Abstract

This thesis project investigates the importance of how Yemaya, one of the Goddesses of the Yoruba religion, exists in the paradigms of music, dance, religion and everyday life. In the Yoruba religion, the Orisha/Goddesses stories coincide with human existence. These stories, known as Patakinis, parallel people’s lives. In my life, family members always told me that my personality reminded them of Yemaya’s characteristics. At a young age I watched my grandmother pray to Yemaya and honor the Yoruba religion. My grandmother’s beliefs inspired my current exploration. Spirituality through time and space in the Yoruba religion is the impetus behind my thesis performance. My movements are inspired by prehistoric memories and experiences that have been passed down through generations and that live in my blood. The sun that shines represents the smiles of the deity Oshun; the thunder that strikes represents the deity Chango; and the water that flows in our bodies is Yemaya. These deities are part of the mythological pantheon that exist in the Yoruba religion. The written portion of this thesis project details my perspective on Afro-Cuban folkloric traditions that supported and provided context for my thesis performance.
MONTCLAIR STATE UNIVERSITY

Drume Mi Negrita: A Choreographic Spiritual Journey of the Goddess Yemaya

By

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Introduction: Spiritual Journey

At the beginning of the year, I experienced something very traumatic; an injury to my left foot that took me into an emotional and spiritual roller coaster. I ruptured my achilles tendon during a dance performance. I was emotionally distraught after sustaining the injury and felt as though my spirit had been taken away and crushed. I felt anger, sadness, and all the negative emotions that occur after a loss. During the time I was injured, I was unable to dance, but in the process of rehabilitation I started to change my outlook by using spirituality as a form of guidance. I was reminded of the prayers my grandmother used to make by the Atlantic ocean. She would find guidance by speaking to the ocean. In her beliefs, the ocean represented Yemaya. Scholar Yvonne Daniels voiced what I believe my grandmother felt: “The signs of Yemaya, divine sea or ocean, the source of all life and in human form, formidable mother” (235). Into the ocean, my grandmother would toss blue and white flowers as a form of offering while asking for positive reinforcement.

In the same way, I closed my eyes and began praying while lying in bed with my injury. With my eyes closed, I imagined praying to the ocean/Yemaya for guidance and positive energy. As I watched myself in the ocean, I felt a lightness as the sun shone through the water. I smiled as the water touched my feet and got goosebumps at the cold temperature of the water. A natural feeling of enlightenment and joy came over my body. I felt protected by the ocean. The waves would move by me as Yemaya listened to my prayers. The feeling of floating and lightness felt familiar to my spirit. It was then that I realized that this is my belief, too. I believe that Yemaya is in me and heals my soul. I came to realize that the connection of the spirit is a feeling, a sensation, an energy that is
felt internally and guides my way of thinking. This guidance comes from the spiritual deities communicating to my physical body. When my physical body dances, my inner spirit rises just like the light of the sun that shone through the water. This is how meditation exists in the Yoruba religion. Through prayers and offerings, my soul is healed.

In deepening my research of the Yoruba religion, I started to understand the two worlds: the physical and the spiritual. In the physical human form, we represent and manifest the spiritual world. There is no in-between the two worlds. The physical and spiritual coexist as one entity. The spiritual world is inhabited by deities known as Orishas in the Yoruba religion. Each Orisha has certain characteristics and symbols that portray their spirit. This is also true for humans; we are all living hybrids of each deity. Each deity represents an element, and as we are living hybrids of each deity, we are also all elements. Philosopher Joseph Campbell in an interview with Bill Moyers in *Joseph Campbell and the Power of Myth* explains the powers of nature in our “human” form:

**BILL MOYERS:** Can men and women live with an impersonality?

**JOSEPH CAMPBELL:** Yes, they do all over the place. Just go east of Suez. In the East, the gods are much more elemental.

**BILL MOYERS:** Elemental?

**JOSEPH CAMPBELL:** Elemental, less human and more like the powers of nature. I see a deity as representing an energy system, and part of the energy system is the human energy systems of love and malice, hate, benevolence, compassion. And in Oriental thinking, the god is the vehicle of the energy, not its source. (Campbell n.p.)

I use this interview excerpt to illustrate the comparison Campbell makes about the powers of nature with that of the Orisha and their elemental powers. For example, in the Yoruba religion, the Orisha Oshun uses her power as a form of feminine tranquility
through her element - sweet waters. Her characteristics are sensual and carry a feminine essence. The sun and honey are also her symbols.

**Background and Research**

As a child born into the Yoruba religion, I was expected to have a specific Orisha or deity to guide my life’s journey. The ancestors and elders chose Yemaya, the Mother of the Universe, a Goddess of the Ocean, as a nurturer and protector, my spiritual mother. My first spiritual mentor was my grandmother who expressed that my personality is a reflection of Yemaya, and that the goddess would follow me through my life’s journey as my guardian angel. I remember my grandmother would always tell me to pray to Yemaya. She even gave me a doll, dressed in her symbolic colors of blue and white, that represented Yemaya. When my grandmother took me to Atlantic City, she would tell me to bring fruits (oranges, apples, grapes, and watermelon) to the ocean. With these offerings, I would pray and throw the fruits into the water. During my prayer I would dream of singing and dancing. My grandmother would often express that one day I would sing in the church and dance in many places. Scholar Brenda Dixon Gottschild expresses my own sensation well in saying, “And that sends me into a tailspin of memories—body memories, black body memories, black female body memories, black enslaved female body memories” (Gottschild 41). My grandmother’s words still exist and her wishes live inside my soul.

My family was born into both the Yoruba (Santeria practices) and Catholic religions in Cuba. Cubans often pray to both religions because each one provides a way for people to receive guidance, support and survival skills. These two religions are bound
together through their similar saints, however the worshipping approach differs. In the Catholic religion, believers worship through prayer asking Jesus and the saints for guidance. In the Yoruba religion believers worship the syncretized saints of the Catholic religion through spiritual practices. As a young girl, I remember going to church on Sundays to pray to the Virgin Mary, Jesus, and various other saints. In accordance with the beliefs of Catholicism, I was baptized at age two and completed my communion at age nine. Though Catholic school ended at age ten, I continued to pray Psalm 23 every night before bed.

In contrast to this type of worship, my family would have spiritual ceremonies, called misas or masses for the dead, every two months, praying and honoring the spirits of the dead or eguns. Scholar Steven Gregory explains misas: “Some houses hold misas on a regular basis, while others do so only when divination indicates to its godparent that it is necessary. Like most ceremonies in Santeria, misas are lively social events where food and beverages are often served at the conclusion of the ritual” (75). Growing up, I never understood the meaning behind either religious practice. It was simply something I was accustomed to exercising as part of my family’s traditions. However, with time, I discovered a deeper interest in these belief systems. I began to explore them further when I traveled to Cuba with my family for the first time in 2013. Being immersed in such a vibrant place, I began to recognize the similarities of beliefs and traditions between the religious customs of Cuba and those we practiced back home in the states. It was during my time in this mystical land that I decided my focus in graduate school would be on Afro-Cuban dance, music, and religion.

I trained in Contemporary Dance, but always had an interest in learning Cuban
dance forms and music during family gatherings. In 2014, I began to take Salsa and Afro-
Cuban dance classes periodically. I felt an intense attraction to the movement. It felt very
natural and familiar to my body. The articulation of the torso, undulation of the spine, and
the grounding of the legs spoke to my physical intelligence. The movement language of
Afro-Cuban dance was very natural as the teachers in the classes would express, “Esta en
tu sangre,” meaning it lives in your blood. At the end of 2015, I started to work on two
solo projects incorporating Afro-Cuban folklore and other dance forms to augment my
narrative movement vocabulary. The narrative of the two solo projects I created consisted
of: 1) Family discussions on being Cuban and living in the United States, and 2) My first
visit to Cuba. After choreographing these two solos, I was very inspired to dive deeper
into the language of Cuban traditions.

During the Fall semester of the 2016 MFA in Dance program at Montclair State
University, I focused my special project coursework on studying Cuban folklore with my
mentor Yesenia F. Selier. At my first introductory session, Yesenia expressed that in
Cuban traditions, dance and music are an integral part of the ritual and spiritual practices
of Yoruba. The Cuban folkloric technique is not codified, but should be taught with the
correct formula depending on each Orisha dance. I had differing perspectives on dance
technique derived from my training in the Western forms of modern dance and ballet. In
listening to Yesenia, I was reminded that every method or technique has similar concepts
but different approaches and styles.

For instance, Doris Humphrey (one of the early modern dance pioneers) created a
technique that was inspired by breath, fall and recovery. “Humphrey’s movements ebbed
and flowed in natural patterns, inspired by the rhythm of breathing or everyday activities
like running, walking, reaching, leaping, turning, rising and falling…. Dancers moved to their own steady breathing, creating the image of the sea gathering momentum in wave-like formations” (Reynolds, McCormick 159). In Yoruba, when dancing as Yemaya, breath is used in the same way to represent the motion of the waves moving naturally forward and back. The Yoruba religion uses the same concepts of Humphrey’s breath method. The breath method is referenced to show the significance of how it is used in both dance techniques.

Each Orisha in the culture of dance, music and religion has numerous stories, and those of Yemaya parallel real life situations - stories of love, abandonment, jealousy, hatred, horror, murder and more. These stories are called Patakini in the Yoruba Religion. Patakinis of each Orisha also resemble specific dances and rhythms.

Here is an example of a story/Patakini told to me from my Babalow (my spiritual priest) about Yemaya and the deity/messenger Orula. This story tells how Yemaya became the mother of the universe. One day the messenger God, Orula, celebrated a gathering in his honor. He expected a significant offering or gift from each of the deities. Yemaya was late to the gathering because she was taking care of her children in the sea. She was very distraught for not having enough time to get a significant offering. Yemaya quickly went to the market and bought three fish. She presented them to Orula with embarrassment as she thought the offering was inappropriate. Orula stared at her gift and said, “this is your offering”? Yemaya bowed her head, but while the other deities found her gift a comedic insult, Orula expressed to Yemaya how significant her gift was. The three fish represented purity, progress, and rebirth. He was very appreciative of Yemaya and announced that she would be the Mother of the Universe and owner of the oceans.
(Babalow n.p.). In my performance, I show how Yemaya, The Mother of the Universe, is presented amongst all the saints and children. Yemaya walks with determination and firmness. She is direct with every foot step while walking and open with her chest, signifying a natural presence. Her chin is lifted and stares at all her children. She opens her arms as a sign of welcoming everyone to the space.

During my instruction with Yesenia, I experienced difficulty in understanding the specific technicality of the movement with the feet in coordination with the upper body. While learning the technique, my contemporary modern/ballet dance training worked against me, as my movements would appear very upright instead of grounded. My feet would turn out, instead of maintaining a parallel position (feet facing straight forward). Yesenia would continuously work on my Yemaya movement alignment. She would say, “smaller stance (feet)... feel as though you are a grandma... movements are subtle, not too big... it’s more about your character.” She explained that each Orisha is distinguished by their character. As Yvonne Daniels mentions in *Dancing Wisdom*, “As Yemaya dances, she converts duple to triple rhythm so that the viewer senses the repetitious and soothing quality of the sea, divine creative source of life. Her dance traces the movement of waves, of whirlpools, and of oars. Her force is as powerful as the ocean, saltwater, and the sea. She is the omnipotent mother, maternal power--caring, nurturing, and incredibly protective” (139). Therefore, my challenge was working with my *internal* Yemaya. I started to understand the embodiment of the Yemaya spirit, and so I began to chant: “I am the mother of the Universe, I protect all of my children... I enjoy peace, I love joy, I love to laugh, but I must be respected.”
During my second semester in graduate school, I connected with an Afro-Cuban dance company in New York called Oyu Oro Afro-Cuban Experimental Dance Ensemble. It was a dream come true. Not only was I in a dance company with a Cuban director, but I was in a place surrounded by dancers from diverse backgrounds, all sharing the same experience. It felt like a family and a second Cuban home. During rehearsals with the company, I was asked by the director to perform Yemaya in one of the choreographed works. I was extremely honored to have been chosen out of the group of dancers who had been studying with her for years. The dancers in the company guided my training, helping me embody and fully embark on a journey into the essence of Yemaya. It was in these rehearsals and through my exploration of Yemaya, that I started to connect my performance personality to the deity.

During my process of learning Yemaya, I realized that there is a misconception about Santeria practices of the Yoruba religion as belonging to black magic and the occult. The more I embarked fully into the religion, I realized that Santeria focuses more on the natural elements of earth like wind, fire, water, iron, and honey, amongst others. The movement, the songs, the tradition, the ceremony, the guidance, the prayers, and the connection to the higher being is about healing. As I have matured, notions of the spiritual and physical worlds existing in tandem have helped me discover a more complete connection to Yemaya that, over time, has allowed me to embody her spirit in both movement and character. I have been able to tap into a culturally rich physical language and during my continuous visits to Cuba I have been able to learn from many master teachers.
During the Afro-Cuban folkloric workshops I attended over the last year, I have been able to practice fully mastering the technique of the dances, and I have also been able to learn the powers of the live music and songs of Yemaya. There are usually about three to four bata drummers playing and one singer. Each bata drummer has a distinct rhythm that makes up the complete sound. There are three different rhythms (learned from Yesenia F. Selier) for Yemaya: Yakota, Omolode/Chikini, and Aro’ which are also detailed in Zela Gayle’s article “Afro-Cuban dance training and teaching.” (n.p.). In addition, there are five different dance techniques that inform Yemaya’s movement vocabulary depending on the rhythm played:

1. Yakota – This is the very beginning phase that exemplifies the collection of water. Movements are in a fluid motion. The mover holds the edge of the skirt and uses the skirt to collect the water in a circular motion/flow.

2. Omolode – This rhythm picks up rapidly, where the dancer is embodying and expanding more of the movements. There is more play with the skirt in a swishing motion, almost as if Yemaya is playing with the waves of the ocean. The torso moves forward and back as the foot stomps on the floor. The knees bounce, but never straighten.

3. Chikine - It is said that Chikine is the celebration dance, where Yemaya is playing and showing off her feet. The movements are mostly in a downward accent, stomping the water and making it flutter.

4. Chacha lo Kafu – This step is performed by all the Orishas, however, it is distinct by the way it is presented, meaning that one can distinguish which deity the
dancer performs due to their characterisation. Each version is distinguished by that attitude in chacha lo kafu.

5. Aro de Yemaya – This is the most intense and last rhythm in the sequence of Yemaya. The movement begins slowly with the dancer moving in a slow circular motion and progresses rapidly, becoming the intense waves of the sea.

As part of the physical experience with the religion, all believers must consult with a spiritual priest called a Babalao. During my introductions to the religion over the course of two years, I have had readings and consultations with my Babalao. The Babalao is a messenger that connects believers to the spiritual gods. When I meet with my Babalao to ask the spiritual gods for guidance and support, he responds with messages, guidance, and a direction to the possible future. He provides protection on my path. During my last session, it was said that my next journey is to get deeper into the religion. To dive into the religion, a believer must pass through the honorings and offerings of Elegua first before any other deity. Elegua is the God of crossroads and the opening and/or closing of doors. In Santeria Enthroned: Art, Ritual and Innovation in an Afro-Cuban Religion, David H. Brown, describes Elegua in detail. “The line always begins with Elegua, the spokesman (vocero), universal messenger, and ‘opener of the road,’ and culminates in the orisha of honor, the guardian angel cabecera that is ‘seated on the head’ or ‘put to the shoulder’ of the initiate…” (135). To further explain the line meaning in spiritual practices, believers must begin with Elegua as the first point of reference through prayers, practices, and initiations. Elegua’s personality trait is that of a little boy that represents a trickster. He loves candy, but also tricks other children
(believers) in their journey for assurance of their faith. I have been guided to complete my first step which is receiving the deity Elegua. I have received Elegua and was given a symbol with his warriors also known as “guerreros.” To honor Elegua, I must give him an offering by serving him a shot of rum or coffee once a week. I sometimes place a bowl with fruits and a glass of water for cleansing and prayer in front of my Elegua. My Elegua symbol is placed by the entrance of my house since he represents the opening and closing of doors. I pray to Elegua to open doors in my pathways. The next step in the religion is getting to know my guardian angel, the initial protector that resonates with my personality. My calm energy gives off the impression that my guardian angel is Yemaya. As discussed earlier regarding Yemaya and Orula’s story, I am a giver to everyone and make sure they feel happy with any situation. In the spirit of Yemaya, my grandmother always told me to be diplomatic and humble. In this religion, I have learned to be tranquil and at peace by using the prayers to center my spiritual alignment and create healing for my inner being.

In the Yoruba religion, Yemaya is the mother of all the Orishas and protects them. In the specific myth, Yemaya is the mother of Chango, who is the God of thunder and fire. She protects him, and it is said that they eat together. Chango cannot eat without Yemaya being present. There is a story that represents how Yemaya used her power when she felt victimized or disrespected by Chango in the blog post “Orisha en Monagas.” The story says: “Yemaya estaba allá en lo hondo ordenando su mundo de caracolas y peces, pero extrañaba la tierra. Un día oyó de pronto, el sonar de los tambores que llamaban al wemilere. Entonces sintió un gran deseo de volver al mundo de los hombres y, vistiendo sus mejores galas de azul, subió a la tierra y fue a bailar. Se veía tan
hermosa que Shangó - Rey De Los Atabales - no la reconoció y esa noche tocó, cantó y bailó para ella, requiriendo de amores” (Artz n.p).

This story was passed down to me from my elders. In translation, Chango, who likes to party, saw a beautiful woman with whom he flirted and teased. He went to the ocean, got on a boat with Yemaya and continued to seduce her with his charm. Yemaya then used her powers to convert the ocean to a whirlpool. The force of the swirling ocean made Chango fall overboard. Yemaya used her natural power and penchant for doling out punishment which made Chango recognize that this beautiful woman was his mother. He apologized and they reconciled. The lesson for Chango is that he must respect his mother, and all women for that matter. Author Steven Gregory discusses the moral of the story. “....the Patakini was a warning to avoid relationships with daughters of Yemaya—fire and water do not mix…. More generally, it was a warning against underestimating and manipulating women” (83).

In a similar story but in a different context, Martha Graham, inspired by the Greek mythological character/story of Medea, choreographed Cave of the Heart. Cave of the Heart as Graham conceived it, is about the betrayal of Medea and her jealousy when Jason chooses the Princess over her. “Madden by jealousy, Medea sent the Princess as a wedding gift a poised crown which killed her when she put it on. Then Medea destroyed her own children and left Corinth in a chariot drawn by dragons ” (Tracy 68). In comparing Yemaya and Medea’s story, Jason and Chango learned the lessons of disrespected women by suffering the consequences. I make this reference to show the parallels between Greek mythology and the Yoruba Religion. Medea and Yemaya show the power of women. Martha Graham’s development of this piece compares to my
movement exploration related to the Yoruba religion.

In Graham’s choreographic work, she became a master at realizing these myths through dance. She believed that there is true belief and meaning in the dancing body connecting to a deeper level of consciousness. For her, it was the act of reaching to another place of enlightenment where spirituality, energy and mythical stories explain real life happenings. Her use of Greek mythology made it evident that she was inspired to connect personal experiences to the mythical narrative. Her works expressing the Greek mythological stories made them accessible and relatable in terms of human emotions and the connection between the conscious and unconscious. Author Robert Tracy said, “Mythology became Martha’s language” (207).

Joseph Campbell was married to Jean Erdman who was a dancer in Graham’s company. He and Graham shared a love of Greek Mythology. Campbell described the Great Mother being the center that holds earth, the development of birth, and the principle that controls our mind. The Goddess of the Mother represents “the giver and the disciplinary; the awakener and the taker of life” (Teixeira, n.p). Scholar Mark Franko makes the connection between Graham and Campbell:

Campbell not only nurtured Graham’s interest in mythology, as a literary basis for her artistic expression, but also helped her understand the relationship between myth and the psyche. His theories also deepened Graham’s existing belief—a belief endemic to mid-century dance modernism—that movement could make manifest subliminal thoughts, feelings, and desires residing in the unconscious, thus paving the way for her development of choreographic techniques that allowed the expression of sub textual content. (Martha Graham in Love and War: The Life in the Work 255)

In the Yoruba religion/ Santeria practices there is no time and space. While in the physical form, we inhabit time and space through our senses. Theses senses are vessels that channel different energies. However when those energies enter from the spiritual to
the physical world, the spirit exists in the physical form. In Yoruba practice, it is called pasando muerto or getting possessed. Campbell expresses a similar idea about consciousness, space and time, “In the biological sciences, there is vitalism coming in that goes much further toward positing a common universal consciousness of which our brain is simply an organ. Consciousness does not come from the brain. The brain is an organ of consciousness. It focuses consciousness and pulls it in and directs it through time and space field” (*Mythic Worlds, Modern Words: On the Art of James Joyce* 286).

In dance, the physical and spiritual world can become aligned. Alignment is a key factor that prevails when the dancing body is open to surrendering to the energies that connect to real life occurrences. In the dancing space, the dancer must surrender to allow for the soul to be free. For my performance, I must allow for my soul to be free to embody the deity Yemaya.

**Performance**

This performance-based thesis project, *Drume Mi Negrita* (Sleep/Dream My Little Black Baby Girl/Bold One), is an in-depth study and exploration of the powerful impact religious and spiritual practice have had on my life as an Afro-Cuban/American dance artist fighting to define her identity. Through a series of choreographed vignettes driven and supported by culturally rich music and video projection score, I have developed a dance work that portrays significant moments in my life through the lens of spirituality. The performative component specifically focuses on the spiritual deity Yemaya, an Orisha deity of the Yoruba belief system.
The Collaboration

When I first started working with Farai Malianga my composer, videographer and musician in 2014, I had a vision to create video footage that explored and inspired new and unique movements. These videos became a compilation of the work that I developed through the special course projects. Watching the videos, I began to understand how I articulated movement and created a language that felt genuine. I realized that viewing my process on the screen was beneficial to me finding my voice, exploring movement and developing combinations of Contemporary with Afro-Cuban folklore. The environment inspired movements that traced back to my childhood memories. Through reminiscing, I created a story and a vision that was captured by the camera. Although my movements were improvised, Farai used different camera angles to focus on different parts of my body. He states, “I focused on your facial expressions and things that are very specific to your movement style. The camera’s perspective complimented the arc and narrative of the piece” (Malianga n.p.). The outcome of this particular video project felt real, authentic, and personal, and will inspire future projects.

As far as movement, I was already exploring Afro-Cuban movements combined with contemporary. These small projects in 2014 inspired my works in the MFA program.

For this specific MFA thesis performance project, I wanted to visually capture different narratives that center around growth, meditation, cleansing and the embodiment of the deity Yemaya. I wanted these visuals to connect with the ocean. In the development of our multimedia collaboration, Malianga and I designed a system based upon our past experiences to make this work. During any live performance, if there is a story, the
dancer expresses the narrative through movement while the audience is expected to relate, understand or create their own version of the story. However through video, the audience is more sensitive to the exposure of the angles and foci of the camera. The different layers and dimensions of the moving images determine the viewer’s interpretation and emotional connection. In other words, the video focuses the audience member’s attention in a more specific way than a staged performance.

Through my collaborative work with Malianga we created a system. The following is a list of our process.

1. We begin by discussing the narrative by asking and responding to questions. The questions are: What is the concept? How can the video compliment the narrative? What will the finished project look like?
2. We discuss location which is very important since it enhances and compliments the story.
3. We position the camera, map out the vision, discuss the props, discuss and define the natural elements and how they relate to my narrative, and determine the camera angles.
4. We define the purpose of video, which is to show the authenticity of the religion and tradition.

Performance Map

Date of Performance: July 31st; Show time: 7:30-9:00 pm
Location: Montclair State University, Life Hall, Studio 1210 & Performance Studio 1200
This performance project is designed to take the audience on a spiritual journey, guiding them to understand my identity through the lens of my spiritual beliefs. At the beginning of the show, the audience enters Studio 1210, which I am calling “The Gallery.”

The Gallery is structured in the form of a museum; the audience will enter and see objects of Cuban significance. These objects express the uniqueness of Cuban culture and history. These objects represent what I call home.

The displays lead the audience members to participate in a visceral experience before beginning my journey. Guests wander around studio 1210, watching a projected video, looking at the Cuban displays and listening to my uncle Chico Alvarez sing with accompaniment from conga player Wilmer Vega.

In the Gallery, the projected video is displayed on the wall. The video will last two to three minutes and will show my video of Yesenia F. Selier. In this video, she discusses her process in teaching Yemaya dance and music folklore. She mentions my understanding of adapting to the traditions, being that I am a contemporary dancer. She expresses that the folklore does not have any codified movements and it is a technique that must be taught with structure.

As the audience enters the pre-show, they will:

1. Experience the elements of Cuban displays I have collected throughout my research in Cuba such as 1950’s newspapers, Cuban dolls, Cuban cigars, Havana Club, Short Sleeve “Guayabera” shirt, Yemaya picture frame, old Cuban records, tall Cuban female statues, cafetera (espresso maker),
Cuban books, pictures of my family, panuelo (handkerchief men wear) and spiritual offerings.

2. Watch the video projection of Yesenia’s teachings and advice during our private sessions.

3. Enjoy the sounds of Cuban music played live by my uncle Chico Alvarez. Chico Alvarez will be singing Cuban Son (a rich classic genre of Cuban music) accompanied by conga player Wilmer Vega.

As the audience transitions to the performance space, they walk through a small corridor that has a table with a vase of flowers, glass of water, bowl filled with spiritual offerings, and a candle. This is the space for spiritual cleansing.

The next stop on this journey leads them into the performance space. In the performance space, a small chair with a doll and a second chair are set up, splitting center stage. As the audience is walking to their seats, I am sitting by my doll playing as I did when I was nine years old. As people enter, the singer Ayamey begins singing a spiritual song. This portion of the project takes us from my childhood memories into my current experiences of Afro-Cuban folklore traditions. Ayamey, playing the role of my grandmother, gives me advice to continue to dance and sing and shares her connection to Yemaya. Ayamey, conveying my grandmother, says “You must pray and trust your spirits. Pray to Yemaya and she will guide you. You can do anything you want to be, but you must pray and trust” (n.p.) Ayamey then exits the stage as I, the performer, continue to dance and express my grandmother’s advice until I am struck by my traumatic injury. The sounds of chaotic voices in my head impact the movements. My grandmother’s voice reminds me of trust, being patient, and believing in Yemaya. I slowly turn to see a
projected video of the ocean. I walk towards the ocean and appear in the image to surrender to Yemaya. Yemaya protects me and cleanses my soul. My image in the video disappears, and I then transform to the Goddess Yemaya. I enter stage left as Yemaya and start embodying her movements. The movements represent the three stages of Yemaya (Asesu, Omolode/Chikini, and Aro’). Each movement signifies the different phases from tranquil to intense and powerful. As the songs and lights fade, I bow and invite people to dance for Yemaya. The dance continues as a procession back to room 1210 with everyone singing and dancing to Asesu. This represented a full circle, a completion of my spiritual journey returning me back home.

**Implications for the Future**

Just like Martha Graham referenced Greek mythology by using Medea’s story, I plan to tell the stories/ Patakini’s using Yemaya’s paths: love, nurturing, warrior, relationship. I will choreograph a Patakini between Yemaya and all her children or husbands in her different journeys. For example, Yemaya and her son Chango, Yemaya and her husband Ogun, Yemaya and her sister Oshun, Yemaya and husband Obatala, and a trio representing Oya, Chango and Yemaya. Why? These Patakini’s are a universal language that relates to all people. Like Martha Graham’s choreography *Cave of the Heart* addressed jealousy, love, hate, and emotional distress, my choreography will continue this methodology of using ancient stories to speak to the people on universal themes. These practices will not only provide spiritual healing, direction, and pathways but will also guide my dancing for the Orisha deities.
Trips to Cuba

My goal is to continue my study and research with periodic trips to Cuba. It is imperative for me to continue to study and to broaden and expand my knowledge in the stories of the deities/Patakini.

My dream is to dance with a folkloric company in Cuba, as well as to teach my codified Afro-Cuban/contemporary dance technique there. Many Cuban companies are performing both locally and internationally. The majority of company performances in Cuba are in the streets of Havana. This authenticity of performances is essential to my learning process and will heavily influence my teaching practice. It is also imperative for me to establish connections and to network with other Cuban artists in hopes of eventually creating a study abroad program for interested students.

Performances/Workshops

In studying Afro-Cuban folklore, I discovered an interest in fusing the folkloric technique with Contemporary dance. Cuban folklore, as I have indicated, has a narrative that relates universally. Yemaya is the mother of the universe, protector of her children and shares commonalities with woman and mothers. Women are powerful, strong, grateful and have maternal instincts. These natural characteristics are used in our daily lives and can be manifested through movement. In teaching, I will instruct people of all ages and genders how to embrace their power, understand their strength, and trust in their instincts through a variety of techniques. My teaching requires acting techniques, meaning asking the students questions about their characteristics and personality. It also involves using movement technique such as incorporating torso undulations relating to Yoruba
movement. I will be using elements of contraction and release technique found in Martha Graham method. I will be using the discipline and foundation developed in ballet technique. I also will be using movements to understand awareness of self, center of gravity, and transfer of weight. The Afro-Cuban rhythms will be used to mark the timing and sounds of Afro-Cuban dance. The timing in Cuban folklore are mostly measured in a 6/8 and 3/4 rhythm; similar to a waltz. I will use the timing of these rhythms to fuse contemporary technique with the distinct rhythms of one Orisha dance. This universal movement language will empower all people of different ages and levels.

In addition, I would like to continue to perform my thesis solo at different universities and venues. Afro-Cuban dance folklore is a technique that is underrepresented in the concert world and should be highlighted in the same ranking as westernized techniques. Performing my solo will teach audiences about the religion, dance and music of the Afro Cuban-traditions. It will inform and challenge audiences to have a personal and visceral connection to the work.

**Conclusion**

Throughout my research and study, I questioned and wondered why Afro-Cuban Orisha dance-music, and religion is not valued the same as western contemporary techniques. I have trained intensely in Western technique. I understand the value of the history, theory and creation of those disciplines. While my Afro-Cuban dance, music and religion are viewed as a less formalized and, in my experience, less respected. I intend to change that perception through promoting Afro-Cuban culture and traditions. I think that these forms
should be put on the same platform as Western forms in institutions like schools and universities.

In reference to Yemaya and the Chango story, Yemaya taught Chango a lesson about respect, trust, and love. Yemaya, loving her son, showed him how to show respect and not underestimate her powers. In reading these Patakinis/stories, I notice that this world is run by the powers of womankind, so that in the Yoruba tradition women hold more power than in Western society.

I see the powers of the universe as lying in the hands of the mother of the universe. In different traditions, the mother of the universe is the earth, the water and all the elements of life that exist in the physical world. In Yoruba, the mother of the universe is Yemaya, Orisha of the Oceans. The Orishas are invisible, but we connect to their spirit through the elements.

As women, we must understand our own powers, listen to our inner abilities, trust our instinct, and believe that there are energies all around us that help guide our predestined paths. In modern societies women are viewed predominantly in the domestic role; the ones who care deeply, take care of the household, protect the children and bring the family together. But human life is also about the energetical forces that hold everything together. The essence of Yemaya will inspire me to empower women to find their inner voice through the Orisha-based movement language that I create. This movement language will be given the respect it deserves and will honor my ancestors. It will also provide a space of healing and meditation for dancers going through injuries and people coping with traumatic life changes. The origins of Afro-Cuban dance, music and
tradition has healed human beings for centuries; before the birth of Christ. I will continue the legacy through the tradition to heal others.
Bibliography


Selier, Yesenia. Private sessions with author, 2016-2018.

Appendix A

Mentor: Yesenia F. Selier Interview

The Overall Question:

Is Folklore losing its public recognition? Where do these traditions exist in the contemporary Western world? What is acceptable and what isn’t?

I wanted to revisit a conversation/ interview I had with Yesenia Fernandez Selier, my mentor, regarding the recognition of Afro-Cuban dance and music traditions. Yesenia is a Cuban born artist, performer, educator and scholar who is receiving her doctorate at NYU. She has studied folklore for about fifteen years and is eager to keep the traditions alive through the lens of performance, classes, and anthropology. She teaches Cuban dance forms to all ages and has lecture classes at NYU through her graduate program. I chose to interview Yesenia because I admire her artistry, intelligence, and courageousness. She has three children, is receiving her doctorate, is a specialist in Afro-Cuban dance traditions, and is writing a book on the ethnography of Afro-Cuban dances.

During the interview, I had set questions and then impromptu questions arose during the dialogue. I focused the questions on her biography and ultimately on the direction of instruction/ evolution of Afro-Cuban dance in New York. The following responses/ are not written verbatim, however, the context of the information is detailed.

During the interview, I was intrigued to know her introduction to the USA I was not sure if it was a touchy subject since there are a lot of Cubans that do not express their way of transportation to the U.S. So instead, I asked, before moving to the USA, what were your expectations of New York?
I thought New York was a very bohemian place to live, and in Cuba the bohemian people were called the Freakies. The Freakies were the rebels and I was definitely a rebel. A Castro rebel, a feminist rebel, a black power rebel, and human rights rebel. When I came to New York, I was under the impression that the bohemian people existed, but it seemed very foreign. There are many people that say it still exists, but I definitely don’t see it. (Selenia moved here in 2004.)

I saw Yesenia perform in Manhattan with her dance partner in 2013 and thought that the way she moved was flawless and with grace. So I thought to ask: Did you expect to perform and continue your dance artistry in New York?

When I first moved to New York, I wasn’t thinking of continuing my artistry precisely. In fact, I was more interested in producing more of the academic beneficiaries that would serve the community knowledge on the Cuban traditions. It was my goal to promote more of the historical context of the Cuban traditions than the dancing. However through that, more opportunities opened through performance and music. It felt as if it was meant to happen.

Yesenia then continued to discuss her training in Cuba, which I thought was very intriguing.

In Cuba, I wasn’t able to train at the prestigious dance schools because I was too old. In Cuba, you are not allowed to train after ten years old. So, I took classes at the community arts center. I then attended the University of Havana where I took classes. I devoted myself to theater, and at sixteen I was training in both folklore and theater. This is where I was intrigued and understood the connection between the theater/dance/music. I understood the mythology, but had no idea of the impact of the folklore in performance. It
is very complex! Everyone has a part of the truth, so I though don’t marry with one teacher.... With many teachers, my capacity of knowledge became masterful.

I was interested in learning the deep meaning of the Orishas and the ideas behind the movement. Why is theater training important and how can I understand the essence and the feeling of embodying the Orisha?

This tradition is said to be from the past, but in fact it’s always moving. It is present and continues to evolve. The folkloric dancers were never institutionalized. In my opinion, trained dancers learning folklore look the same. There is no individualism. This is not that good.

Hearing Yesenia discuss folklore and how it is institutionalized, reminds me on my training days at Alvin Ailey. My training developed my technique, but it did not develop my individualism until I was a much more mature dancer. For me, it rises the question of is it better for a dancer to be trained first or explore their own movement? Which one is more acceptable? Does strict technical training take away from the student’s individual voice?

When I was younger and I saw the different companies that are grand today... they were the real deal! You were able to witness soloists on stage as an ensemble. These were people from the street that had a little bit of training, but the most important part of the folklore was their authenticity. In addition, the way things were taught was by watching the teachers. The teachers wouldn’t teach you if you did not embody the movements. The form of this culture is a form of community. It is not a form of entertainment. Its a form of blessing. I trained with Conjunto Folklórico de la Universidad, but I didn’t like to perform. I don’t like to learn choreography. Here is where people learned choreography
by watching. There were people that were in the company for sixteen years and weren’t able to perform much unless they were a favorite.

What’s next for you?

I want to continue to perform and educate everyone about my culture. I would like to write a book on the ethnography of Cuban dance. These traditions are very important to me, and I would like for more people to have more knowledge and see the fruits of this tradition manifest to liveness.

This was a great interview with my mentor. She inspired me to continue the work I am trying to accomplish and establish. Her delivery encouraged me to also promote Cuban dance and music forms. We have a duty to broaden the knowledge of Afro-Cuban dance and forms.
Appendix B

Performance July 31 7:30pm

Performance Title: Drume Mi Negrita

Link to the performance:

The Gallery 1

https://vimeo.com/283328856

The Gallery 2: Chico playing

https://vimeo.com/283329365

Performance: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9BpJkXQoVno&feature=youtu.be

Procession: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KynqnQ7ynfo&feature=youtu.be
Transition to the Performance Space:

Photo of the Spiritual Offerings Displayed at the thesis event

Photo of Yemaya, Cuban Statue, Dolls as displayed in the thesis event