

# Unboxing Pearls in the Rough

Cultural Syncretism, epistemicide and the Dancing Identities of South America and the Caribbean

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## Preface

After growing up just off the Caribbean coast in the city of Caracas, my childhood memories are filled with trips to La Guaira, Morrocoy, Cuyagua, Margarita island and so on. My movement is inspired by the soothing warm waters of the Caribbean sea. This place embodies a picturesque yet worrying history. In a continuous collective joy, Caribbean beaches of Venezuela are not only the place where colonists arrived on the mainland in their third voyage. This exoticised cliché of a never ending festival becomes calming and cathartic to the struggles lived by the Venezuelans in current times, where drumming and dancing ceremonies embellish the sandy shores.

I am Venezuelan, my education is rooted in this culture and its struggles as a colonised society. I trained their -wrongly labelled- traditional dances and later began more formalised forms of dance. Here is where I found for the first time a sort of individualist quality. That was something I didn't know, a newness I found in the process of becoming a professional dancer. In this investigation, I wanted to dig into syncretism in Latin American dances<sup>1</sup>. After coming to study in Europe, these dances became historical, ethnic or got another label. I've believed that because of it, they lack acknowledgement in contemporary dance practice, training and education. Partly because it's easier to reduce the giant number of dances to a geographical region and also because of the enlightened tendency of repressing dances, rituals or practices from the Global South.

I trust in the elements that are important for these dances, technical elements that can be trained such as the experience of ecstatic embodiment or the wisdom in collective joy that Ehrenreich speaks about in her book *Dancing in the Streets*. Among multiple other physically technical elements that can also be trained, but I don't focus on that in this writing. I am rather interested in what enables people to gather and connect in multiple ways, beyond time and space.

With time I've come to understand that there is the layer of knowing about history in the outskirts of Westernised cultures, and becoming aware of the syncretism present in their dance practises. Dances are not pure, dances have many different cultural influences and these need to be named. They can, as an immaterial cultural knowledge, not just be disregarded because they become forgotten, they die.

Through experience, I found that the way Afro diaspora moves comes from their connection to nature, religions, ancestors and different cultural influences, from African and Amerindian origins. I started my dance journey more than 10 years ago, and I have taken part in dance processes where the ways I dance are rejected or even going more specifically, the way my pelvic area moves, to certain gazes, is sexualized or wrongly labelled as sexy. When a predominantly white choreographer doesn't want you to dance sexy, it is reproducing the

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<sup>1</sup> Syncretism is a combination of separate concepts into one new, unique idea. Cultural syncretism is when an aspect of two or more distinct cultures blend together to create a new custom, idea, practice, or philosophy. Cultural syncretism can occur for many reasons, from immigration to military conquest to the marriages between groups, and results in a culture finding ways to blend new customs into their own. Web source: <https://study.com/academy/lesson/what-is-cultural-syncretism-definition-examples-quiz.html>

historical demonization and sexualization of dance. Eherenreich, who I introduce later in the text, exposed what was written about the lascive gaze women used in their dances and was banned because it provoked men. Leading to the demonization, secularisation and prohibition of dances that didn't conform to a norm and came primarily from people of lower classes experiencing pleasure. These ecstatic forms of dancing also existed in Europe before dance was secularised or banned to distinguish the civilised culture from the other, the savages. This is a puritanical form of movement that forces us all to be calm, correct, well mannered, civilised.

I now understand these historical connections, projected onto me in academic contexts. Even during my MA studies, I wanted to investigate Salsa, as a movement practice born in the XX century, because this was the task. But I wasn't allowed to do that or share it with students because according to them it is a social dance, not a concert one. Which reproduces different forms of racism in an epistemic, cultural and/or structural sense, and isolates bodies from cultures and ancestral knowledge.

These experiences have an effect on people who, like me, come from these specific cultural backgrounds, with artistic movements parallel to the Western Eurocentric civilization. It is a form of violence. I've feared that writing about it would make me more vulnerable. That's why I avoided it. This specific type of violence is engrained in the judgements of dance institutions, therefore their selected people. It is not only a fetishism that makes individuals move their hips and lose themselves in the experience of movement. It is much more profound and robust.

In terms of syncretism, we don't talk about all the influences. These are understood as a tradition of Christianity, but syncretism is more, it's going to the roots and see where they come from. And at the end who has the power? The one that describes it as vulgar. My friend and artist Rene Siebel talks about the jealousy and fear of sexyness, a fear of what is supposedly savage. And I add, a fear of spiritual/religious possession. He admits this is the gaze we have, which is Eurocentric, unaware that when one abstracts something from its nature, all the substance and spirit is gone.

It is difficult for me to write about this issue, because I apply the same Eurocentric gaze to sabotage myself. But here, I have the privilege to do what I want. Most people, even in the dance field, don't know what syncretism is. To my belief, every dance is or has syncretic potential, some sources call it hybrid but syncretic describes the ritual qualities of dance. At least in an attempt to articulate it in relation to its multiple cultural influences. This means you might not get it right away, they are made robust in the history of mankind and hundreds of years of repression.

If there is no experimental nudity aesthetic, named performance art, it is simply because not being allowed to do so became embodied, just like racism does. They had to fit these dances to certain rules, certain forms that pleased people of power. This is why I think syncretism is an important step in my research, which might just lead me to the thesis of dancing truly like my numerous selves. These come from various contexts and also from different forms of repression: as a Latino immigrant, LGBTQ+ person and artist. Plus the supernatural physicalities of my body that reach beyond my own understanding and I can only describe as magical realism: Why do I

suddenly get interested in pearls and death dances, why did pearls become the last conversation with my aunt who died? The experience of loss, of something that is dying. Of dying nature in a pandemic landscape, facing a global ecological crisis.

There was an impossibility of investigating these dances without acknowledging the knowledge that was erased, because of the white gaze expectation in the understanding of contemporary dance. Perhaps, that is why the Latino community holds on so tight to what is left, to the basic steps of Salsa, for instance. Everything else is something that would need to come from elsewhere. Feeding a form of expression from somewhere else was the reason why these dances could survive, while at the same time they were being repressed. It was because they were merging with other cultures that they were allowed the possibility to live.

Lastly, about the pearls' history, in my reflection, I am allowing the way I think, the way I connect to be present in my writing. Following the magic in the realism. What I'm writing is a way to syncretize my academic studies with the culturally magic forms of knowledge that my 'sexy' non-white selves embody.

# Unboxing Pearls in the Rough

A commentary on Cultural Syncretism, epistemicide and the Dancing Identities of South America and the Caribbean

Written by Juan Urbina

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As a personal inspiration and parallel to my role as dance researcher, I became interested in wearing pearls without a clear reason. They called my attention in every vintage store. I asked my aunt Marisela Urbina, because of her knowledge as a literacy teacher, what she knew about the history of pearls in colonial times and she told me to search for the stories of *La Virgen del Valle*. Two weeks later, my aunt passed away. Among her numerous teachings, travels and the cultural knowledge she exposed me to, when I was a child, she told me that the mountains, sun, moon, sea, and all the nature that surrounded us were the gods that the indigenous peoples venerated, before Columbus arrived in America. When she invited me to read *Gulliver Travels*, my first book, I didn't imagine that becoming a migrant would come with passport delays, economic crisis and a pandemic. I saw her for the last time in 2018. I arrived back in Venezuela one week after she had left. I went to her house and in her room and I found a box with the shape of a heart. Inside were all her pearl necklaces. I connected that, which I don't know if it was her gift for me, with our last conversation when I asked her about pearls.

[Now, I invite you to inhale]

Back in the XVII century pearls were exploded out of the Caribbean shores of Venezuela for capitalist purposes. They were exported to Europe to decorate fashionable clothing worn at the time. Also, around the same time, pearls became symbolic for a syncretic deity, La Virgen del Valle. She was venerated by the Waikeries, a native community of Cubagua Island. They were persuaded to believe she was the goddess of the sea who they already venerated.

[English translation]

The miracle of the pearl: Vague news about this fact refers that a native fisherman from Punda, named Domingo, was hit by the barb of a stingray when he was trying to find pearls at the bottom of the sea. Domingo saw the danger of losing his leg, ulcerated and about to be amputated. His wife, a fervent devotee of La Virgen del Valle, begged for the healing of his husband, producing the first miracle in this story. The fisherman, in return for the miracle, promised to give him the first pearl he found. Digging into the seabed, Domingo opened the valves of an oyster and what would not be his surprise when he found a pearl that faithfully reproduced the shape of his leg and even the scar mark.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Virgen del Valle y “El Milagro de la perla” [Quote in Spanish] El milagro de la perla: Vagas noticias sobre éste hecho refieren que un pescador nativo de Punda, llamado Domingo, fue alcanzado por la púa de una raya cuando trataba de encontrar perlas en el fondo del mar. Domingo vio el peligro de perder su pierna, ulcerada y a punto de ser amputada. Su esposa, ferviente devota de la Virgen del Valle rogó por la sanación de su esposo, produciéndose el primer milagro de ésta historia. El pescador, en pago del milagro prometió obsequiarle la primera perla que encontrara. Hurgando en el fondo marino, Domingo abrió las valvas de una ostra y cuál no sería su sorpresa al hallar una perla que reproducía con fidelidad la forma de su pierna y hasta la marca de la cicatriz. Source: <https://carupano.tripod.com/milagro.htm>

At this point, one might wonder how I merge these histories with my intention to investigate syncretism in dances. Therefore, before going further, I need to explain that this paper is the reflection of a process that aimed to identify and embody amalgamated modes of physicality that mirror/defy the colonial oppressive hierarchies still present in dance education today in terms of standardised dance practice and training. My apologies, even though I abstain from calling this an academic research, this is for professionals in the dance field. My writing deals with the concept of Cultural Syncretism as an amalgamation of social organisms that produce a new cultural form. I will further define it later, I am attempting to hybridise the text with spiritual beliefs, scientific stylism and my own experience, as a way of translating in writing the depths of syncretic cultures.

The text also reflects on the epistemicide (of dancing traditions) derived from what Ramón Grosfoguel<sup>3</sup> calls 'the civilization of death'. I associate his philosophy with the multiplicity of 'moving identities' present in a contemporary dancer that scholar Jenny Roche exposed in 2015. I post references to Afro-Caribbean and Indigenous dance practices, such as La Parranda de San Pedro, Los Tambores de San Juan de Naiguatá, El Baile del Mono, among others, through video documentaries and in-studio movement research.

In addition, I draw extensive reference from the research of Barbara Ehrenreich<sup>4</sup> who makes historical connections between secularisation and the practice of ecstatic ritual, possessions and trance. Beyond where this history is documented, I propose becoming aware of forms of cultural syncretism to confront contrasting moving identities that come together even in their apparent difference. I question how it is possible to encourage access to multiple forms of embodiment and dance traditions that extend political borders and promote decolonial thought.

Here you go, syncretism is one of the concepts that reiterate among historical discourses about the cultural colonisation of Latin America. Especially, when it comes to social crossroads of knowledge and traditions. It is present in the food, dances, language, religions among other forms of culture. It serves to explain why Afro-Caribbeans worship catholic deities like San Pedro or San Juan (St. Peter and St. John). And consequently why there are dances with their names.

Cultural syncretism, as the meeting of two or more cultures, initially began with religious traditions that were compromised to change its concepts and/or meanings to subjugate to a new dominating religious form. A new cultural form develops because of the incapability of erasing the traditions of the culture that is forced to mutate. As an example, after the catholic and Yoruba religions were syncretised, Santería emerged in Afro Cuban culture. In Venezuela, 'La Virgen del Valle,' illustrates this phenomena as a catholic saint that was

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<sup>3</sup> Ramon Grosfoguel is a Professor who specialises in decolonization of knowledge and power, international migration and political economy of the world system.

<sup>4</sup> Barbara Ehrenreich is an American author and political activist. During the 1980s and early 1990s she was a prominent figure in the Democratic Socialists of America. She is a widely read and award-winning columnist and essayist, and author of 21 books. Ehrenreich is perhaps best known for her 2001 book *Nickel and Dimed: On (Not) Getting By in America*; a memoir of Ehrenreich's three-month experiment surviving on a series of minimum wage jobs. She is a recipient of a Lannan Literary Award. Source: <https://www.barbaraehrenreich.com/landing-page/barbara-ehrenreich-about/>

syncretised with the Waikerí deity of the sea, and later with the water spirits of Yoruba in the African diaspora (uniting European, Native Caribbean and West African cultures), yet it is celebrated in the custody of the Catholic institution.

When one reflects about decolonization in dance practice one is referring to bringing back to life forms of knowledge that have suffered extinction due to colonisation and the pass of time. In a way, my analogy of the exploitation of pearls and other natural resources of the Caribbean and Latin America serves as a metaphor for the epistemicide experienced in the so-called 'new world', and their polyvalent aftereffects. Nowadays, natural pearls are very rarely seen because "mollusks were nearly hunted to extinction [and] pearl-bearing oysters depleted by over-harvesting in the 18th and 19th centuries."<sup>5</sup> Numerous sources document that Columbus [...] stumbled upon pearls during his third voyage (1498) off the Venezuelan shores of Paria<sup>6</sup>. Mindful of the controversiality of Cervantes' take on the what's has been written about *los conquistadores*, I still see his understanding of the historical repression:

Although many Spaniards continued to behave as if the indigenous peoples were their personal property, they were also being made aware that, at least in theory, they were free. This soon made the lure of previously undiscovered riches more enticing than slave trading. The pearl fisheries spotted by Columbus just off the coast of Venezuela on his third voyage were a case in point. Among those who made a beeline for them at the first opportunity was Amerigo Vespucci<sup>7</sup> [the word America comes from him, - insert eyes rolling up-]

This quote summarises the desire for the natural possessions found in the "new world". The emphasis on the extraction of pearls gives particular attention to this natural resource in the Caribbean. The interest that was targeted in the location becomes a proof of what later will inform the religious beliefs about *La Virgen del Valle*. It sets the convenient appropriation of the Catholic church and consequent miracles surrounding natural resources such as pearls and its capitalist extraction.

Religious syncretism was beneficial to Christianity in the Americas because it served as an excuse to 'legitimately' appropriate all kinds of resources and erase forms of knowledge already existing. Grosfoguel indicates that "there were multiple civilizations, with different logics of political authority, of economy of conceptions among the relationships between humans and other non-human forms of life. An ecological vision different from the western one where there were a lot of forms of democracy that have been erased by the Eurocentric history of this civilization of death that we call 'western modernity'."<sup>8</sup> This led me to think that religious syncretism played a crucial role in the cultural death of dancing rituals of the Indigenous and the African diaspora in the Americas.

Therefore, in Latin America, movement rituals previous to colonisation and syncretism changed to accommodate the colonising power, even if the intention remained. The original dies to transform into a newly syncretic form of knowledge. This complements what Grosfogel

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<sup>5</sup> Pearl Knowledge [https://rawpearls.com.au/pearl\\_knowledge](https://rawpearls.com.au/pearl_knowledge)

<sup>6</sup> Figueroa C. Juan David Regiones muy ricas de oro y gemas. *Information and Representations about Precious Stones in the First Printed Sources on Spanish America (1493-1526)*. 2017.

<sup>7</sup> Fernando Cervantes. "Conquistadores. A New History". 2020.

<sup>8</sup> Ramón Grosfoguel cerrando el curso Descolonizar las Historia Mundial. Youtube Channel "Historias Globales desde el Sur". June 2021. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=aheJvAtYOK>

discloses as epistemicide, and what I extend as the epistemicide of dances resulting from colonisation and since perpetuated as a racist practice. It undermines, renames, appropriates and claims as discovered the customs and traditions of any culture outside Western civilization. As Grosfogel says:

It was inspired in the methods used against Muslims [and Jews] in the Iberian Peninsula (Garrido Aranda 1980). It was a form of “spiritualicide” and “epistemicide” at the same time. The destruction of knowledge and spirituality went also together in the conquest of both Al-Andalus and the Americas.<sup>9</sup>

Contributing to such perspective, the research of Barbara Ehrenreich offers a historical association to this phenomena by asserting that “theologically, the larger “syncretic,” or hybrid, religions—Vodou, Candomblé, and Santería—are defined by their use of the Catholic saints as a cover for a pantheon of African-derived deities. [...]”<sup>10</sup> Ehrenreich continues to describe them as “ecstatic, danced religions, in which music and the muscular synchrony of dance are employed to induce a state of trance interpreted as possession by, or transcendent unity with, a god.” And this is what I affirm as the important spiritual connection to nature that ancient rites practised to, e.g, celebrate harvest. In fact, I believe that Ehrenreich prehistoric and mediaeval research should be mandatory when imparting the history of dance in dance education. Especially, since the author argues that these ecstatic, danced religions were what people practised before the institutionalisation of movement practices, the birth of manners to categorise social classes, and ‘classical’ ballet.

In “Dancing in the Streets” the autor continues to expose how “to most European observers, the danced rituals leading to possession trance looked like madness, complete abandon, or sexual frenzy”. These projections have been carried and escalated in contemporary times. Dances of the African diaspora are sexualised, commercialised and portrayed as forms of entertainment that disregard their cultural relevance, resulting on cultural racism<sup>11</sup>.

The Salsa tradition and the history of this dance demonstrates this repression, as a practice influenced by Afro-Caribbean culture, its history poses a great example that situates such practice and urges for naming its syncretic qualities beyond the label of ‘social dance’:

European immigrants projected their perceptions of Salsa onto the people in countries in which they immigrated. Licentious, immoral—these are words they used to describe this dance form and to judge the character of those who enjoyed it. This judgmental, misleading stereotype was used to justify oppression of Africans in Cuba and Puerto Ricans in New York.<sup>12</sup>

I only cite Salsa because it is an amalgamation of dances that plays as both: survival strategy and epistemicide, depending on the perspective you look at it from. Because numerous hybridised dancing traditions that are currently practised depict the contemporary

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<sup>9</sup> Grosfoguel, Ramón. The Structure of Knowledge in Westernized Universities. *Human Architecture: Journal of the Sociology of Self-Knowledge*, XI, Issue 1, Fall 2013

<sup>10</sup> Ehrenreich, Barbara. “Dancing in the Streets: A History of Collective Joy” 2015.

<sup>11</sup> Mukhopadhyay, Carol C.; Chua, Peter (2008). “Cultural Racism”. In John Hartwell Moore (ed.). *Encyclopedia of Race and Racism*. Gale. pp. 377–383. “a form of racism (that is, a structurally unequal practice) that relies on cultural differences rather than on biological markers of racial superiority or inferiority.”

<sup>12</sup> Brianna Rae Johnson, “Salsa’s Sexuality: Rooted in Racism,” <https://briannaraedance.com/2017/12/06/salsas-sexuality-rooted-in-racism/>

result of the forced Cultural Syncretism that began with colonisation in Latin America and the Caribbean. The dominating powers, not surprisingly, remain. In reality, beyond naming the African influence, the spiritual/ritualistic origins of these dances linger rather mysterious or silenced, because to this date they are still named and practised within the institution of Catholicism ([See video example](#), approximate time: 4:55).

In certain contexts, dances of the African diaspora were strongly secularised, losing their ancestral connection to nature and spirituality with the passage of time. And, due to forms of epistemic racism<sup>13</sup>, it is more acceptable to talk about the European/Christian centred influences that repressed such practices. Another example sets a dance from Caicara in Venezuela. Named *El baile del Mono*, it suffered from a form of secularisation that erased its indigenous knowledge:

Those stating that the Monkey Dance was simply a craze, taking over in the 1920s and eventually silencing any reference to the Day of the Innocents, are predominantly older people with strong ties to Caicara's agricultural past. However, those insisting that the Day of the Monkey is a completely indigenous celebration, with no link whatsoever to any European or African tradition, are for the most part young men who have left Caicara in order to study or work [...] But economic realities are always bound to social ones, and if the 'Indianness' of the Mono celebration is being used to indicate an era of pastoral plenty and wellbeing, it also resituates the participants who wish, at least for the day, to recover that reality.<sup>14</sup>

Living in a Western society, I recognize how syncretism is seldom a topic of discussion. In a document called "San Juan Bautista en Venezuela", found in the archive of Fundacion Bigott that is a cultural heritage organisation based in Caracas, it is clear that the religious influences that syncretised with this dance are overlooked and display the Africans and Indigenous only as "participants":

[Translated from Spanish]

Like the other Catholic religious festivals, that of San Juan Bautista began to be celebrated in [Venezuela] from the colonial period, when the Christian religion spread and the first confraternities were founded in his honour. In the contraternities or religious brotherhoods of San Juan Bautista, the participation of the population of indigenous and African origin and their descendants was allowed, and it was accepted that they demonstrate their fervour with their music and dance.<sup>15</sup>

This is another example of how the knowledge carried through these dances was erased by Cristianity. It's a sort of death, like the one of the pearls in the Caribbean due to capitalist extraction. In the previous quote, we can observe that the participation of the Indigenous and African populations is not regarded as relevant features of this ritual celebration. However, the movement aesthetic and costumes carry a strongly visible African influence ([See video](#)<sup>16</sup>). That is a consequence of a previous erasure of dances from the Christian churches:

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<sup>13</sup> With this concept I relate to Grosfoguel: "Epistemic privilege and epistemic inferiority are two sides of the same coin, a coin named epistemic racism/sexism (Grosfoguel, 2012a) where one side is considered superior and the other side inferior." Found in: Grosfoguel R. (2015) Epistemic Racism/Sexism, Westernized Universities and the Four Genocides/Epistemicides of the Long Sixteenth Century. In: Araújo M., Maeso S.R. (eds) Eurocentrism, Racism and Knowledge. Palgrave Macmillan, London. [https://doi.org/10.1057/9781137292896\\_2](https://doi.org/10.1057/9781137292896_2)

<sup>14</sup> Stewart, Charles and Shaw, Rosalind (Editors). *Syncretism/Anti-syncretism. The politics of religious synthesis*.

<sup>15</sup> San Juan Bautista in Venezuela. Bigott Foundation.

<sup>16</sup> "Fiesta De San Juan Bautista. Naiguata 2017" <https://youtu.be/EX1GPnBLHwk?t=77>

Christians in our own time wriggle mightily to evade these teachings, which, from a cold, capitalistic perspective, look like sheer madness. But Jesus' instructions may have made perfect sense to the early acolytes, who spoke in tongues and drank and danced together with their hair streaming. What are possessions, what is individual pride, to people who can routinely achieve ecstatic merger through their communal rites? The early Christian patriarchs may not have realized that, in attempting to suppress ecstatic practices, they were throwing out much of Jesus too.<sup>17</sup>

As a result of the Church ruling powers in the 17th century, the concept of syncretism isn't always attributed with positive connotations, this is explained by confronting the history of syncretism in Europe. During this time, the term was used to castigate colonial churches that had burst out of the sphere of mission control and begun to "illegitimately" indigenise christianity instead of properly reproducing the European form of christianity they had originally been offered. The anthropologist Melville Herskovits considered syncretism "a valuable concept for specifying the degree to which diverse cultures had integrated..."<sup>18</sup> Herskovits advocated for African and African-American studies in American academia.

## The myriad selves of a Dancer

In this article, I speak from the perspective that what we know today as Contemporary Dance is influenced by cultural syncretism, in all its historical connotations. Living in a globalised society results from the merging of cultures, in simple maths. Although those cultures hardly ever interact at an equal level. Similarly, the dancing body experiences multiple selves resulting from the various moving identities collected through dance training and the exposure to numerous cultural influences, yet colonial hierarchical structures generally push aside, for instance, the dances of the African diaspora in Contemporary Dance education and the profound discourses that robustify them.

Connecting the investigation to a time and space proximity, Moving Identity (ies) is a concept of the European academic context when it comes to literary research based on choreography and Contemporary Dance. According to Jennifer Roche in *Multiplicity, Embodiment and the Contemporary Dancer* (2015)

[...] the dancer's moving identity as an accumulation of choreographic movement incorporations and training influences, which also includes the life path of a dancer as a gendered, socially and culturally located subject; it is in the site where consistencies are apparent and patterns emerge. A dancing body is crucible, a host to the haunting power of choreographic traces (that remain available to be re-embodied again, a site of potentiality, a lived archive and the dancer's habitual form [...]) The moving identity is an accumulation of incorporated movement that is assembled through dancing experiences. Previously embodied movement is integrated into the moving present through a process of sedimentation - a settling over time. Beyond merely a habit body, the moving identity displays the stylistic subtext as a movement signature that a dancer forms throughout her/his career path.<sup>19</sup>

When analysing Roche's definition of moving identity I find it crucial when she says "beyond merely a habit body". Acknowledging that the body inevitably will come to habitual patterns when improvising or composing movement. Going further, if we relate the definition of

<sup>17</sup> Ibid. Dancing in the Streets.

<sup>18</sup> Andre Apter. "Herkovits Heritage: Rethinking Syncretism in the African Diaspora" In: Anita M. Leopold and Jeppe S. Jensen. Syncretism in Religion. A reader. 2004

<sup>19</sup> Jennifer Roche in *Multiplicity, Embodiment and the Contemporary Dancer* (2015)

moving identity to the way that communities (even pre-historically in the case of African, Indigenous and lower class Europeans) have danced and created their own movement traditions by collective ecstatic embodiment, we can extract that this concept also relates to a wider form of embodiment that, as Roche says: "...also includes the life path of a dancer as a gendered, socially and culturally located subject" meaning that not only academic training informs the physicality of a dancer but also the cultural contexts and the dances that, in practice, become part of their individual and collective movement identity.

In my current way of thinking, influenced by a 'new wave'<sup>20</sup> of decolonial discourse, if we are to decolonise contemporary dance (and dance education) we must recognise and practice the contributions of dances outside Academic circles and Euro American borders. While also recognising their European influence as culturally syncretic dance forms. I strive to uplift, appreciate, and question them. I search for interactions that acknowledge these as forms of art with endless movement research potential. We can begin by understanding the historical reasons why there's a sense of "time stuckness" or extinction.

Such a feeling of stuckness is characterised by the use of labels like "folkloric dance", "ethnic dance", "traditional dance", and even "contemporary dance". Under this idea of decolonising dance curriculum, Could institutions embody syncretic roughness, and what was previously documented as savage? The people who practiced movement rituals shaped by cultural syncretism were not allowed to embody and worship their deities nor evolve with their own cosmovision in the way they did before becoming slaves. So how to find accessible strategies of dance knowledge transmission out of forms of knowledge that have, essentially, been erased? I believe that becoming aware of this part of the history, naming influences and territories would help us to articulate these traces/leftovers. And, by doing so, tracing the links that exist within multiple cultural forms of dance, and decolonising the history of dance.

The noticing of how colonial hierarchies are still present in Dance Education today makes me wonder what is there to act upon. How to relate to standardised dance practices (named Classical, modern and post-modern dance) and how to appropriately utilise forms of knowledge beyond political borders. This will not only support us to question the western gaze, taste and aesthetic, but also, what lies beneath a joyful, ecstatic and collective form of dance.

With this investigation, I wanted to articulate a form of cultural syncretism that defies how contrasting moving identities can come together even if they appear to have nothing in common. However, socio-political implications show the need to dig deeper into the reasons why these are not at an equal level, and probably will never be.

Moving with other dancers in the dance studio ([See video](#)<sup>21</sup>), I realised the need to acknowledge how culture influences the way we dance in certain contexts. "What is my culture?" Some of them wondered. The encouragement of a body's moving identity allows heterogeneous societal awareness. A new - I hope non violent - form of syncretism takes place. Valuing how a person or collective moves, in this sense, becomes a form of accessibility towards cultural multiplicity.

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<sup>20</sup> I call this a "New Wave" because it's how I experience topics of cultural racism and decolonization more present after the murder of George Floyd in 2020.

<sup>21</sup> "Parranda" by Juan Urbina (movement research process) <https://youtu.be/E1BY2BVmZ3Y>

## A “Dead dances” paradigm.

There’s a notion that “robust African religious traditions have muted the voices of academic skeptics who questioned the ability to prove [that] certain African religions survived oppressive conditions of colonialism in the Americas.”<sup>22</sup> Even though the Caribbean is an undeniable proof that these traditions are alive, especially alive through their bodies in movement. It is also undeniable that systems rooted in epistemic racism have excluded them while creating a paradigmatic death.

Adding to this paradigm, dancing “La Parranda de San Pedro” away from its original context ([Like in this video](#)<sup>23</sup> for instance) is comparable to the modern production of artificial pearls. Where a man-made environment is fabricated to produce them. But the difference lies in the necessary consciousness beyond westernised/eurocentric perspective and the sides of history many are uninformed about.

Syncretic dances such as Los Tambores de San Pedro or San Juan (among others) bring back to life their historical relevance and the consciousness of what has been repressed. A healing miracle could rise as the intention. When it comes to the societal responsibility of an industrialised world, there’s a historical duty of creating awareness about the toll of colonialism. I’ve come to think that I can neither perform nor transmit any of these syncretic dancing rituals. But I believe I can uplift these as the dancing memories that have influenced my own movement physicality.

This awareness serves as a bridge to bring cultures together. Cultures that consider themselves restricted to experience the dances, customs and religions of ‘the other’. There’s an inevitable rupture that comes when the aforementioned is put into practice. And if one feels uncomfortable being present at an African ritual celebration with strong ties to its religious roots, why is it then permissible to enjoy a Afro-Caribbean traditional dish? The way the Western civilization popularly supports international cuisine, should also be the way it’s permissible to dance to the religious drummings and their deities. Dancing to the merged Afro-Caribbean deities in the sound of ‘Los repiques del tambor’ makes syncretism visible through ecstatic embodiment and the celebration of the dancing body.

The departure of my aunt reminded me of the constant state of loss of ancestral knowledge. *El día de Los Muertos* in the Mexican/Latin American ritual tradition is a way of mourning all that knowledge that didn’t survive, that was un-documented, repressed. I dedicate this writing to an attempt of balancing the powers within cultural syncretism, in the name of ancestral person-to-person movement traditions, honouring the bodies that transmitted such ‘vernacular’ knowledge. The civilization of death can also become the civilization of transcendence, beyond the experience of normality and towards a balanced syncretic understanding of the world we share, with humans and non-humans. I hear “Una visión más abierta de la ‘otredad’” (A more open perspective of otherness).

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<sup>22</sup> Murrel, Nathaniel Samuel. *Afro-Caribbean Religions: An Introduction to Their Historical, Cultural, and Sacred Traditions*. 2009

<sup>23</sup> “Entrevista - Parranda de San Pedro - Fundación Bigott”. Youtube Channel of Fundación Bigott <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MxUjyA6cbdE&t=1s>

[and now, exhale]

That was intense.

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