Healing the Immigrant Body with Performance

By Mabel Valdiviezo

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Photo by Robbie Sweeny

During my 16 years as an undocumented artist, I was deeply disconnected from my body and from society at large. The heavy impact of my status affected my entire existence. I lived in silence, underground, and saw no chance to reclaim my being. I didn't realize that my physical being was holding deep fear and that trauma and illness had ravaged my once healthy body. Unsurprisingly, I became very sick.

A sheer will to live took me through recovery. My whole being ached for movement, fulfillment, and freedom. I began to imagine a vision that would take me out of isolation and into empowerment for myself, my community, and my culture. Within that context, *Metamorphosis: Phase 1* came into being.

**Gestation**
Metamorphosis is a multimedia dance performance that combines contemporary and indigenous movement, storytelling, and shamanic ritual with interactive visuals and sounds to explore the intersection of family separation, trauma and the well-being of Latinx immigrant women. We ask the question, “How do we alleviate suffering and restore hope through an artistic process that is rooted in our indigenous culture, and the healing of our individual and collective body?”

What follows is a conversation with my collaborators, choreographer Juliana Mendonca, and technologist Travis Bennett, where we delve into the artistic process and development of our work.

Mabel Valdiviezo: Juliana, we met during Kinetech Arts DanceHack at CounterPulse in 2018. I was new to dance and hoped you would join me in this adventure.

Juliana Mendonca: Our encounter during DanceHack was a beautiful synchronization. I remember the clarity and force with which you presented the story on immigrant Latina women and I felt that this story related to me. A connection was created between us and it was accelerated when you were selected for the CounterPulse Combustible Residency. I felt it was a very interesting opportunity to contribute and share my work as a choreographer and dancer. And a way to give life and depth to a story that also has to do with my personal life and my sensitivity to shamanism and healing through art.

MV: Travis, the pre-prototype we developed during Kinetech Arts’ DanceHack expanded my mind to the possibilities of mixing dance, technology, and shamanism to create a vision of wholeness. When we met, I thought that you were so perfect for Metamorphosis.

Travis Bennett: My background is in technology, art, and community work through Kinetech Arts. I love to help out other artists, so that my work and my own perspective isn’t so technology-focused. After meeting you, I thought the story you’re trying to tell is very important. The topics being addressed in this work are very prescient. The current political climate and nationwide debate over immigration is certainly worth exploring.

On a broader level, I am interested in the idea of othering, whoever the underdog is, the minority group; the idea that these people are not like us and so should be feared and admonished. What does that mean in our society and what does that mean personally to be dismissed and not thought of as important enough to be treated with dignity and respect?

MV: Juliana, your background as a choreographer and an immigrant from Venezuela influences our work.

JM: Metamorphosis comes at a very special moment in my life where being a recent immigrant has been a test for personal improvement, an identity crisis, and an opportunity to transcend limits and create new possibilities.
Choreography and interpretative dancing is the creative path that has enabled me to know myself, heal, and cultivate my femininity. I studied contemporary dance and Butoh and have researched traditional Venezuelan and Latin American dances. Through all of these, I have developed a vocabulary that expresses my concerns in dance and reflections on life.

**Envisioning Metamorphosis**

**MV:** As the Artistic Director, I am grateful for CounterPulse’s residency. We are able to experiment for six months; engage in artistic dialogue, investigate the intersection of embodiment, dance and tech; also bringing community voices and truths into the dance space.

We are developing a work that can be socially, culturally, and artistically impactful. *Metamorphosis* incorporates shamanic ritual inspired by the Peruvian Amazonian culture and an interactive healing garden with artwork by painter Limbert Gonzalez. The original score by Ronald Sanchez, aka “Altiplano,” blends electronic beats with native influences. The project includes art and dance movement workshops in the Latinx community with the intention of healing the contested territory of the immigrant body.

**Choreography Brings Narrative to Life**

Metamorphosis has an overarching narrative influenced by a Latin American indigenous worldview and the heroine’s journey archetype. In this piece, the dance portrays an indigenous woman surviving systematic and gender violence while she crosses the U.S. Mexican border. Seeking solace, she encounters a Peruvian shaman who guides her to a healing garden. She begins her path to wholeness and reemerges as the Aztec earth goddess Tonantzin.

**JM:** In our piece, the choreography explores elements of contemporary dance, indigenous shamanic dance, and physical theater. From the combination of these different “languages,” the choreography interprets the narrative and symbolic elements of the story through physical actions, specific movements, gestures, images and improvisational patterns that define the dance and the characters.

The content of the narrative explores movement in a way that goes from the concrete to the abstract and vice versa. Additionally, technology and music are elements that influence the choreography.
MV: This mixing of contemporary and indigenous movement is what makes our piece evocative.

JM: As Latin American immigrants, you and I are women artists who have been searching within the sensitivity and knowledge of our ancestral culture for universal answers and deeper connection.

The narrative of *Metamorphosis* designates the aesthetic aspects of the characters and even the body language for each dancer. In this case, the immigrant woman is defined in contemporary body language and the shaman in an indigenous language. This fusion between the indigenous ancestral and the contemporary increase the possibilities of creative movement. A ritual space emerges where we envision the past, present, and future of immigrant women.

Converging Dance and Tech

**MV: Travis, I'm curious how you see the role that technology plays?**

**TB:** Technology is one of the best mediums for collaboration because it needs a lot of exploration and experimentation to figure out how to be effective, tell a story, and evoke certain emotions. This is a lengthy process and continual effort to tease out the subtle details and characteristics that technology can bring to the performance. The residency gives us the time and space to explore this topic with the technology to find the right balance of concerns, narrative, and expression that can take our piece to the next level.

**MV: We have given a lot of thought to our themes and the tech side.**

**TB:** The dual nature of a modern immigrant’s journey (leaving everything behind for a chance at something better) is a dense tapestry of interwoven hopes and fears. We use a variety of tools and techniques throughout the piece to expose this struggle to succeed in a world of heightened cultural divides, increased political instability, and algorithmic bias.

Through the simple act of masking or revealing, we seek knowledge, relief, and understanding (with our custom software, 3D depth sensors, and cameras). We mask dangers and reveal truths. We hide pain and show love. We heal and gain transcendence.

As a collective of artists, we rework these ideas on the conceptual side and experiment with visuals and technology, music and choreography, and how they all interrelate. The process ends up finding things that are emotionally resonant that are a good fit for the piece. They become a much more refined toolkit for us to explore further.

Trauma and Healing Using Dance and Tech
MV: Travis, two key topics in the piece are trauma and healing of the immigrant body. Enacting them through technology is a difficult balancing act.

TB: How do we direct the energy of the piece to avoid re-triggering trauma? I am thinking about the night time attack scene that we are exploring. Using a technique like the heat map, we are able to let the audience imagine what could be happening in that scene more than what we are putting in on display for them to watch. This moment becomes an internal emotional struggle. When we bring the technology in that way, we create a bigger impact and draw the audience in.

The same thing works in the healing parts of the piece when we start to expose another level of consciousness or spirituality that is not normally seen. We'll be able to expand the understanding and the energy of what we're performing so that there is another level of themes on top of what we are showing and dancing. Using the technology, we can actually tip our hat to inter-dimensionality.

**Working with the Latinx Community**

MV: *Metamorphosis* calls for a strong community component.

We are facilitating a series of free Art for Healing workshops for immigrant women at La Voz Latina in The Tenderloin and in The Mission district as a way of building empowerment and resilience through collage, drawing, painting, and dance movement. The performance and the workshops seek to alleviate the stress felt by the Latinx community due to inhumane immigration policies that are directly impacting immigrant families, and exposing them to post-traumatic stress. We honor the creativity and courage of immigrant women with a community art exhibit at CounterPulse during our September performances.

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Travis Bennett is a Bay Area web content creator, immersive technology researcher, and technical artist. His work explores the nature of society’s relationship with emerging technologies; such as AR, VR, motion capture, and human movement.

Juliana Mendonca is a Venezuelan contemporary dance performer, choreographer and teacher based in Oakland. Juliana co-founded Raíz de Agua, a live music and dance company that creates projects inspired by nature and our relationship with it.