn into an ideology of self-righteousness and defensiveness, as characterized by conservative critics of identity politics.

As a fairly new phenomena, questions raised by identity politics, multiculturalism, and issues of cultural appropriation have, especially in the last few decades, infused consciousness around questions of origin and race into mainstream society, making them valid proof of the non-universal specificity that differentiates each individual. This new understanding is partially responsible for introducing the concept of "cultural ownership" to the debate on knowledge and culture during the multicultural years and still vibrant today. Therefore Shohat/Stam's choice to use Paul Simon's *Graceland* to illustrate their suspicion of white musicians' "right" to work with non-European rhythms and music, only begins to address all the intricate aspects of "appropriation", a practice that has been a part of this country's cultural history and one that I will analyze in conjunction with the phenomena of primitivism later in this chapter.

Perhaps a more appropriate approach to the question of cultural appropriation in this case would be to trace back music history in the U.S. and contextualize *Graceland* within Simon's own

practice of musical appropriation. After all, Paul Simon's repertory is a testament to his ongoing interest in "other" sounds, from early collaboration with Art Garfunkel in the Andean influenced music *El Condor Pasa* to the Brazilian-infused music of *Rhythm of the Saints,* to mention only two. But notwithstanding Simon's s love for "other" music, the level of political and cultural complications generated by the making of a record like *Graceland is* impossible to generalize and its implications impossible to fully capture by simply inverting the racial terms of the situation, "Should Paul Simon not have made Graceland? Would it have been better had Stevie Wonder made it?" (SHOHAT; STAM, 1994, p. 343). Given that a lengthy cultural analysis on the subject would be impossible due to their illustrative usage of the example, raising the political aspects of such "cultural crossings" would make for a more interesting analysis of the subject.

Robert Christgau, in a 1986 review for *The Village Voice*, emphasized the problematic nature of Paul Simon's violation of the letter of the U.N. cultural boycott and decision to record *Graceland* in South African during Apartheid (not deliberately, Paul Simon claims). Christgau does not question Simon's mastery of composing in a "Black" music vocabulary with African musicians; instead he criticizes Simon's claim of being apolitical "only as an artist". For Christgau (1986, p. 23), the problem with *Graceland* lies primarily in the fact that *"Graceland* does nevertheless circle around an evasive ideology", which he understands as a consequence of the composer's apolitical position, a "universalist humanism that is the secret intellectual vice of centrist liberals who are out of their depth". The fact that Paul Simon has never publicly disavowed South Africa's apartheid brings up harder questions than his race identity *vis-à-vis* his *Graceland* project. His silence over marketing questions and his own inarticulateness towards his privileged situation as a U.S. born composer and his "attraction" for "other" sounds projected a shadow over the project. By averting the political question and claiming that he wanted the music to speak for itself, Paul Simon disregarded the notion that music only speaks so loud; and if his efforts to "try and bridge cultures" were legitimate then maybe he should have invested further in reciprocating the tremendous music contributions made by his African collaborators by perhaps publicly taking a stand against Apartheid here and in South Africa. Therefore, even if identity politics and multiculturalism have been partially responsible for creating a perhaps not-so-friendly cultural environment where artistic practices considered culturally imperialistic could no longer go unexamined, to generalize the critique of "appropriations" as a "policing" strategy seems shortsighted and does not address the political aspect of such cultural crossings.

In "Multiculturalism and the politics of identity" Joan W. Scott (1992, p. 12) characterized the resistance to multiculturalism, a movement whose mission she defined as negatively targeting the center of the Reagan-Bush conservative agenda in 1992, as a distraction "from the fact that there are serious issues at stake and more than one valid side to the story in the current debate of knowledge", and she identifies the last two decades as witnessing debates that approach knowledge "as a political enterprise that involves a contest among conflicting interests [...]" as part of the

conservative's strategy to discredit dissimilar political positions. Scott (1992, p. 12) defines the term "political correctness" as a label created to harm the reputation of intellectuals and artists who exercised a "critical, skeptical approach to all that a society takes for granted".

Multiculturalism surfaced then as a theoretical basis for a new cultural model, if controversial, with a political and cultural language that seemed more adequate to address the needs of an ever changing world after the Communist debacle in Eastern Europe and the repression of its goals of social justice in Latin America and was accused of alienating larger sectors of the American nation for proposing to expand the notion of "American identity by insisting on attention to African-Americans, Native-Americans, and the like [...]" (SCOTT, 1992, p. 13). It is this function of multiculturalism, the expanding of perspectives on culture and race that I would like to highlight here as I analyze the different expressions of resistance towards the movement. Although a reasonable fear of essentializing identity has instigated a healthy discussion on the benefits of inclusion politics, the concern expressed by Shohat and Stam (1994) that a "Latino speaking for a Latino" scheme could become Latinos' only space of enunciation, never became a threat given the short lived ideology that inspired "identity grouping" during the multicultural years, which is not to say that artists like myself were not mistrustful of them.

As a middle-class Brazilian woman, recently graduated from New York University's dance conservatory where cultural "difference" was never addressed in conversations with faculty members and never reflected on the department's choice of guest choreographers, I was not prepared to commit myself to the category of "different/other" waiting for me as I entered the professional dance world during the early days of multiculturalism in the mid1980s. Growing up in a professional family, my father was a lawyer and my mother a teacher-turned-lawyer, I had an intellectual middle-class status bestowed on me with its usual privileges, so naturally in my new adopted country, I thought of myself as "the same", not different from my colleagues, until told otherwise. Although mobilized by the huge disparities between the "favelas" and the wealthy areas of Rio de Janeiro, given my "political consciousness" provided by my parents' socialist tendencies, my life during the 1960s and 70s was nevertheless free of the violent disruptions marking everyday life in Rio today. My most direct experience with inequality was through listening to my father's rant on the terrible prison conditions his common and political clients had to endure. So as "artist of color" emerged as my new identity in the United States, the multicultural movement which delivered me into the new status, marked my artistic path and shaped a concrete political space in my consciousness.

In 1990, choreographer Merian Soto commissioned a few Latino choreographers to create work for the showcase *Muevete!.* She curated for Dance Theater Workshop. Conscious of my unenthusiastic feelings towards essentializing my identity as a Latina choreographer, I created a piece that dealt with that ambivalence. For *"Untitled, (Suggestions Welcomed)"*, I developed a few culturally typical characters, pushed them a notch further and positioned the girl protagonist between the two male stereotypes. Splitting myself up between them, I was awestruck with the gold-lame clad

lip-synching Elvis (American male as a pop stereotype symbolizing a vision of Americana paradise) who popped up unannounced throughout the piece slowing me down to a state of virtual paralysis, and also engaged in a contrarian relationship with the preppy looking Gap-stylized American nerd who directed me in an audition for the new Chiquita Banana commercial, correcting my Spanish and cooling off my "hot" interpretation of the song, *I'm Chiquita Banana and I've come to say, bananas have to ripen in a certain way".*

In my (tongue in cheek) relationship to the buffoned American stereotypes, I certainly meant to create a playful critique of the overwhelming infiltration of American pop culture throughout the globe, but I also targeted the ideological subtexts that informed the curatorial principles of multi-cultural showcases. I was uncomfortable at the way multicultural group shows isolated artists of color's cultural specificity as indistinguishable expressions of difference and perpetuated the understanding that "their" culture, unknown to the world, was in need of exposure. Given that research repeatedly shows that in "Western representation whites are overwhelmingly and disproportionately predominant, have the central and elaborated roles, and above all are placed as the norm, the ordinary, the standard", (DYER, 1997, p. 3) by defining these artists solely on the basis of their racial and ethnical identity, the "multicultural showcase" format ran the risk of perpetuating the invisibility of whiteness as a race while not actively challenging the perception that artists of color existed in a artistic space outside the history of contemporary art-making. For the politics of visibility advocated by the Left as an important frontier to be conquered during the multicultural years, nonetheless awkwardly grouped artists of color together in a kind of ethnic spectacle, even while it produced opportunities for the artwork to be seen.

Peggy Phelan (1993) in her *Broken Symmetries* essay further scrutinizes the presumptions generated about "the political efficacy of visible representation". She argues that "In framing more and more images of the hitherto underrepresented other, contemporary culture finds a way to name and thus to arrest and fix, the image of that other" (PHELAN, 1993, p. 2), eventually undermining the original goal of accessing power through visibility and rendering the subject invisible in his/her fixated position. Confronting the visibility-equals-power equation, Phelan (1993, p. 6) complicates it further by demanding a more nuanced relationship between visibility and what the Left believes it to be necessary: "I am not suggesting that continued invisibility is the 'proper' political agenda for the disenfranchised, but rather the binary between the power of visibility and the impotency of invisibility is falsifying".

The conviction that visibility should not be the sole factor responsible for delivering an empowered position to any one subject helps demystify the expected role artists of color were given: to raise the race consciousness of culturally white institutions as well as inform white artists/audience on issues of race. The "nationality grouping" that characterized some multicultural showcases (i.e. Latin American descendants grouped together in spite of their differences in country of origin, language, race, and culture), even while creating visibility/audience for those artists, ideologically endorsed the West's totalitarian discourse and ethnocentric focus on its own perspectives, making

it the one arbiter able to categorize all other cultures. The other difficulty I had in subscribing to these showcases resulted from my mistaken hope that my new community would think of me simply as a modern dancer and not as a *Latina modern dancer*, unconsciously wishing for the "universal" label I have since rejected after realizing that in the U.S. it has become a code word for whiteness, Eurocentric, Western etc. As Richard Dyer (1997, p. 2) simply puts: "There is no more powerful position than that of being 'just' human. The claim to power is the claim to speak for the commonality of humanity. Raced people can't do that – they can only speak for their race. But non-raced people can, for they do not represent the interests of a race".

Struggling between the desires to affirm the "self" part of me which would isolate me as "other", or to ignore that and embrace the "us" side of the duo "us versus them" which would erase the "self" component of the equation but situate me in the universal context of whiteness, I chose to engage with the compositional recourse of irony as a rhetorical strategy to help me confront the problem I had posed for myself when I created a piece like *Untitled* for a Latino/a choreographer showcase like *Muevete!*. In the creative process for *Untitled* irony became the critical strategy I used to address the ambivalence of my situation, allowing me to overcome the obvious predicament of my role as a Latina choreographer in the showcase (to make a culturally "enlightened" piece), and to suggest things I did not want literally spelled out.

Charles McGrath in his 2000 *The New York Times* article "No kidding: does irony illuminate or corrupt?" investigates the root of the word back to the Greeks when it translated their enduring concern with "the gap between appearance and reality, or between truth and belief". Like the ancient Greeks I was interested in evoking dramatic irony when characters' gestures and words were not at all what the writer/choreographer wanted to say and portray. In *Untitled* I embodied a gawking fan paralyzed by the vision of her golden idol, an over-the-top Latin woman who eagerly squeezed herself into her (all American) white boyfriend's fantasy while forcing him to balance on her shoulders like a circus tight rope walker. Although humorously performed, the piece addressed the tragic predicament of someone who struggled between affirming herself as someone who desperately pinned for the cultural status quo's attention and acceptance. Even though that was what these performances expressed on the surface of the piece, what was being communicated in reverse, in a kind of "brown face minstrelsy", was my angry, ironic portrayal of Latin and North American stereotypes: it was as if I was saying to my audience, "the way you see me is the way you have invented me. The miniaturized version of myself, this performance of the invented 'me' is your projection". Although critics admitted to enjoy the fun, they avoided the more serious questions I raised with the ironic inversions of cultural stereotypes, which given the specific nature of the showcase and the multicultural moment we were in, such critical evasion seemed gutless and uninformed. Here I was being asked to perform "different" aspects of myself and teach others about things they should already know about me and no serious discourse ever ensued in any of the places I performed the piece, Washington D.C., New Orleans, and New York City.

So, as multiculturalism carved a space for artists like me who straddled two worlds and pushed me to claim all that I am culturally and racially, it did not complicate the question of identity and nationality, culture and identity, and most artists who attempted to do so in their work were either misunderstood and/or left alone. Existing in a transitional space, no longer the Brazilian woman I used to be before moving to New York, and not yet filling the shoes of a U.S. dance artist, the multicultural moment validated my "in-betweeness". But the simultaneous exposure to multiculturalism and postmodern dance which ironically instigated a paradoxical desire to de-center my subjectivity as a Brazilian woman while celebrating my "Brazilianness", did not guarantee a safe space for my art in neither the "people of color showcase" for much longer, nor in the invisible world of whiteness. Hence my interest in the multicultural movement is highly personal and enmeshed in my own memoirs, whereas my curiosity about the primitive movement stems from a yearning to understand the practice of cultural appropriation regularly exercised by modern artists including the modern dance pioneers I will concentrate on the second half of this chapter, and whose works have indirectly influenced the development of mine, even if in an inverted manner.

As multiculturalism produced a heightened awareness on race in the art world and suggested that non-white people fill leadership positions, advocates pressured cultural institutions, presenting organizations, and funding agencies (private/public) to examine hiring practices that did not reflect their constituency. Multiculturalism racialized culture and destabilized the cultural world for a moment. But the mission of the multicultural movement to include and credit artists of color as active participants in the cultural fabric of the United States, required a serious commitment to the practice of equal opportunity and social justice as well as a determination to withstand the criticism that framed the movement as the scapegoat for the field's artistic and financial hardships.

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