



**Title of the article: Moving Words, Thinking Movement: Three Peruvian Approaches to Dance and Diversity**

**Name of the Authors: Pamela Santana Oliveros, Pontificia Universidad Católica del Perú**

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# Moving Words, Thinking Movement: Three Peruvian Approaches to Dance and Diversity<sup>1</sup>

Pamela Santana Oliveros

Pontificia Universidad Católica del Perú

## Abstract

Based on the Redefining the Contemporary Symposium held online in 2020, this article explores “traditional” and “contemporary” concepts derived from the Peruvian roundtable and the effects these categorical perspectives can have on dancers’ practices and experiences. Further explored in this article are how “essentialist” discourses of identity and negative recognition of diversity can be intertwined in how dance is conceptualized, practiced, and taught. Focusing on three Peruvian artists’ ideas and artistic proposals: Antonio Vélchez, Luz Gutiérrez, and Carmen Román, this paper further interprets their dance practices as decolonial actions that postulate an alternative *mestizaje* as a means to advance the positive recognition of diversity in a Peruvian dance context.

## Keywords

*Aesthetics, dance, diversity, decoloniality, mestizaje, Peru*

## Biography

Pamela is a Peruvian researcher, teacher, and dancer based in Lima. She holds a BA in Performing Arts from Pontificia Universidad Católica del Perú and an MA in Dance Knowledge, Practice and Heritage (Choreomundus). She has presented her research at conferences in Peru, Hawai’i, and the UK. Since 2021, she has been part of the Performing Arts Faculty at the Pontificia Universidad Católica del Perú. Her research areas are the anthropological study of dance, aesthetics, and politics, and the intersections between gender, dance, and performance in Latin America.

## Contact

[pamesanoliveros@gmail.com](mailto:pamesanoliveros@gmail.com), [psantana@pucp.pe](mailto:psantana@pucp.pe)

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<sup>1</sup> This article goes in memory of Colleen Lanki, dear friend and colleague. Your vision for the world of dance will inspire me forever.

## Introduction

*Todas las Sangres* (Every Blood) is the title of a novel by the Peruvian author and ethnologist Jose Maria Arguedas, a devoted promoter and defender of Andean culture. From this book, published in 1964, the expression “Peru, pais de todas las sangres” (Peru, the country of every blood) was born and has remained fixed in Peruvians’ collective consciousness. At the roots of this expression lies the appreciation of two ideas: the positive recognition of Peru's cultural diversity and the *mestizaje*, a blend of cultural streams, present within each individual. For Arguedas, the cultural revitalization of the indigenous world (Portocarrero, 2015, p. 171) is crucial in recognizing diversity within the country and is a necessary move for the creation of a new kind of Peruvian society, one that acknowledges the blend of cultural streams that weave throughout the lives of Peruvians.

The perception of indigenous peoples as “culturally backward” has prevailed in Peru since colonial times. Despite past ideological projects that sought to vindicate and integrate oppressed indigenous cultures, those efforts can be valued as compensatory responses to a primitive

devaluation for which they cannot compensate (Portocarrero, 2013, p. 167). The failure of alternative decolonial visions to resolve the devaluation of the indigenous is evident in the inequality still present between different ethnic and cultural groups in Peru. As pointed out in the 171st conclusion of the Peruvian Truth and Reconciliation Commission’s<sup>2</sup>(2003) report:

Reconciliation must occur [...] oriented toward an overarching goal: building a country that is positively recognized as multiethnic, pluricultural, and multilingual. That recognition is the basis for overcoming the discriminatory practices underlying the multiple discords in the history of our Republic.

From my standpoint, as a Peruvian dance researcher, I see the complex landscape of Peruvian culture and its continued struggle with reconciliation and inequity as proof that positive recognition of diversity is still an unaccomplished project. As anthropologist Hugo Chacón suggests, regarding the expression “Peru, the country of every blood,” the magnitude of the expression’s dissemination and influences are as vigorous as the possibility of making it a reality

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<sup>2</sup> The Truth and Reconciliation Commission was created in 2001 during the transition government of Valentin Panigua to “investigate the crimes and violations of human rights that occurred between May 1980 and November 2000, enacted by the actors of the internal armed conflict” (Mantilla, 2006, p. 323). The final report concluded the death of more than 70

thousand people, the main victims were peasant populations located in rural areas (Reategui, 2009). The report acknowledged the existence of violence based on race-ethnicity and gender during this period and posited a series of recommendations towards the purpose of reconciliation of the Peruvian society.

is still far away (2017, p. 247). This expression is used often by politicians to depict a united country, but in reality, this vision of cultural and ethnic united diversity does not exist in practice.

With the above in mind, I offer my reflections and analysis from a roundtable discussion at the 2020 *Redefining the Contemporary Symposium*, in which the ideas of diversity and Peruvian dance were at the forefront. The symposium was an international event led by Colleen Lanki,<sup>3</sup> artistic director of TomoeArts, and featured three virtual roundtables involving dance practitioners from three countries: Canada, India, and Peru.<sup>4</sup> Colleen Lanki, myself, and Kavya Iyer were the coordinators and curators of the Canadian, Peruvian, and Indian roundtables, respectively. At this symposium, artists were invited to gather and discuss how their choreography and performances have been perceived and conceptualized in relation to the influences and effects of categorizations of “traditional” and “contemporary” in dance. The three virtual roundtables demonstrated points of convergence in how taxonomies in dance create material and ideological challenges for artists working on the

frontiers of traditional and contemporary. In the Peruvian roundtable, however, another particular issue was highlighted when a conversation arose on the topic of concert dance: the negative recognition of Peru’s cultural diversity and the continued inequality and discrimination that infiltrates dance practice.

The Peruvian roundtable<sup>5</sup> featured three dance artists each with an established artistic trajectory: Antonio Vilchez, Luz Gutiérrez, and Carmen Román. As curator of the Peruvian roundtable, my selection of the participants aimed to represent artists who often worked, in what some might consider, the margins of dance in terms of discipline and style, and whose political intentions inform their artistic choices and practices. All three artists describe their practice as embodying knowledge from traditional Peruvian dances. At the same time, they understand their artistic practices as contemporary, referring to their spirit to create, as author Ananya Chatterjea describes when writing on the topic of contemporary dance, “in response to the issues of the day” (2020, p. xii). In my opinion, the composition of this panel was an excellent demonstration of artists with solid

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<sup>3</sup> Colleen Lanki (1965-2023) was a dancer, choreographer and scholar specialized in Japanese classical dance and theater. She was director of TomoeArts, a dance-theater company based in Vancouver. Company’s website: <http://www.tomoearts.org>

<sup>4</sup> *Redefining the Contemporary* was a local project initiated by TomoeArts and Colleen Lanki in 2019. In

2020, it became an international event developed by Colleen Lanki and Pamela Santana.

<sup>5</sup> The Peruvian roundtable was presented on the 11<sup>th</sup> of December, 2020 as part of the International Festival of Lima Danza Nueva Vol.2. organized by ICPNA. View the panel here: [Redefining the Contemporary Symposium - Peru \(2020\)](#)

careers as dancers, teachers, and choreographers, who could academically reflect and discuss from their personal practice-based knowledge.

In this paper, I build upon specific ideas explored and produced in the context of the Peruvian roundtable on the topic of perceptions surrounding “traditional” and “contemporary” in dance. As coordinator, I attended the virtual roundtable and participated in the event’s introduction and closure while taking notes. As part of the organization of the panel, we held group and individual conversations before and after the roundtable. Furthermore, I held informal conversations with the artists during the 2020-2022 period. All of these endeavors have informed and nurtured the reflection I present in this article. Additionally, my position as a Contemporary dance<sup>6</sup> practitioner with studies in anthropology, and who is currently invested in the ongoing debate regarding intersections of arts and politics, has triggered my attention and commitment to this topic of traditional and contemporary.

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<sup>6</sup> Throughout the paper, I will use Contemporary dance with a capital C to refer to the concert dance genre developed in Europe and the United States, which groups diverse movement techniques and artistic proposals. Peruvian dancer, choreographer and scholar Maria Paz Valle Riestra explains that Contemporary dance’s birth in Peru is linked to the arrival and establishment of ballet and modern dance in the 50s. In the 80s, modern dance entered a stage of questioning and experimentation that gave birth to new artistic proposals included later under the umbrella term Contemporary dance (Valle Riestra,

Through this article, my goal is to share how essentialist discourses of identity and negative recognition of diversity affect how dance is conceptualized and practiced, as described and discussed by the panelists. First, I begin by presenting a broader socio-historical framework to contextualize the ideas and experiences shared by the artists later in the article. And to conclude, I interpret the artists’ agency and artistic proposals as decolonial approaches, which can help to understand and grapple with what I perceive as an ongoing problem of categorization of dances in the Peruvian context.<sup>7</sup>

### **A Social-Historical Framework: Legacies of Colonialism**

In order to discuss diversity in Peruvian dance, it is essential to contextualize discrimination and racism in Peruvian society. According to anthropologist Marisol de la Cadena: “In Peru, everyone accepts that social discrimination is pervasive, and almost everybody would explain and even justify such

2020). Today, Contemporary dance has positioned itself as a dance genre in Peru’s academic and art circuit.

<sup>7</sup> This paper provides a decolonial frame to read these artists’ performances and practices. It is important to clarify that none of these artists explicitly state their approach or work as decolonial, nevertheless, their ideas and practices are aligned with a decolonial frame of thought. From the three artists, Carmen has acknowledged her objective of *decolonizing* dances through her artistic and pedagogical work.

practices in terms of ‘cultural differences’” (2000, p. 1). However, as the author suggests, many Peruvians often deny their racism based on the idea that discriminatory practices do not refer to innate biological but cultural differences (2000, p. 2). The problem of discrimination, as Peruvians face it today, is a colonial legacy. Thus, I first briefly turn to the Spanish invasion of Peru.

The colonial system imposed by Spanish conquerors on the country from 1530 to 1821 established a socio-political and economic order that classified and placed hierarchies among people based on the category of race, producing “new historical, social identities in America—Indians, blacks, and mestizos”<sup>8</sup> (Quijano, 2000, p. 534). In this system, the colonized people and their cultural products were held as primitive, thus inferior to the colonizer’s culture, which was defined as modern and equivalent to progress and civilization. This initial race-based difference that justified the perception of one group as superior to others became the foundation of the colonial order which still operates today as a pervasive attitude in Peru. As anthropologist Anibal Quijano states, “The racial axis has a colonial origin and character, but it has proven to be more durable and stable than the colonialism in whose matrix it was established” (2000, p. 533).

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<sup>8</sup> A current understanding of *mestizo* is a racialized cultural mixture of Spanish and indigenous (de la Cadena, 2000, p. 5).

One of the legacies of the colonial project was the incorporation of a dualist perspective that framed the relation between colonizers and colonized through a series of dichotomies: “Europe–non-Europe, primitive-civilized, traditional-modern” (Quijano, 2000, p. 552). Anthropologist Fernando Fuenzalida (1970, p. 21) explores how the dualist perspective, in the Peruvian context, was also extended to geographical regions, engendering an opposition between rural and urban contexts. In this process, he explains, the coast (which includes Lima, the capital) was established as the dynamic segment made up of the white minorities and the urban mestizo, and the Andean Highlands as the static segment with the indigenous majority and the provincial mestizo. This division of the territory differentiated and separated the populations and illustrates how “geographic taxonomies are simultaneously constituted in evaluative racial denominations about human beings” (Méndez, 2011, p. 61).

In the arts, coloniality also meant the segmentation of art spaces, differentiating “cult” or “high” art from traditional or vernacular art. Where high art is related to versions of European academic culture occupying official spaces such as galleries, museums, auditoriums, and theaters (Vásquez, 2009), and traditional art was relegated to the production of native culture

usually of oral tradition treated as Folklore or Crafts and designated officially to unofficial spaces (Vásquez, 2009). This segmentation of art spaces contributed to the creation of a canon within the arts that positioned western dance forms as superior to traditional or folk dance forms.

This colonial attitude is also manifested in the Peruvian educational system and concretely, in arts and dance education. In schools,<sup>9</sup> education in arts cultivated the formation of a sense of cultural “taste” based on the hegemonic concept of culture which exoticized the “national” and idealized the “foreign.” In the particular case of dance, Peruvian dances were usually grouped as folk dances and taught separately from Western dances. Despite folk dances being broadly taught in primary and secondary levels of schools, they were transmitted as frozen forms, highlighting the use of costumes and props without any insight into the uses, meanings, or current manifestations of the dances in their particular contexts. These

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<sup>9</sup> Peru’s basic education system includes early education, primary (6 years) and secondary education (5 years). The contents transmitted in schools align with the National Curriculum of Basic Education. Within the curriculum, the Arts and Culture area aims to form students to appreciate and critically evaluate arts and cultural manifestations (Ministerio de Educación, 2016). Also, students can learn in private or public schools, depending on their family incomes.

<sup>10</sup> The reflections I present are based on my personal experience of being educated in a private school in Lima and material gathered through online surveys to approximate 30 people between 18 and 30 years, out

dances were often performed for contests or as shows for civic and national festivities. This type of transmission, in my view, does not foster an understanding of traditional dances and risks the danger of reinforcing stereotypes about Peru’s different cultural groups. As for Modern and Contemporary dance, they were not as widely transmitted in schools. They were usually taught as courses or extracurricular activities in upper-class private schools of Lima, which led to the general perception of these dances as belonging to an elite. The school educational system formed sensibilities that aligned with colonial logic, reinforcing the asymmetry between traditional and contemporary in the arts and the perception of traditional dances as not subject to change.<sup>10</sup>

In the Peruvian higher education setting, there is also a separation of dance spaces according to the labels of traditional and contemporary. There is an evident predominance of western dances in institutions of “knowledge,” such as universities, where modern and

of which 50% study in Lima in private schools and 50% in other cities (Huancayo, Cusco, Chota, and Tarapoto) in private schools. This outcome signals the necessity to explore experiences of learning dances among state schools. I must acknowledge that through this reflection, I do not pretend to encompass the diversity of teaching approaches and teaching contexts within Peru or to underestimate the work of Peruvian dance teachers. This reflection targets the Peruvian educational system and institutions whose practices undermine the positive recognition of Peru’s cultural diversity.

Contemporary dance are positioned as legitimate forms of study in which a student can earn a university degree<sup>11</sup>. Contemporary, modern, and classical dance is most often the foundational techniques of dance curricula at the university level. Despite offering a Bachelor's in Dance, which might imply learning about dance at large, these universities offer most of their practical courses belonging to these three genres.

The imbalance between traditional and contemporary is also mirrored in the predominant performance of western dance forms, such as ballet and Contemporary dance, in professional stages and theaters. Although companies such as *Ballet Folclórico Nacional del Perú*<sup>12</sup> perform in big theaters such as *Gran Teatro Nacional* or *Teatro Municipal*, these theaters' programming is mainly occupied by ballet performances, Contemporary dance performances, residencies,<sup>13</sup> and opera. Peruvian audience's consumption demonstrates the lack of visibility of non-western dances in mainstream spaces. As Luz Gutiérrez commented during the roundtable, it was not until the 70s and 80s that

the audience accepted dances inspired by tradition and folklore on large stages.

All the examples above reveal the perpetuation of colonial aesthetics, a system of value that positions western cultural production as superior to national or local ones. Traditional and contemporary are inherited concepts that are used without consciousness of the connotations they carry and the asymmetry they may produce in practice. These concepts cannot be assessed in isolation from the socio-political and economic power system they help maintain. They were strategically deployed in the construction of alterity and continue contributing to Peru's social fragmentation. Today, two years after the bicentennial of Peru's independence from Spanish colonization, the discussion regarding the pertinence of the traditional and contemporary categories appears to arrive late but, simultaneously, more than necessary.

### **Artist Agency and Decolonial Proposals: Dance, Identity, and *Mestizaje***

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<sup>11</sup> An exception to this landscape was the authorization granted to the National Superior School of Folklore José María Arguedas in 2008 to grant bachelor and licentiate degrees to students.

<sup>12</sup> Company of folk dances and music from the National Superior School of Folklore José María Arguedas (ENSFJMA).

<sup>13</sup> The majority of Contemporary dance companies that have performed in this theater are foreign. In Peru's Contemporary dance scene, there is not a system of dance companies. Contemporary dancers usually perform or create collectives that have a short

span of life. Additionally, in the last 10 years, institutions (private and public) have provided some residency opportunities where usually a foreign choreographer is invited to choreograph a piece with Peruvian dancers. The residency often includes the presentation of the performance in a large mainstream theater. It must be acknowledged that in recent years, national choreographers such as Cristina Velarde and Luz Gutierrez have showcased their work at Gran Teatro Nacional.



In the following sections, I outline ways in which the three artists featured in the roundtable Antonio Vílchez, Luz Gutiérrez, and Carmen Román, respond to the rigid categorization of dances by showcasing an ability to work on the frontiers of dance styles and body techniques. In my interpretation, their efforts can be read as an attempt to build bridges between different fields, subjects, and knowledge (Belausteguigoitia, 2015, p. 32), interrogating in action old dichotomies such as urban and rural, past and present, western and non-western. By incorporating and combining different aesthetics with worldviews and dance knowledge, each artist pursues their own narratives of identity through dance.

I contend that the work these artists present surpasses essentialist definitions that tie specific dances to pure identities and ethnicities while searching for personal self-representation and identity. As anthropologist Gisela Cánepa affirms, dances are acts where society and individuals represent themselves and others (2001, p. 14). These artists' self-representation responds to a dynamic understanding of identity. In the line of thought presented by anthropologist Andrée Grau, "Identity has to be seen as fluid and

in the making. It cannot be reduced to fixed essences that confine individuals, and its edges must be considered part of the whole" (2007, p. 201). This concept of identity, the inclusiveness of its different components, and its frontiers are all evident in the new narratives of identity these artists present in their work.

Additionally, these artists advance an understanding of identity that aligns with Gloria Anzaldúa's idea of *mestizaje*<sup>14</sup> as a bridge. Anzaldúa's *mestizaje* calls upon building bridges between complex concepts that have been antagonized or opposed. It advocates for the inclusion of the diversity that shapes people's subjectivity, promoting an idea of identity as something in motion, in transit, and under construction. It also advocates for the inclusion of diverse cultural aspects amid globalization and migratory processes.

In the sections below, I will also be analyzing the ways in which these artists describe their practices from Arguedas's idea of *mestizaje* as developed by Peruvian sociologist Gonzalo Portocarrero. I consider their work as projects and proposals that aim to imagine a reconciled society that promotes development and coexistence based on the dialogue of multiple

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<sup>14</sup> Here it is important to separate this idea of *mestizaje* from Jose Vasconcelos' concept of *mestizaje* as the synthesis of all races into a "superior" one, "in which all the peoples will merge" (1948, p. 27). This process of *mestizaje* encompassed an assimilation process where "lower" species/cultures were absorbed by "superior" ones (Zang, 2015). On

the contrary, the *mestizaje* proposed by the featured artists involves the recognition of multiple legacies and cultural heritages we have as Peruvians and not just "tolerance" to other cultures. Moreover, the idea of constructing bridges among cultures does not entail the destruction of differences.

identities (2015, p. 174). Similarly, the works of Antonio, Luz, and Carmen call for a recognition of cultural diversity through exchange and dialogue between dance forms, dance spaces, and bodies that have been separated as an effect of categorization. In this sense, their artistic proposals can be interpreted as decolonial propositions that attempt to bridge distances among dancers and dance genres “through mixtures and encounters that boil in which new ways of being are cooked” (Portocarrero, 2015, p. 174).

#### **Antonio Vilchez:<sup>15</sup> Celebrating *Mestizaje***

The guiding question of Antonio Vilchez’s artistic and pedagogical practice is “Who are we?” And it is this endless question he explores in each creation. He investigates Peruvian identity as a continuous construction based on one’s actions and relationship with others, showing how “identity is first and foremost dialogic” (Grau, 2007, p. 191). In his pedagogical and artistic work, Antonio combines

western dance techniques such as Contemporary dance and tap with traditional dance styles such as *zapateo*,<sup>16</sup> *marinera*,<sup>17</sup> and Afro-Peruvian dances. He has been recognized internationally for his fusion of tap and Afro-Peruvian zapateo.

In his choreographies, he plays with a mixture of music styles with dance styles that are not normally mixed. For instance, he has danced *marinera limeña* to rap music. During the roundtable, Antonio shared a provocative thought that comes to his mind before each experimentation: “Why can’t I dance a different dance to this traditional music? What limits me?” This is a crucial question to formulate within the traditional dance setting of Lima, where rigid standards about dances’ “authenticity” prevail. This curiosity has led him to create, what I believe are some of the most polemic mixtures on stage, born from the exploration of incongruous styles and genres.

In his creative explorations, he places traditional and contemporary in a confrontation that has generated polarizing reactions from

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<sup>15</sup> Antonio is a dancer, producer, teacher, musician and choreographer that works in a variety of dance spaces in Lima –mainstream and alternative. He teaches in academic spaces and also generates independent workshops. His work has been presented in national and international stages, sometimes as producer of his own works, others as a guest for bigger productions and international festivals. He also does community work with children in the district of La Victoria with his project Landó Tap. Antonio is the director of the dance company Adu Proyecto Universal. Company’s website: <https://aduprojectouniversal.wordpress.com>

<sup>16</sup>Antonio specializes in Afro-peruvian zapateo which is both a dance style as well as a musical expression. It is based on the rhythmical percussion of the feet on the floor complemented with hand movements that involve the strike of the palms against the floor and different parts of the body.

<sup>17</sup> Couple dance that involves movements and interactions of courtship, using handkerchiefs and brushing and stomping steps. *Marinera* has different styles according to the region of development.

dance programmers and audiences. This has led to criticism from the more conservative folk-dance sphere and exclusion from participation in particular dance settings. For example, his company was denied participation in dance festivals for not fitting a concrete category. In the roundtable, he shared: “When we wanted to participate in a Contemporary dance festival, we were too folkloric for Contemporary dance, or if we wanted to participate in a folk festival, we were too contemporary for folk.”

His choreographies are innovative in terms of aesthetic choices, and his deep understanding of *marinera* – a form he has practiced since he was four years – led him to question the continuity of certain discourses attached to the dance. If “movement lexicons of males and females often demonstrate the ideals of gendered difference in action” (Reed, 1998, p. 516), Antonio’s work questions the ideas concerning men and women that *marinera* disseminates. As a reaction to *marinera*’s performance of gender, Antonio placed two female bodies dancing together. In response to the high rate of femicides and violence against the LGBTQI+ community in the country, he offered a change in the dance narrative that would align with the social context in which we live.

Antonio searches for collision through integration. I sense that in the heart of his explorations lies the proposition of a new identity for Peruvian dance, where the blend or encounter of elements does not amount to a sum of things but to a productive dialogue that leads to the creation of new realities. I find that his work responds to the divisions and exclusions encountered in dance through the experience of toxic stereotypes related to ethnicity and socioeconomic class. During the roundtable, he shared his experience of practicing certain dance traditions where his body image, color of skin, and facial features did not “correspond” to those commonly expected in the dance. As a result, he experienced feelings such as not belonging or not being “authentic” enough to perform certain dances, which has led him to ask: what people do I belong to? These experiences are expressed in the questions he shares in the video of his work “Raíces libres:”<sup>18</sup>

What is this white man doing talking about blackness?

What is this *chino*<sup>19</sup> doing talking about the Andean?

Wanting to know what is mine

From a *cajon* (percussion instrument) and zapateo.

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<sup>18</sup> Text featured in Antonio’s presentation during the Peruvian roundtable.

<sup>19</sup> In Peru, *chino* is commonly used to designate a Peruvian with Chinese descentance or a person that

presents features commonly associated with Asian people.

Antonio's questioning points to the undeniable bond that exists between certain dance forms and the ethnicity or racial identity of the dancer. Additionally, dance practices performed and safeguarded by very closed communities may require membership in order to participate, like being a local, or a member of the community, among others. However, even today, this association between dances and ethnicity is not entirely fixed and many communities of practice are becoming more flexible and welcoming "outsiders" to learn and practice the form.<sup>20</sup> For example, in the early 2000s, Antonio was not able to join *Teatro del Milenio*<sup>21</sup> because he was not black. This group was committed to the celebration of Afro-Peruvian dance and music, thus, focused on enrolling dancers that belong to a certain racial identity. Nevertheless, a few years later this restriction changed and Antonio was welcomed into the company and performed with them for several years. The feeling of being an outsider in many Peruvian dance forms pushed Antonio to seek identity through dance, taking and exploring different

cultural streams and diverse dance traditions and owning them as his:

Using our Peruvian dance and music  
As a source for creativity  
And the search for my own self<sup>22</sup>

Antonio builds identity from different fragments that compose Peruvian dance and music, stitching a new identity made up of a conglomerate of elements that represent Peru's cultural diversity. His dance practice works both as a critique of essentialist views of dances being ascribed to specific ethnicities and regions; and as advocacy for recognizing new subjects marked by experiences of migration and mestizaje. Through dancing, he recognizes diversity and his differing legacies, and how these legacies are not in confrontation but can enter dialogue and enrich one another: "Today I want to dance like my grandfather, like my great-great-grandfather. A great-great-grandfather that I may not know and that I imagine." Thus, in dancing, he may embody Arguedas's vision—as elaborated by Portocarrero—of a

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<sup>20</sup> We can find an example in *Atajo de Negritos* dance practice. According to Miguel Ballumbrosio, Afro Peruvian dancer and member of Family Ballumbrosio's Atajo, this dance "is focused towards a racial identity within Peru" (M. Ballumbrosio, personal communication, August 7, 2020). The Ballumbrosio's Atajo preserves the African legacy of this tradition, nevertheless, they welcome members that may not belong to El Carmen (locality) and their members consist both of Afro-Peruvian and mestizo people. They even welcome women in their lines,

despite originally being an all-male dance. This Atajo is an interesting example that demonstrates how traditional communities are open to change while at the same time, remain concerned with the transmission and continuity of their cultural practices.

<sup>21</sup> *Teatro del Milenio* is a cultural association that creates works inspired by Afro-Peruvian culture and combines theater, dance and music. Its aim is to promote and vindicate Afro-Peruvian legacy.

<sup>22</sup> Text featured in Antonio's presentation during the Peruvian roundtable.

*mestizaje reintegrado* which implies putting into dialogue instead of hiding, or trying to annihilate the legacies that constitute it (2015, p. 172). Through his dance practice, he offers another alternative to respond to the complex question: What does it mean to be Peruvian?

### Luz Gutiérrez:<sup>23</sup> Interweaving times, bodies, and heritages

Luz Gutiérrez's approach to creation highlights her embodiment of heritages within. She describes her mixed identity as composed of a strong legacy of *huanca*<sup>24</sup> culture from her



Image 1. Antonio Vilchez in *Raíces Libres*, a choreography where he plays with his diverse roots. Musicians: Miguel Ballumbrosio and Alvaro Sovero. Photography: Courtesy of Redefining the Contemporary Symposium.

mother's side and the cultural syncretism experienced as an immigrant in Lima. Her

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<sup>23</sup> Luz Gutiérrez is a Peruvian dancer, teacher and director of *La Trenza Danza*, a performing arts collective that creates dance performances based on the exploration and research of the folkloric event and movement. Luz started dancing in community dance spaces and folkloric settings such as folk dance contests and shows. She has performed in diverse stages such as national and international theaters, cultural centers, *peñas* (criollo and folk music houses), galleries, and public spaces. Her dialogue between artistic practices and dance genres has led

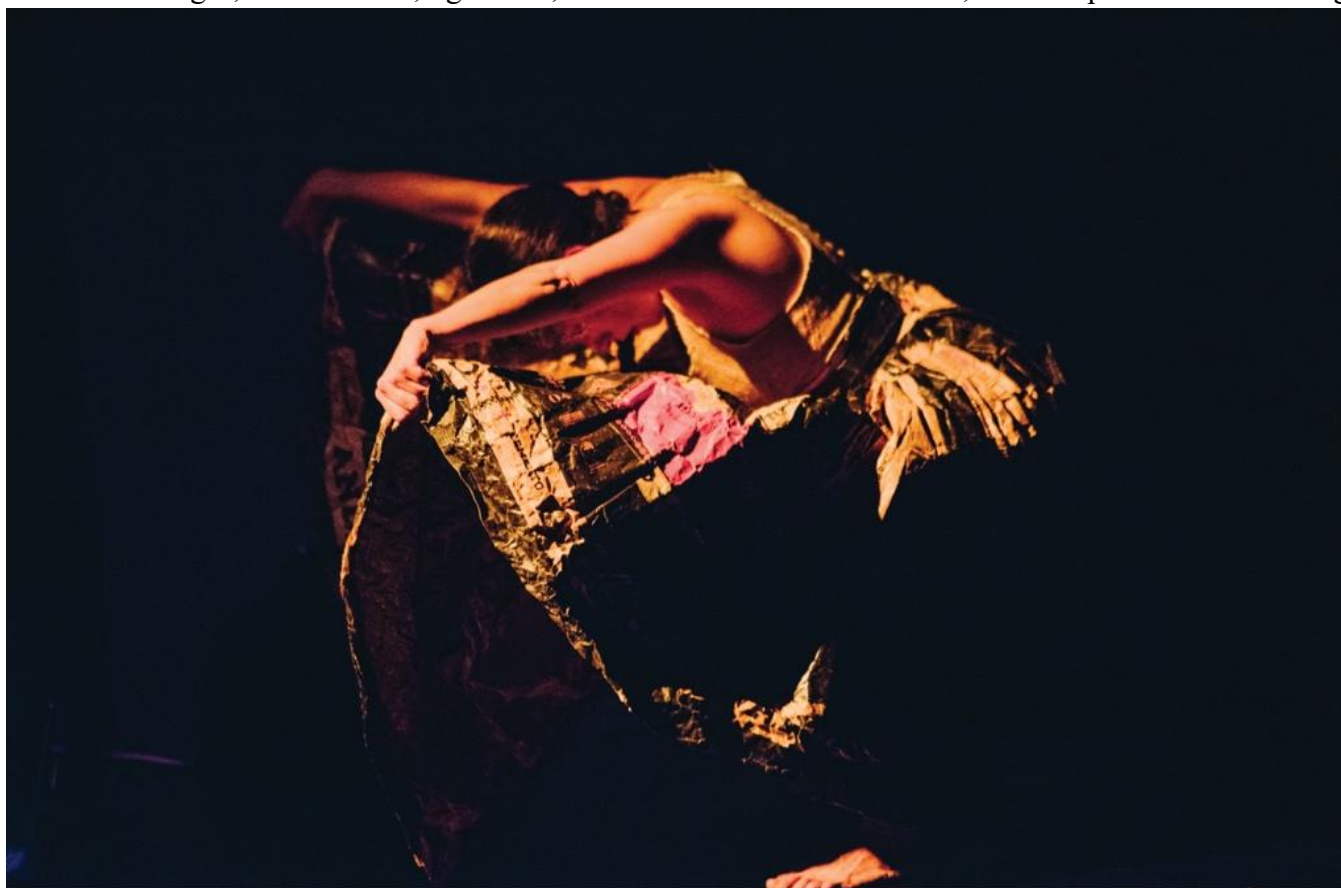
her to participate in dance events with traditional communities and popular festivities in different parts of the country while, at the same time, in mainstream theaters of the capital where she has directed both folk and Contemporary dance ensembles. She teaches at academic and independent spaces in Lima and other provinces of Peru. Company's facebook: *La Trenza Danza*.

<sup>24</sup> A pre-Inca culture that occupied the provinces of Huancayo, Jauja and Concepción.

experience, in which different cultures collide and encounter one another, is explained by Luz through the metaphor of skin. She illustrates her lineages as two layers of skin that make up her body. I contend that this metaphor of skin translates into her pedagogical and artistic practice in which it builds bridges among diverse streams of influence.

During her trips around Peru, Luz describes discovering how people rethink their dances, their costumes, their songs, and their movements every year, highlighting the way in which these ethno-cultural groups constantly update and exchange. Luz's choreography connects images, movements, gestures, and

elements from different cultures with contemporary moving bodies. In her choreography "Pollera," Luz explores a traditional element of dress from the Andean culture, the *pollera* or skirt. In dancing, as Luz explains, the skirt transforms into "somatic clothing" (Coronado & Gutierrez, 2016, p. 126) that informs the moving body and becomes a channel of connection between the context in which the dress was created and the personal context of the dancer (Coronado & Gutierrez, 2016, p. 126). In this choreography, one can observe how the artist's presence, built from the traditional *pollera*, is re-signified and actualized to construct a new, abstract *pollera*. The moving



**Image 2.** Luz Gutiérrez in *Pollera*. In this choreography, Luz explores the traditional Andean dress to create a new kind of body. Photography: Prin Rodriguez.

body references the traditional and contemporary simultaneously.

Peruvian cultures' association with a historical and frozen past is also contested in Luz's work. She proposes a counteraction to the linear vision of time in which some perceive the past as primitive and non-western, and the future as western and advanced. Instead, she describes time as intertwined and interconnected. For Luz, when she looks at her time, she also looks at the past and knows how to interconnect, weave and give life between the past and present. Her concept of time is similar to the Andean worldview where in a single space of time, the past, present, and future coexist affected by a circular development of time" (Chacón, 2017, p. 221).

For Luz, one can imagine the dancing body as the space where time interweaves and the traditional and contemporary reconciles. Similarly, as dancer and researcher Ana Ávila (2014, p. 274) also explores, the body is the tradition of its cells, of the history it carries that is constructed from memory and vital experience. And further, the body and the tradition of the individual only exist in the contemporaneity of a heartbeat and in breathing (Ávila, 2014, p. 275).

In her artistic endeavors, Luz is aware and critical of the effects of categorization in dances, both in traditional and contemporary settings. According to her, the system of classification of dances and the values we attach to them might,

in practice, generate privileges or exclusions of dance forms and dancers, creating unspoken rules in the dance community about which dance is "better" or which body is more fit to dance a particular dance style. Being a traditional folk dancer curious about Contemporary dance and other western techniques, she shares her experience in some Contemporary dance classes in which harsh classical vocabulary and inquisitive looks that scan and define her as a traditional or folk body were used. She describes this experience as being labeled as not being good enough for Contemporary dance. On the other hand, she has also experienced the rigid views present within Peruvian traditional dance settings that propagate an education focused on preparing dancers to be mere reproducers of forms and steps instead of exploring their creativity and movement possibilities.

In her pedagogical work, she also describes seeking to counteract racist vocabularies and rigid forms of transmission that perpetuate classifications as discrimination and labeling of bodies. For Luz, the dangers of transmitting stiff views about dance forms lie in the possibility of embodying those views. These views have the capacity to reinforce separation among dancers by disseminating toxic stereotypes and creating what Luz terms "dance ghettos," alluding to the marginalization or segregation of dance styles or communities of dance practice. She comments, "[classical

dancers' bodies] were taken as a prototype. Then, folk dancers could not mix with them, nor with contemporary or modern dancers. Among all, forces of power were executed." Here, she adds, dance becomes a "form in which the body seeks to take a position, a status."

During one of our conversations, she also shares an experience of directing a folk dance group to illustrate classification in dance and the consequences it might produce in dancers' bodies, movement, and how they relate to others. She explains that dancers in the group had been classified by body type and ethnic features in order to match each dance's region of origin. She says:

The previous management had classified and ordered the human group in this way: Those who did dances from the coast, those who did dances from the Andean region, and those who did dances from the Amazon region. Those who did dances from the coast [...] were splendid. Why? Because Afro-Peruvian people –since Victoria Santa Cruz<sup>25</sup>– had arrived at a different status [...] apart, the Afro rhythm is very attractive, very contagious. And well, the marinera, the valsas [peruvian waltz] were put into that category that entered with force: *criolla* [creole], *limeña* [from Lima]. The other

group was those who did Andean dances. They were [...] the dancers with fewer opportunities. And those who did Amazon dances hardly existed. When I started working here, I realized the discrimination. Those who did coast were the "nice ones," and those who did Andean dances were not considered that good [...] I told them we would not have that division anymore. Everyone is going to do everything. Everyone will move from the coast, Andes and Amazon [...]. It caused quite a stir [...] Those who did dances from the coast realized they could not perform Andean dances. These great dancers were confronted with themselves. But if they were great, why couldn't they do any genre linked to folkloric style? And those who did Andean dances could not do dances from the coast. So, it was pretty difficult to accomplish this. Little by little, over five years, progress was made. I managed to erase these patterns of discrimination and these bodies' fixations. We became a human group [...] that mainly sought to find its body, express itself, and communicate.

This divisive practice she worked to erase reflects a national problem where dancers are classified in a way that reinforces hierarchy and distance among people and bodies. In Luz's

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<sup>25</sup>Victoria Santa Cruz was an Afro-Peruvian author and theater director, choreographer, musical composer, costume designer, researcher, and folklorist who contributed to the research,

dissemination, and revalorization of Afro-Peruvian culture.



example, the bodies related to white and mestizo identities and the capital (Lima) were seen as superior dancers and given better opportunities than those whose bodies and identities related to historically oppressed peoples from the Andes and Amazon regions. In this way, the dancers were embodying and normalizing the stereotypes that divide Peru as a country. As Jane C. Desmond affirms, "Such practices and the discourse that surrounds them reveal the important part bodily discourse plays in the continuing social construction and negotiation of race, gender, class, and nationality, and their hierarchical arrangements" (1997, p. 34).

Luz continues to question discrimination of dances and people in her practice. She considers a possible approach to the problem of diversity as the creative process of connecting people through dance and the exchanging of dance practices. She explains, "Through the body, we can understand the other. And understanding the other means understanding your dance." She promotes dance teaching that focuses on building dancers' awareness and self-knowledge so as to nourish dancers so they are prepared to perform any dance genre or style. Her

idea of mestizaje can also be understood through Anzaldúa's concept of "blending that proves that all blood is intricately woven together" (1987, p. 85), which brings to mind Luz's image of a new skin. A blending as a type of skin that weaves time, places/spaces, cultures, and peoples together.

### **Carmen Román:<sup>26</sup> Decolonizing Afro-Peruvian dances through ritual**

Carmen Román's choreography fuses Afro-Peruvian dances and other dances from the African diaspora with western forms such as modern and Contemporary dance. From an early age, she learned Afro-Peruvian dances and dances from the African diaspora from Haiti and Brazil. However, she went on to study dance in a western institution where the core of the program was modern and Contemporary dance. Although she acknowledges the rewards of this mixture of western and non-western forms in her movement vocabulary and artistic development, she also recognizes the challenges of being a student of Latin American heritage who danced Afro-Peruvian dances at a western dance institution.

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<sup>26</sup> Carmen Roman is a dancer, teacher, and choreographer born in Lima and raised in Lima and California. Carmen's work takes place in the San Francisco Bay Area, where she performs with her company both on theater stages and in public spaces. She produces her own spectacles and also participates as a guest in different dance festivals. Her audience is varied, attracting Anglo, Latin, and African-American populations, as well as people from the

African diaspora. She has dedicated strongly to education, working in public schools teaching Afro-Peruvian dances and Creative dance to children from different parts of the world, with a strong presence in Latin communities. She also gives workshops in universities and public schools. She is the director of Afro-Peruvian company Cunamacue. Company's website: <https://www.cunamacue.org>

As Carmen recalls, being an immigrant in a foreign country, and later studying dance at a western institution, made her feel her “difference” and experience, in the flesh, the hierarchies between people. She realized the hierarchies between dances communicated supremacy of western forms over ethnic dances. Despite the fact that the term “ethnic” has been replaced in some academic contexts with the phrase “world dance,” this new term continues to be problematic since, as Susan L. Foster claims, “through this relabeling, the colonial history that produced the ethnic continues to operate” (2009, p. 2). Indeed, Carmen has also experienced the continued unequal treatment and visibility given to non-western dance forms in dance curricula as a university teacher.

Carmen’s being marked as “different” and her experience of perceiving her heritage as inferior has propelled her to counteract this perception through her pedagogical and artistic practice. One of the ways she approaches this is by questioning the use of space in a conventional theatrical performance and recovering dance as an interaction and shared event. To reduce this perceived gap between the audience and performers, she brings her dances to the streets and uses space inspired by ritual to generate new interactions between participants. In this way, she repositions ritual and spirituality of indigenous and Afro-descendant cultures in a contemporary and urban environment in her

work. She does this by researching Afro-Peruvian elements and references such as masks and musical instruments and their incorporation in current settings within a public location. She also renovates ceremonial actions such as processions and cleansing rituals and performs them in the streets or on the stage.

From an early age, when learning dances from Haiti and Brazil, she describes realizing how dances from the African diaspora were connected to strong belief systems. She wondered why, in her experience, this spirituality was not present in Afro-Peruvian dances. While researching the histories of Peruvian dance, she learned how Afro-Peruvian dances and music were erased during the colonial period. As ethnomusicologist Chalena Vásquez (1992, p. 9) explains, this outcome was perpetuated by the massive process of evangelization of indigenous and Afro-descendant populations. Enslaved populations were forbidden from their religious and cultural practices and forced to adopt Catholicism. However, as Vásquez emphasizes, they resisted cultural supremacy, either by disguising their original practices or incorporating new contents to the religious dances enforced on them (1992, p. 9) and in this way, producing a religious syncretism through the overlapping of Christian symbols on native religious imaginaries and rituals of African origin (Cairati, 2011, p. 124).

As a response to the process of detribalization and loss of identity for the enslaved, Carmen continues to search for the religious and spiritual qualities present in today's Afro-Peruvian dances which are the product of a revival process that took place in the 1950s to adapt them to the theatrical stage. As ethnomusicologist Heidi Feldman (2008) says: "The first major revival performance, by the Pancho Fierro Company in 1956, was conceived and directed by white criollo folklorist and scholar, José Durand" (para. 3). The leadership of Durand in this process suggests that the reenactment process might have included dances being "'toned down,' 'tamed,' and 'whitened'" (Desmond, 1997, p. 34) to become agreeable and suited for the "educated" mestizo audience.

As developed by Feldman (2009), the revival of Afro-Peruvian artistic expressions continued during the following decades with the leadership of Afro-Peruvian artists Nicomedes and Victoria Santa Cruz. They held an Africanist position that advocated for a revival process that had in its heart the purpose of rescuing the ancestral memory of African origin (Feldman as cited in Parra, 2006, p. 28).<sup>27</sup> Inspired by this posture, Carmen pushes for the incorporation and

reimagination of ritual as a way to recuperate intrinsic and important values of dances in which the relationship between the dance and personal and cultural beliefs is far more important than beauty as it is understood in the west (Cairati, 2011, p. 120). Carmen orients this enterprise as born from a desire to reconnect with her Afro-Peruvian heritage and make up for its "lost" history.

During the roundtable, she tells about her performance of "Son de los diablos," a dance that "originated during colonial times in the Catholic procession of Corpus Christi" (Román, 2022, p. 44). According to Carmen, African descendants may have hidden their African deities behind the masks. In her performance, in an attempt to decolonize the dance from Catholicism, she performs it as a healing ritual, using masks to reconnect dancers with ancestral memory. She explains the use of masks: "It helps create a space to remember how we worshiped and encountered energies or deities that existed in our cosmology before we were colonized" (2022, p. 44).

Lastly, for Carmen, ritual is central to her work and a "space to create a portal where past, present, and future exist simultaneously". In this way, she subscribes to the Andean worldview

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<sup>27</sup> As Javier F. Leon (2006) explains, the "re-Africanization" of Afro-Peruvian music and dances, sometimes involved the addition of elements that were outside of Afro-Peruvian tradition. The purpose was to reconnect Afro-Peruvian traditions back to Africa. It is important to acknowledge that the revival process involved many proposals from different

artists that had different agendas, including economic motivations to make dances and music more profitable or popular to the masses. Santa Cruz family's Africanist position involved counteracting colonial stereotypes disseminated and reinforced by certain lyrics, themes or styles in Afro-Peruvian music and dances during the revival process.



**Image 3.** Carmen Román in *Barrer*, choreography inspired in Victoria Santa Cruz's song "Hay que barrer." In this work, the broom is used as a spiritual element of healing. Photography: RJ Muna.

that the past traces the future path literally, so our ancestors, grandparents, and parents walk in front of each person because they were born before (Chacón, 2017, p. 221). At the same time, she connects her heritage to her present by incorporating personal elements in her work. She explains, "I can create ritual through song, through repetition, through objects that you bring into the space that are of significance to you. Things I use to create rituals are things that I have

personal experience with." In her choreographies, ritual situates in the frontiers between tradition and contemporaneity, the collective and the personal, the ancient and the present, and the sacred and the accessible, thus, weaving between heritages, cultures, and dance forms.

In the Arguedian sense, Carmen's practice can be understood as an attempt to undo the colonial knot (Portocarrero, 2015, p. 175) that locked aspects of enslaved peoples' cultural expressions. If the official written history has made invisible the African presence and its fundamental contribution to the construction of cultural identity on the Peruvian coast (Vásquez, 2007, p. 26), Carmen counteracts this through a decolonial practice of making visible worldviews and knowledge of Afro-Peruvian ancestors and reconnecting them to the present. Furthermore, she concentrates on giving body and presence to spirituality and religion. As she explains: "African religions did not survive in Peru. Because of that, in my dance creations, I often imagine a dance practice that goes hand in hand with a spiritual practice, one that is not imposed on us" (2022, p. 45).

Her practice is situated in the diaspora. She faces the challenge of reconstructing her legacies for her African-American dancers and foreign audiences while entering a dialogue with the cultures, peoples, and places that made up her environment. Although some of her movement

creation and teaching methods rely on western forms, she uses these forms strategically to communicate Afro-Peruvian dances' messages and history. In bringing Afro-Peruvian dances closer to foreign audiences, one could ask how "the meanings of the movement lexicons change when transported into the adopting group" (Desmond, 1997, p.35) and what kind of new narratives and knowledge of Afro-Peruvian culture Carmen's work is putting forward. In any case, Carmen's determination and approach to rescue and disseminate Afro-Peruvian legacy is undoubtedly a demonstration of the memory of the civilizations that return, affirming themselves (Mignolo, 2010, p. 20).

## **Conclusion**

The discussion around "contemporary" and "traditional" is unquestionably connected to the idea that "movement serves as a marker for the production of gender, racial, ethnic, class, and national identities (Desmond, 1997, p. 31). Since bodies are read and interpreted differently across cultures and contexts, Peruvians situate in a particular socio-historical context marked by colonialist hierarchies and discrimination. In this complex scenario, dance practice provides a rich place to study and dispute the relationship between bodies and power structures at play. The dance practices of Antonio Vélchez, Luz Gutiérrez, and Carmen Román are examples of how artists can experiment and carry out diverse

ways to conceive, explore, and perform dance that embraces cultural diversity. Their subversion is danced, and it is in and through their bodies that they try to solve the inequalities sustained by dance categorization.

The artists featured in the Redefining the Contemporary Symposium to me defy the dichotomy of traditional vs contemporary in their work. Instead, they build dialogues between diverse knowledge and dance forms in innovative ways while grounding their practices in aspects of the past and their own particular cultural identities. In the roundtable, they made explicit their respect and knowledge of dance forms some define as traditional while putting forward an understanding of tradition as dynamic. At the same time, they dispute the appropriation of the descriptor "contemporary" by western dance forms. Instead, they work to extend the contemporary to a plurality of dances that sustain dialogue with the present and past in a way that might make local worldviews and aesthetics visible.

Their work also aligns with Ananya Chatterjea's definition of contemporary dance as "meaningful dance embedded in the 'now'" (2020, p. x) and relevant to the artists' life and work contexts. In this way, they push for a resignification and erasure of boundaries surrounding the concepts of traditional and contemporary in order to release artists and audiences from this dichotomy. They hope to

expand on how these terms can be intertwined and embedded within one another to represent how the present is never disconnected from the past and to demonstrate the value of all kinds of dances on mainstream, official, and community stages and art spaces. To do this work, these artists create in ways that feed on mixture, contradictions, and ambiguities. They transmit dance with flexibility, questioning stereotypes, breaking normative separations of bodies and genres, and showing a desire to bring the fragments of our country closer. By envisioning and working towards a new kind of dance, they also imagine a new and more equitable society. In this process, their dances can be interpreted as decolonial actions.

Additionally, their way of embodying a flexible and integrating approach to diversity through dance is *mestizaje* – performed as an encounter, mixture, and dialogue of different legacies, worldviews, dance genres, techniques, and bodies. *Mestizaje* in itself counteracts the dualist vision of traditional/contemporary. This concept in action means that these categories do not have to be in opposition; they can be in dialogue. As performed by these artists, *mestizaje* can become a new epistemological approach to confronting the lack of recognition of cultural diversity. It distances from a purist and static vision of identity, inviting closeness, dialogue, and collaboration within diversity. Through *mestizaje*, dances can be seen as mirrors

to knowing ourselves and getting to know others. They can also be practiced as means to recognize and fight the internalization of categories and discrimination within ourselves. And lastly, they can become places to make visible *every blood* that makes up our diversity.

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