

Cuerpo Talk: The Memoir of a Gringita

Abstract:

“Cuerpo Talk: The Memoir of a Gringita,” is an autobiographical research solo on the evolution of Cuban dance forms from the 1960’s to present day. This timeline accompanies the path of Cuban culture from pre-communism to post communism and its progression. Dance influences from both the island of Cuba, and the Americanized version of Cuban dance in Miami are used to show the transformation of cultural identity. It concerns the exploration of identity politics through a Cuban-American lens in modern day society. It delves deeper into the beliefs and cultural shift of Cuban-Americans across multi-generations, and is illustrated through a comparative analysis of Cuban dance forms culminating in a choreography based performance. It provides information on the dual representations of Cuban culture that exist, and spreads awareness of the divide that has been created amongst the generations.

Personal Statement:

I often wondered about my family’s life before the communist revolution in Cuba. Throughout my childhood, I have considered myself an activist and a scholar, leading to many research projects in which I explored my identity politics and Cuban-American heritage. In high school, I was enlisted in a research program which enabled me to conduct a small-scale undergraduate research project based off of the arts and its ability to provide activism. In college, I had life altering experiences with a roommate who was racist and homophobic towards me. This experience left me with the need to research more into my culture and identity politics in order to regain confidence and connection with my ancestral roots. The integration of my culture and qualitative creative research has always been a significant aspect of my life. By academically and ethically exploring my heritage and its physical forms more in depth, I can add knowledge to the Elon community and my personal comprehension.

The Lumen Prize will enable me to discover more about myself and my ancestral history than I ever thought possible. Cuba and its culture has held a distant yet near place in my life ever since I was a child. By being able to delve deeper into my culture and the issue of identity politics, I will expand my intellectual horizons to include the struggles of minority cultures and our battle to fit into a larger societal schema. While there is research and knowledge about the oppression of minority cultures adapting to majority cultures, not many Hispanic voices are represented within the dance community. This project can provide an opportunity for me to expand my intellectual horizons on the transitional shift of culture. Culture is a broad term used to describe a certain group of people’s way of life,

and is heavily researched in the academic field. The research on culture that is lacking however, is the shift and change of a culture that can occur over time or across multi-generations. By further researching how a change in a culture can impact familial differences, a new definition or belief of culture can be found.

Growing up, I was able to witness many Caucasian and African-American dancers that existed, but very little of Hispanic background. The most famous Hispanic dancer to exist is Alicia Alonso who founded the National Ballet of Cuba. Through my personal discovery of her and her work for the LatinX community, I grew a fondness for dance. Alonso's efforts in the dance community is what inspired me and sparked hope that I could be a professional dancer. If my research efforts were to be spread across various communities by presenting my research across multiple conferences and forums such as social media or dance festivals, I may be able to inspire another future dancer just as Alicia Alonso had done for me. While the representation of Hispanic voices and knowledge of our cultures may not be accepted widely in today's society, it is still of the utmost importance for the future generations of America that is to come. Further choreographic works about Hispanic culture may generate a new wave of inclusion within the arts.

Project Description

Focus

“Cuerpo Talk: The Memoir of a Gringita,” is an autobiographical solo on the evolution of Cuban dance forms from the 1960’s to present day. It concerns the creative process of making an autobiographical dance solo that explores my Cuban-American identity. It aims to research how identity politics in correlation with movement can impact the dance community. How does identity politics, which is loosely defined as social constructs of one’s place within societal norms, affect the Cuban-American culture? This research will delve deeper into the beliefs and cultural shift of Cuban-Americans across multi-generations, how its illustrated through Cuban dance forms, then explore my findings through a practice-based creative process of choreography. It can help address the immigration and racial issues that are present within America today. David Cazares mentions how, “Miami, a city fed by the huge Cuban migration since Fidel Castro came to power in 1959, does not have a visible Afro-Cuban cultural presence...because the few black Cubans who migrated to the United States in the 1960s chose the Northeast or the West Coast, where they generally assimilated into African-American communities” (Cazares). If other cultures were to be more visible to the public eye, acceptance and understanding in regards to other ways of life could become more universal. This greater comprehension may benefit in the embracing of cultures that are different than the majority.

In the 1950’s, during the rise of communism in Cuba, the majority of Cubans who immigrated to Miami went in search of democracy and economic opportunity. Through this migration, Cuban culture has become Americanized causing the representations of the culture to become “white-washed” (Cazares). This “white-washing” that occurs causes the Cuban culture that exists today to have a heavy influence from the majority culture that includes American influences. Even much of the artistry that is produced on the island today is cultivated for means of tourism (Gahl). It has become more difficult for Cuban choreographers to create new work that accurately portrays the lifestyles of the island without censorship from the government. This causes a divide amongst the Cuban culture leading to two different representations and definitions of what the culture consists of. A comparative analysis of Cuban dance forms performed in the United States as well as Cuba will provide information on these two representations, and spread awareness of this divide that has been created amongst the generations.

In my field of academic discipline, research on dance and identity politics exists, but little visible research on the Cuban-American identity and dance is known. There is an underrepresentation of Cuban and Cuban-American voices within the industry of dance. This is combated through resisting traditional representations of Latina-ness, by having the choreographer be a recuperative cultural representative that counters commonplace Latina stories and repossess the image of the Latina figure in society (Figueroa). Through this new representation of Latina choreographers, Cuban dances are able to be integrated within

“American” contemporary choreography to redefine dance. Conducting this research project will add representation of Hispanic minority voices in choreography, both locally and globally. Miguel Gutierrez, a New York-based choreographer, performer, and author, discussed in his article, Does abstraction belong to white people, “the ways that power, access, possibility, and the ability to dream into the future were constricted by the happenstance of economic or racial contingencies that defy reduction into shape and color,” and how this concept does not affect the majority of Americans (Gutierrez). My project can aid in diminishing this stigma within the dance world. Through dance and the ownership of traditional dance forms, such as famous Cuban ballet star Alicia Alonso did with ballet in Cuba, I am able to redefine the stigma of Hispanic women being sexual objects (Tome). Alicia Alonso was able to bring a strong and graceful representation of Hispanic women to the ballet world through her choreography. The same can be accomplished with my research by demonstrating that Hispanic women are capable of many forms of dance in similarity to the majority.

Scholarly Process

This is a qualitative project with practice-based research. I have already researched literature on Cuban dance and Cuban-American Identity Politics in Dance through the use of various databases such as ProQuest. Through this literature, I was able to formulate my annotated bibliography and obtain background knowledge on my research of interest. I have started an annotated bibliography with literature on dance and Cuban culture. With this annotated bibliography, I am able to reference scholarly articles that can inform my choreography on representations of the Cuban culture. I plan to annotate further articles by Miguel Gutierrez to study his use of identity politics as a LGBTQ member and Hispanic. With this annotated bibliography, I am able to reference scholarly articles that can inform my choreography on representations of the Cuban culture.

I will complete a comparative analysis on Cuban dance forms presented in the United States and the island of Cuba by using Laban Movement Analysis to chart my observations. This form of movement analysis codes movement into four categories: body (movement), space, effort, and shape. This will provide a useful analysis for when I begin crafting the choreography for the final product. While there, I will also conduct interviews from multi-generational Cuban-American family members. The U.S. data collection will take place in Miami, FL where I will take Cuban dance classes and attend performances. Interviews will be conducted with family members who immigrated here from Cuba and relatives who were born in America. The personal testimonials resulting from my interview process can aid in further research on my background and personal identification with the culture. I will then draft a storyboard/outline of my final performance by organizing common themes from interviews into subsections for a dance. It will allow for clarity and theming of my research for production purposes. My identity politics will be influenced from the stories of my relatives and the emotions that are enticed from hearing these testimonials. This familial perspective will provide information on my identification of Cuban or Cuban-American culture. It also provides insight as to which dances were practiced and how these styles

shifted due to changes in culture. Data will also be collected in the island of Cuba in the summer of 2020 to gather research about island culture and the Cuban dances that exist socially and for concert presentation. In addition, the time I spend in Cuba will offer valuable experiences and information that can inform the history and identification of myself, the Cuban-migration of the 1960's, and the complexities of being a Cuban-American in the present day United States.

Proposed Products

The aforementioned scholarly process will be synthesized into a creative process of choreography, where I will create a full length self performed solo that will be presented to the local public at Elon University. Presentations regarding my creative process of choreography research will be submitted for presentation in SURF (Student Undergraduate Research Forum), ACDA (American College Dance Association), and NDEO (National Dance Education Organization) Globally, I will submit my research to ICDFH (International Cuban Dance Festival in Havana) and Cuba Research Forum to spread awareness of this cultural shift. . Afterwards, I will create a Post-Production Handbook that includes: writing all of press releases, online digital portfolio, and an artistic statement. A detailed concept statement will be included with programs, postcards and posters, and audition post mortem notes about the production. A budget and production calendar and notes will be made as well to ensure timeliness of the process. In addition, rehearsal reports, rehearsal notes, storyboarding, and production post mortem will be included to provide cohesion of the creative process. This handbook will provide a detailed account of what occurs throughout the research project, the production elements that were used, and a detailed account of the logistics of my performance.

Feasibility

Feasibility statement:

A potential challenge I may face is travel to Cuba due to restrictions from the US government. This can be overcome through a visa application that states I am visiting as a student for research purposes. I am conversationally fluent in Spanish and will be able to easily communicate with other family members or citizens of Cuba. I grew up learning the Cuban dialect and slang enabling me to be more comfortable with the vernacular of Spanish that is spoken on the island. With this said, there may be challenges of adapting to the culture of the island since I am American born and raised. The travel to Miami is feasible since it resides within the United States and does not incur as much travel cost. I have many relatives that live in the Miami area and who can assist in providing personal research and feasibility methods. By having a previous direct connection in Miami, I have more knowledge of what exists and would need to be spent in terms of gathering qualitative research. The production I aim to produce is also feasible due to the resources that are already provided for me in the Center for the Arts. Since I am a Dance Performance & Choreography and Arts Administration double major, I obtain access to all lighting, staging, and directing equipment at no cost. The expenses which would incur the most cost would be costuming and set design, but since most of my set design consists of personal documents and photos, there would be room left in the budget and timeline to add more if needed.

Budget:

Expenses

Books

The Body, Dance, and Cultural Theory

\$43.86

Dancing with Cuba: A Memoir of the Revolution

\$13.45

Dancing Cultures: Globalization, Tourism,
and Identity in the Anthropology of Dance.

\$29.95

Subtotal

\$87.26

Travel to Miami

Airfare

\$245

Hotel/Room and Board

\$0 Stay with family

Food
\$40/day (\$3,320)
Cuban Dance Classes
\$12/per class (3x a week for 12 weeks) (\$432)
Subtotal \$3,997
Travel to Cuba
Airfare
\$506
Hotel
\$50/night (\$4,150)
Food
\$20/day for 83 days (\$1,660)
Dance Classes
\$300 for 3 weeks
Subtotal \$6,616
Production
Photographer
\$100
Videographer
\$100
Musical Composer
\$500
Poster/Postcard Printing
\$50
Photography Printing
\$100
Picture Frames
\$100
Conga Drum
\$200
Set Design
\$500
Costumes
\$100
Programs Printing
\$100
Conference Applications and Travel
ACDA: \$160, Travel (Uber): \$50
NDEO: \$35, Travel (Airfare): \$235
ICDFH: \$420, Travel (Airfare): \$426

Subtotal	\$3,176
Tuition Stipend	\$6,123.74
Total	\$20,000

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Feasibility Cont.

	Proposed Experiences	Proposed Product(s)
First Summer Term	Travel to Miami, FL	- Creative Research in Cuban-American dance forms; Conduct interviews from multi-generational Cuban-Americans
First Fall Term	LUM 498 (2 Credit Hours)	Begin coding data on Cuban dance forms presented in Miami utilizing Laban Movement Analysis; Chart a sound score from interview information to use for final performance; Continue to research existing literature on Cuban-American Identity Politics in dance; Choreograph a 5-7-minute dance integrating Cuban dance and contemporary technique.
First Winter Term	Creative Research	Draft a storyboard/outline timeline of final performance by organizing common themes from interviews into subsections for a dance.
First Spring Term	Study Abroad in Florence, Italy.	Journal images, ideas, and themes inspired by the comparative analysis to use for the final choreography project. Notate ideas to explore in the creative process of choreography in the Fall of 2020.
Second Summer Term	Travel to Cuba	conduct final stages of creative research in Cuban dance forms and culture;

		<p>Finish coding data on Cuban dance forms utilizing Laban Movement Analysis; Record video footage of atmosphere, scene, and culture of Cuba that could potentially be used for creative process and/or final product; Continue to formulate and hone ideas for studio research in the Fall of 2020.</p>
Second Fall Term	LUM 498 (3 Credit Hours)	<p>Complete comparative analysis of Cuban dance forms in United States and Cuba.</p>
Second Winter Term	Creative Research	<p>Continue to synthesize research in the creative process of choreography; An invited showing of work-in-process to select faculty for feedback.</p>
Second Spring Term	LUM 498 (3 Credit Hours)	<p>Conclude PR/Marketing campaign for production; Present final choreography product to the public; Complete a Production Handbook of all acquired research, PR, Marketing, Production, and Creative Process materials; Apply to SURF to present research; Apply to American College Dance Association Conference to present research.</p>