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Rediscovering the Movements of H:mong/istory: The Cultural Resistance and Hybridity of Performative Identities Within the Third Space Through the Insights of the Hmong Diaspora, Experiences and Perspectives

THESIS

submitted in partial satisfaction of the requirements

for the degree of

MASTERS OF FINE ARTS

in Dance

by

Julian Xiong

Thesis Committee:
Assistant Professor Cyrian Reed, Chair
Professor Jennifer Fisher
Professor John Crawford

2024

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DEDICATION

I dedicate this thesis research to the Hmong friends and families whose passion for dance was hindered by challenges in support and accessibility. I am very grateful to have this opportunity to come this far because of your support and love. As you read this paper, I hope that parts of your stories and voices were heard from the Hmong individuals and mine through this research. To the Hmong youth who share this joy and passion for dance, I hope you find inspiration and courage to continue dancing. I look forward to hearing more of our stories in dance.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

CHAPTER 1……………………...……………...………………………………………………..1

Third Space Theory..…………………………………………………………………1

Hmong Diaspora: Early Settlements In China to Present Day America………………….1

Hmong Art Forms……………………………………………………………………3

Emergence of Hmong Dance: A Cultural Resistance……………………………………..6

CHAPTER 2…...………………………………………………………………………….8

Introduction……………………………………………………………………………..8

K-pop: Appropriation of Hip Hop…………………………………………………...8

The Impact of K-Pop on Asian American Identity and Experiences.……………………10

A New Cultural Identity that Transcends…………………………..…………………14

Beyond the Hmong and Male Body……………………………………………………..14

CHAPTER 3….……….……………………………………………………………………22

Research Methodology………………………………………………………………..22

Interview with Hoshia-Aaron Thao: Identities are Performative………………………..22

Interview with Brandon Yang: Hmong Dance as a Somatic Practice……………………28

Interview with Magnolia Yang Sao Yia: Hmong Identity and Spirituality………………31

Interview with Page Yang: Freeing the Voice and Divergence within Hip Hop…………34

Interview with Gary Yang: From Gangs and Violence to Breakers……………...………39

CHAPTER 4……………………………………………………………………………..…48

Thesis Concert, titled “Transcendence Within the Third Space”......................................48

Interviews From Dancers and Reflection……………………………………………..51

Additional Surveys from Dancers………………………………………………..…53

CHAPTER 5...…………………………...………………………………………….57

Conclusion………………………………………………………………………….57

Research Findings…….…………………………………………………………….57

Limitations Within the Research……………………………..……………………..58

Areas for Future Research………………………………….………………………59

APPENDICES……………………………………………………………………...63

Appendix A: Consent Form……………………………………………………...…63

Appendix B: Research Question Interview Guide………………………………………65

Appendix C: Thesis Dancer Interview Question Guide…………………………………66

Appendix D: Thesis Concert Dancer Survey…………………………………….…67

REFERENCES……………………………………………………………………..69

LIST OF FIGURES

Figure 1: Picture of Hmong Embroidery………………...……………………………...…5

Figure 2: Examples of Dancers' Acculturation Experiences in the Third Space.…...…..54

Figure 3: Examples of My Acculturation Experiences in the Third Space….……...…...55

Figure 4.1: Dancer's Style of Background Survey Pie Chart………………...………….60

Figure 4.2: Movement Quality & Identity Construction Survey Pie Chart……………...60

Figure 4.3: Drawing in Personal Experience Survey Pie Chart………………………….61

Figure 4.4: Different Versions of Self & Character Survey Pie Chart…………………...61

Figure 4.5: Dance is Transcendent & Identities are Performative Survey Pie Chart…......62

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RESEARCHER'S NOTE

The word 'rediscover' is used in the title to symbolize my aspiration to bring closure to this endless exploration of my Hmong identity, a significant chapter in my upbringing that I value and have centered throughout my experiences. 'H:mong/istory,' a term I've combined with 'Hmong' and 'history,' refers to the experiences, stories, and narratives of the Hmong people. I've endeavored to unravel the history of my Hmong cultural heritage, gradually piecing together what it means to be Hmong and preserving my cultural identity through dance. I am deeply honored to present this thesis research with the hope of contributing my piece of the puzzle to inspire more Hmong youth to pursue higher education and further document our stories and experiences for each other. I hope this research study sheds some light and resonates with you through my stories, as well as those of other amazing Hmong artists

ABSTRACT OF THE THESIS

Rediscovering the Movements of H:mong/istory: The Cultural Resistance and Hybridity of Performative Identities Within the Third Space Through the Insights of the Hmong Diaspora, Experiences and Perspectives

By Julian Xiong
Masters of Fine Arts in Dance
University of California, Irvine, 2024
Assistant Professor Cyrian Reed, Chair

The Hmong diaspora has drawn the attention of Hmong scholars, artists, and researchers to understand its cultural dynamics, identities, boundaries, and influences. Hmong culture has transformed through interactions with diverse cultures, which this research examines through the lens of the third space theory by Homi K. Bhabha. This theoretical framework is used to investigate the cultural resistance and hybridization of identities that emerge from within. The exploration of my personal lived experiences, along with five interviews of Hmong-identifying individuals who are educators and artists, captures perspectives on performative identities within Hmong, hip hop, and Korean pop culture, as well as aspects of gender and sexuality in dance. As a result, these investigations utilize the acculturation model theory by John W. Berry as a framework for understanding performativity by analyzing dancers through choreographic works. This finding reveals how each third space offers boundless possibilities not only for cultural resistance and the hybridity of identities but also for a theatrical performance of different acculturation strategies, allowing dancers to embody cultural contexts and explore movement qualities and techniques on their bodies. Ultimately, this study demonstrates how Hmong people resist, create, and reinvent ways of preserving cultural heritage and constructing their identities within various cultural contexts, illustrating what it means to be Hmong. Additionally, it shows

the significance of embodying the essence of a dancer, further highlighting the relationship between cultural expression and personal identity through artistic perspectives and choices.

CHAPTER 1

Third Space Theory

The third space theory by Homi K. Bhabha emerged from postcolonialism, describing a binary opposition between two groups: the colonized people and the colonizer. The in-between and hybridity of the third space represent the encounters of these two social groups with different cultural traditions and potentials of power, serving as a special kind of negotiation or translation that occurs in a third space of enunciation (Ikas et al., 2009). Within this research, this concept can best be understood as the interaction between dominant and minority groups, where differences and elements from two cultures are shared, leading to the creation and emergence of new identities among minority individuals or groups. The discussion of the Hmong diaspora will highlight how Hmong people have invented ways and avenues to preserve and assert their new cultural identity through migration, settlements, and war displacements such as the Vietnam War and the Secret War. This will illustrate the cultural resistance within the third space, showcasing intercultural encounters and cultural hybridity, and representing an ethnic group that has undergone cultural development and integration across diverse cultures.

Hmong Diaspora: Early Settlements In China to Present Day America

Although studies have shown that the origin of Hmong people and history traces back to China between 4000 and 3000 B.C. (Quincy, 1998), I will be discussing the major events from the Hmong diaspora during the Vietnam War, which occurred in the late 1960s and 1970s and continue to the present day. Hmong people are an ethnic group from China who do not have a country of their own. During their settlements in China, the Hmong people were commonly known as the Miao, a generic term referring to many non-Han groups who constituted the minority in South-West China (Culas and Micraud, 1997). The Hmong people who integrated

into Chinese society and culture were considered "cooked Miao," while those who refused to abandon their culture, accept sinicization, and assimilate into Chinese civilization were distinguished as "raw Miao" (Lee, 1998). Those who resisted faced genocidal attacks and were forced to migrate to the mountains, resulting in migrating from China due to wars and conflicts, eventually settling in Indochina between 1727 and 1740 near the Vietnamese border (Quincy, 1998). The lifestyle of the Hmong people was primarily agricultural practices as they lived in the jungles and mountains. Between 1815 and 1818, more Hmong communities were established in Laos, where they built homes, villages, and crops on the land in Xieng Khouang province (Quincy, 1998).

By 1850, France had already begun to colonize Vietnam and established the French Indochinese Union, comprising protectorates such as Cambodia, Laos, Tonkin, Annam, and Cochinchina in 1893 (Chapman, 2016). During World War 2, Japanese forces entered French Indochina and took control until 1945. Seeking independence, it led to the first Indochina War until 1956 when the Geneva Conference called for a ceasefire in Vietnam and signed the Geneva Accord, temporarily dividing the country at the 17th parallel and requiring the withdrawal of the French army (Watt, 1967). Laos and Thailand had just become independent and neutral nations, but Southeast Asia was already experiencing a domino effect of Communism. To prevent any further spread, the United States Central Intelligence Agency conducted the Secret War in the 1970s (Lo, 2017). There were concerns from the United States that if Laos fell into Communism, Thailand could be next.

In 1961, the Secret War was initiated, recruiting the Hmong people in Laos and a well-known Hmong leader, Vang Pao, to train them in speaking English and using air forces and guerilla tactics (Sullivan). Although the team was led by the intelligence of General Vang Pao,

the state of South Vietnam surrendered, and Saigon fell in 1975. The Americans withdrew their troops, leading the Hmong people into the hands of communism and eventually leaving the land into the jungle or seeking refuge in Thailand. The Hmong people who fled into the jungle encountered numerous attacks and executions by the communist Lao Army. Due to the harsh conditions of the jungle, many had no choice but to surrender to Lao authorities and reintegrate into their society (Currie, 2008). However, those who participated in the Secret War were granted the opportunity to go to America, while those who couldn't, assimilated and lived in Thailand (Lo, 2017). The Hmong population today can be seen in countries such as Vietnam, Thailand, Laos, Myanmar, the US, and even parts of Canada and France. Based on a research article by Kou Yang (2001), he states that the earliest immigration wave to the United States started in 1976 and peaked in the year 1980. Although many were dispersed across America, most migration took place in California, with Fresno leading as the city with the highest population of Hmong people. Towards the end of the 1990s, more Hmong people started moving out to different cities in California, as well as out of the state to Minnesota, in search of employment and better economic opportunities (Yang, 2001).

Hmong Art Forms

Culture serves as an integral aspect in shaping people's identity. It unites individuals through shared experiences, values, beliefs, religion, and language. Within a community, culture represents a collective effort to preserve identity, traditions, norms, and principles that are handed down from ancestors, reflecting the continuity and legacy of the people. The Hmong people have endured wars to preserve their culture through art, language, and dance. Although assimilation and cultural homogenization play a role in separating and disconnecting an individual from their identity and culture, preservation endures through art, clothing, oral

traditions, and dance. As one culture changes and comes into contact with another, new forms of cultural representation emerge to continue preserving the culture. Some features have changed and been lost due to selective use, while new ones have replaced them (Lee, 2008). This evolution represents a response and adaptation, allowing for the survival of the cultural legacy.

Due to their living environment surrounded by mountains and agriculture, the Hmong people did not have literacy, so many stories and cultural traditions were passed down orally within the community (Thao, 2006). The Hmong people had two kinds of oral traditions: *kwv txiaj* and *qeej*. *Kwv txiaj* is commonly known as an art form that uses the voice as an instrument. It is often performed by expressing the loss of loved ones, family members, living in poverty, and longing for the homeland. However, *kwv txiaj* was also used to convey their stories, beliefs, and history through recitations in songs and poetry (Duffy et al., 2004). This was a way of sharing knowledge and cultural traditions. As for the *qeej*, it is an instrument made of several sizes of bamboo that determine the musical notes. Studies by Yer J. Thao (2006) showed that during funerals, *qeej* players would perform a ceremony to communicate with and guide the soul of the deceased person to the ancestors' world for guidance. Another research study also states how the sound of the *qeej* serves as a communicatory bridge between the physical and spiritual worlds, providing detailed instructions for the soul's journey to the world of the ancestors (Falk, 2004).

Traditional clothing also plays a role in identifying an ethnic group. *Paj ntaub*, which translates as "flower cloth," is a form of Hmong textile embroidery that holds deep cultural significance in preserving Hmong heritage through clothing and storytelling. It serves as a means of communicating and documenting life experiences of the past and present through intricate pictures and symbols. These embroideries, predominantly sewn by Hmong women, have played

a crucial role in capturing human experiences and memories of war, from migration and exile to the establishment of new homes (Hatch-Surisook, 2023). According to Ava L. McCall (1997), both Hmong men and women began creating these story cloths during refugee camps in Thailand and further explains how Hmong embroideries were also crafted for sale to generate income, as well as for clothing during the Hmong New Year celebrations. During the Hmong New Year, people gather to celebrate by wearing various traditional Hmong clothing, enjoying food, and watching performances and entertainment. Attached below is a picture of a Hmong *paj ntaub*, illustrating the story of the Hmong people during the Vietnam War.

Figure 1 - Unknown Artist 1980s-90s

Photo by Noah Vang, item at the Hmong Archives

In the upper left corner, airplanes can be seen bombing villages, while people cross mountains and rivers at the border to seek asylum. In the bottom right corner, it portrays Hmong people walking into Thailand and approached by Thai police.

Emergence of Hmong Dance: A Cultural Resistance

The emergence of Hmong dance is significant in examining and understanding how the culture has developed and made a transformative impact on the culture. Following the Vietnam War, Hmong women learned to dance from Laotian women and performed for the elites of Lao society, later appropriating and carrying these movements when they immigrated to Thailand (Vang). The participation of Hmong women has utilized this art form to assert cultural identity through movements and clothing that are traditional yet fused with elements of Thai and Lao culture. Contemporary Hmong dance has been profoundly influenced by various forms of dance and cultures, spanning from Vietnam to Laos, Thailand, and America. It shares many similarities with Thai and Lao dance, featuring numerous hand and arm gestures in elegant movements involving the pinching of the thumb and index finger. Many Hmong dancers also emphasize the incorporation of hip movements into their routines and choreography, blending Hmong music with elements of hip hop. The Hmong people have adopted this art form which became a cultural reproduction for the Hmong community, serving as a way of preserving culture and identity (Lee, 2008).

The term "appropriation" generally has a negative connotation and is frequently discussed in Hmong dance. Cultural appropriation is universally recognized as wrong and problematic because it can have harmful effects. It is the “act of taking or using things from a culture that is not your own, especially without showing that you understand and respect this culture” (Cambridge). However, it's also important to consider the socio-economic issues and historical

contexts prevalent at the time when these appropriations occurred. Typically, cultural appropriation occurs when there is an imbalance in power between two groups, leading to the exploitation of a culture by a dominant group from a minority group. In a research article by Richard A. Rogers (2006), he examined and reconceptualized the notion of cultural appropriation into 4 categories: *cultural exchange, cultural dominance, cultural exploitation,* and *transculturation*. The interactions between Hmong culture and other cultures could best be characterized as cultural exchange and transculturation. This involved a reciprocal exchange in language, religion, technology, and artistic expression in a voluntary process (Rogers, 2006).

As a minority in Laotian and Thai societies, they have integrated elements of those cultures into their own through these interactions to assert their cultural identity. Through this integration, this research could also best be supported through the acculturation model theory by John W. Berry. This model theory consists of four acculturation strategies: assimilation, integration, separation, and marginalization (Zee & Oudenhoven, 2022). Assimilation occurs when a group has completely adopted the cultural norms and practices of the dominant culture, while integration is when a group maintains its original culture while adopting elements of the dominant culture. Marginalization is the process of maintaining neither of the two cultures, excluding themselves from cultures, while separation is not conforming to the dominant culture and primarily practicing their cultural practices. The Hmong people have displayed a form of integration by adopting elements of Thai and Lao cultures for their cultural identity to coexist within the dominant group. This involved the appropriation of elements of a dominant culture by a subordinated culture for survival, psychological compensation, and/or opposition (Rogers, 2006).

CHAPTER 2

Introduction

Chapter 2 discusses the interaction between my Hmong identity and my experiences in dance. The cultural influences from my dance experiences played a crucial role in shaping my Hmong American identity. It served as a platform for self-expression, cultural exploration, and communication, extending beyond the confines of a mere dance floor. My upbringing in dance was heavily influenced by Korean pop music and its culture, serving as a precursor for me and providing a foundation for exploring gender and sexual identities within the expressive realm of dance. Therefore, a new cultural identity emerged from hip hop.

K-pop: Appropriation of Hip Hop

During the early 2000s, Korean artists such as Big Bang, 2NE1, Girls' Generation, SHINee, and many more from the early generation of K-pop first started making waves into the media, however, as K-pop gained popularity in the mainstream media through Blackpink and BTS, it has become global phenomenon across the world. Other than the concepts, choreographies, and music that come from K-pop, what makes it unique is the origin of where it came from. It can be traced back during the 1980s when Koreans came across American culture, hence, K-pop was born through the cultural hybridity of Korean and hip-hop culture.

Hip-hop culture came from the Bronx, New York in the 1970s (Alridge and Stewart, 2005). There are four elements in Hip Hop culture which include graffiti, emceeing, DJing, and breaking. Graffiti and breaking emerged from the 1960s but hip-hop music can be traced back in the Bronx on August 11, 1973, when DJ Kool Herc threw a party where he used two turntables and the instrumental break of records (Williams, 2011). Hip hop culture was a reaction and reflection of the socioeconomic conditions in the Black and Latino community at the time.

According to one of Fernando Orejuela's research study, Hip Hop music culture is a product of African American, Afro-Caribbean, and Latino inner city communities plagued by poverty, the proliferation of drugs, and gang violence in the 1960s and early 1970s (Maultsby et al., 2021). Emceeing later evolved into rapping and DJing went underground into turntablism by manipulating music with play records (Maultsby et al., 2021). Orejuela (2021) states that there are three different eras of hip hop: Old School, New School, and Golden Eera. By the time hip hop reached its Golden Era, its popularity became mainstream into the 21st century, becoming a global phenomenon that reflected cultures, politics, and society.

Hong, Cho, and Kinney (2023) explain how Korea has been colonized by Japan, China, and the Soviet Union, and since the Korean War in 1953, South Korea has been heavily influenced by cultural imports such as movies, TV shows, and music from China and Japan, but more particularly, the United States. As the Golden Era marked the beginning of Hip Hop commercialization, it was brought over by American troops to South Korea. There was a popular nightclub in Itaewon called the Moonlight Club, where American GIs would go clubbing and dance to Hip Hop music (Cala et al., 2023). The economy and cultural industry in South Korea rapidly started blooming and initiated the Hallyu, also known as the Korean Wave, throughout Asia, which birthed the first K-pop group Seo Taiji and the Boys, influenced by American hip hop culture (Hong et al., 2022; Cala et al., 2023). Itaewon soon served as a third space for people of different cultures, fostering and creating new cultural hybridity (Baik).

It's crucial to acknowledge and delve into the topic of cultural appropriation and appreciation that occurred during this time. In a journal blog by Yunjae Lee (2020), she brought up how a hip hop group called Drunken Tiger, who were born in America, brought "real authentic" hip hop to Korea. However, Seo Taiji and the Boys, who were very successful during

the same time as the Drunken Tigers, were popularizing hip hop and were not considered authentic from the perspective of Drunken Tigers. South Korea, being a homogenous country, didn't view race as an issue or concern and often relied on racial stereotypes, differing from the dynamics of race in America (Lee, 2020). Therefore, this raises questions about whether this would be considered cultural appropriation and commodification, resulting in the loss of authenticity and meaning of hip hop.

Cultural appropriation occurs when the dominant group exploits and takes advantage of the minority group; however, this doesn't seem to be the case for K-pop but rather a cultural exchange and hybridization, paralleling Hmong dance. Hip hop, as an expressive art form resisting societal norms, shifted into the mainstream and, through the process of globalization, became commercialized worldwide, leading to a cultural hybridization that influenced societies, cultures, and economies (Hare & Baker, 2017). Although this process may seem to wash out the authenticity of hip hop culture, it still has a significant impact on how hip hop culture transformed the music industry in Korea. This transformation highlights the third space that occurred between Korean and American culture.

The Impact of K-Pop on Asian American Identity and Experiences

As far back as I can remember growing up, Hmong individuals showed an interest in K-pop music and culture. It provided me with a platform to explore dance and music for the first time in a performative aspect. The influence of K-pop dance, music, and fashion has led to the development of a new sense of belonging within the Hmong American community, where each individual, including me, starts to adopt new elements of cultures different from their own. I often heard the term “Korean reject” from family, friends, and members of the Hmong community, but I never fully understood its meaning. "Reject" refers to someone unwanted,

unsatisfactory, or failing to meet requirements (Merriam-Webster). It seems to be used to belittle and shame other Hmong individuals for their interest in cultures outside of their own. However, it has changed the lived experiences of Asian Americans, fostering a sense of cultural connection, self-expression, and community.

Before K-pop became a global phenomenon, the fandom community was still relatively small but growing. Learning choreography from K-pop dances, performing, filming, and uploading on platforms like YouTube, Instagram, or any other social media became one of the greatest ways to connect with communities across the world and share their interest in K-pop. Studies have shown that K-pop provides Asian Americans with cultural content, narratives, and Asian values while being integrated into American pop culture, portraying Asian identity beyond stereotypes from experiences in America (Kuo et al., 2020). This highlights the importance of representation for cultural connection and empowerment.

K-pop also serves as a way of negotiating gender and sexual identities. Asian men have often been portrayed in the media as feminine, soft, and passive in America, and stereotyped into descriptions such as nerdy, exotic, and submissive, contrary to Western ideals of masculinity such as tough, dominant, and rugged. However, Jung (2021) explains how K-pop creates hybridized concepts that reflect layers of masculinity throughout music, fashion, and behaviors. K-pop boy bands present a wide range of gender images, such as ‘flower boys,’ who are described as individuals with pretty facial features, slim and attractive body shapes, and ‘beast idols,’ who are men with bodies that are masculine and tough like a ‘beast’ (Oh, 2015). This has created perceptions of masculinity that vary, rather than adhering to a single ideal, transcending what it means to be masculine in various ways. It portrays how men won't be emasculated for participating in dance contrary to America where men who do participate in dance are considered

effeminate and homosexual (Oh, 2015; Kim, 2023). K-pop also creates a safe space where LGBTQ Asian Americans may observe and relate to portrayals of queer identity (Kuo et al., 2020). This means that male K-pop idols perform gender, where fans are able to engage and learn how to redefine gender and sexual identities, as well as through imagination of fetishizing idols, providing alternative narratives of sexuality, gender, and Asian identity to queer individuals who may lack sources of visibility and validation (Kuo et al., 2020).

Another aspect of K-pop is through the dance covers, which involve recreating choreographies. Through these K-pop dance covers, a sense of community is created among people of all ethnic backgrounds (Kim, 2023). This also involves collaborating with other dancers and fostering a supportive community. Its significance allows not only Asians but also non-Asians to feel included and connected, transcending cultural and ethnic boundaries. K-pop dance covers also provide platforms for performing "reverse covers," which occur when dancers recreate dances originally performed by a gender different from their own, allowing for free expression of masculinity and femininity (Kim, 2023). Dancers bring their unique interpretations, styles, and personalities to their performances, allowing freedom to mimic idols through fashion, facial expressions, and lip-syncing. It involves the practice of imitation by replicating the original choreography, where identity passing, and crossing racial identity borders, as well as intra/interracial issues of identity and authenticity, become necessary (Alexander, 2004; Oh, 2020). The significance of K-pop dance covers provides insight into understanding intercultural performance, reflecting the interconnectedness of cultural exchange and borrowing across cultural borders (Oh, 2020).

The influence and impact of K-pop have allowed Asian Americans to view their lived experiences differently, combating stereotypes and addressing the lack of representation.

Although it may have appropriated hip hop, it still reflects the essence of hip hop culture as freedom of expression through resistance. Just like hip hop, K-pop has become a tool in shaping individuals' identities and providing them with a space to develop their sense of agency within an explorative third space that may resonate more with certain communities which affirms why Hmong Americans may have a resonating interest in K-pop, defying cultural norms and societal expectations to challenge and explore beyond cultural boundaries and find discoveries in themselves. As someone like me who has always aspired to "become and be like" a K-pop star, the first female Hmong American K-pop star, Lexi Vang, was able to achieve that accomplishment and become a role model for the Hmong community, stepping away from the stigma which once shamed others for immersing themselves in K-pop culture. Another aspect of K-pop is through the dance covers, which involve recreating choreographies. Through these K-pop dance covers, a sense of community is created among people of all ethnic backgrounds (Kim, 2023). This also involves collaborating with other dancers and fostering a supportive community. Its significance allows not only Asians but also non-Asians to feel included and connected, transcending cultural and ethnic boundaries. K-pop dance covers also provide platforms for performing "reverse covers," which occur when dancers recreate dances originally performed by a gender different from their own, allowing for free expression of masculinity and femininity (Kim, 2023). Dancers bring their unique interpretations, styles, and personalities to their performances, allowing freedom to mimic idols through fashion, facial expressions, and lip-syncing. It involves the practice of imitation by replicating the original choreography, where identity passing, and crossing racial identity borders, as well as intra/interracial issues of identity and authenticity, become necessary (Alexander, 2004; Oh, 2020). The significance of K-pop

dance covers provides insight into understanding intercultural performance, reflecting the interconnectedness of cultural exchange and borrowing across cultural borders (Oh, 2020).

A New Cultural Identity that Transcends

I found myself immersed in hip-hop culture through K-pop which eventually led me to construct a new cultural identity. Nguyen and Fergeson (2019) have described how hip hop serves as a tool for young Southeast Asians to express their identity while living in America, connecting their identity within a wider global community, and exploring this attraction to hip hop by explaining three perspectives: contact, assimilation, and marginalization. Many immigrant families who come from low-income backgrounds often reside in black and Latino communities where they share experiences of marginalization based on their ethnic minority and socioeconomic status. Southeast Asian American youth appropriate and adopt hip hop culture as a way of affirming their American identity within the dominant culture due to the invisibility they face (Nguyen & Fergeson, 2019). Ultimately, hip hop provides a space for those who feel marginalized, reflecting fundamental aspects of hip hop culture. As I continue to unravel my experiences, the impact of hip-hop culture on my journey demonstrated how embodying hip hop knowledge and dance has shaped my new cultural identity.

Beyond the Hmong and Male Body

"Hmong men don't dance." When men do not fit the masculine type, they are criticized and made to feel inferior for participating in feminine activities (Oliver, 2017). As an effeminate, closeted gay teenager growing up, I faced challenges with the intricacy of my identities within my culture. This extra layer reinforced the stigma for me, leading me to hide this aspect of my life from my family. Hmong dance was my parents' only exposure to dance, which already placed a perception of dance as a feminized activity that did not conform to my gender roles and

expectations. My parents lacked an understanding of dance and perceived it as a hobby rather than a professional career, which created concerns for my financial security and stability. Due to the limitation of the Hmong language, it caused a lack of communication with my parents to understand my passions and career goals. When my parents immigrated to America, the mentality of surviving and generating income to support the family was the primary purpose. However, it became essential to open conversations with them, recognizing that the new generations of Hmong Americans now have access to a wide range of resources and opportunities to further their endeavors. These conversations across the Hmong community bridged the gap and enlightened older generations about how new ways of living in America are changing and evolving.

K-pop essentially became the epitome for me—a gateway to foster my abilities and construct my own identity because it was already difficult to seek mentorship or role models within my culture and community due to the lack of professionals and representation in dance. Therefore, I self-learned how to mimic movements by studying K-pop choreographies through videos, constructed my personas, learned to use and operate a camera, and even managed my own YouTube channel and directed my dance group. While K-pop served as my foundational influence in dance, choreography ignited a new interest in me, prompting me to push my development as an artist beyond just copying dance through a screen. After I graduated high school, this led me to adopt hip-hop dance with the guidance of my mentor, Serena Yang, who graduated from the University of California, Riverside with a BFA in Dance and was actively dancing in the hip-hop dance community and collegiate teams in Southern California during her time. She opened her dance studio, Immaculate Trait, back in Fresno after she had finished school and offered training where I was under her guidance for six months in choreography and

teaching. When it was time for school to start, I moved down and relocated to Los Angeles to pursue my bachelors in dance at California State University, Los Angeles, where I earned my BFA in Dance, receiving my very first training in ballet and modern dance while immersing myself in the hip-hop dance community and participating in different teams such as Family Bizness and Maker Empire's adult team Rogue Makers.

During my time training with this company, I began learning various hip hop dance styles and house dance became my very first. Throughout my training, I've recognized the importance of understanding the history and origins of each dance style I encounter. To my surprise, I learned that house dance emerged from gay communities and clubs in Chicago in the 1980s. However, it's important to understand that house music and house dance are two separate phenomena. Whereas house dance is a dance subculture with its own culture that emerged from house music, which has its own spiritual and philosophical system (Kronsted, 2021). Sagollo (2013) explains how house music, an electronic genre played between 118 and 130 beats per minute with a four-on-the-note-floor kick drum, originated in underground clubs where Latino and Black men from the gay community gathered. It has allowed numerous subgenres to emerge, such as hip-house, afro house, acid house, and soulful house (Sagolla, 2013). House dance consists of three elements: jacking, which involves rippling angulation of the spine and upper body; footwork, borrowing from tap dance and salsa; and lofting, which includes floorwork and acrobatic movements (The House Mason, 2013; Sagolla, 2013). The term "jacking" originated from Chicago, including a move called Farmer, but as New York house dancers continued codifying it, more terminologies emerged, such as Loose Legs, Train, and Skate, as well as footwork like heel-toes, borrowed from jazz, tap, salsa, and African dance (The Mason House, 2013).

Not only as an art form of dance, but house dance also serves as a form of communication. It is interactive, performative, and improvisational, serving as a means to unite people, transcending status, name, and identity (Sommer, 2001). When people enter clubs like the Loft and Paradise Garage, they do so with an ethos of self-expression and a non-judgmental attitude (Resident Advisor, 2021). These underground clubs provided a safe haven for everyone, offering a sense of home, family, and liberation. There was no focus on color, gender, or one's own appearance; rather, it was a learning and sharing experience with everyone, regardless of their physical attributes or identities (Secada, 2017). As house dance legend Archie Bunnet once said in the documentary film (2012) "Check Your Body at the Door," "Check your body at the door means take your attitude, your baggage, your all of that. Check it at the door, and then you go into the club, and you're a totally different person. You enjoy aggravation-free, stress-free, life problem-free." This embodied knowledge has truly liberated my body, allowing me not to worry about how I look and move.

I also developed an interest in whacking with the influence of the dance company. Whacking is an art form inspired by Hollywood films that originated in the 1970s in Los Angeles' underground gay disco clubs among marginalized black and Hispanic men (Bragin, 2014; Briteramos, 2023). Viktor Manoel, an original punker, explains that punk was a derogatory term for "fag"; therefore, terming the dance style as punking was a means of expressing their daily life, transforming the ugly into beauty through dance to uplift themselves as gay men (Waacking Sharing, 2022). Other original punkers included Arthur, Tinker, and Andrew, but due to the HIV/AIDS epidemic, most of them passed away, leaving Viktor Manoel as the last original punker (Ma, 2024). Manoel further explains in his interview (2022) that punking is the entire style; however, whacking, derived from TV series and comic books like *Batman*, is an element,

along with posing, which was the first element. It involves circular motion and rotation of the arms from Manoel and overhead movements like nunchucks from Tinker. In terms of spelling, whacking means to strike with force, whereas “waacking" has become a commercialized term. As punkers started performing and competing more outside of gay clubs, it gained popularity among straight people, leading to its rebranding as waacking for a wider audience in media, films, and studios due to its origin and the stigma surrounding queer roots (Bragin, 2014; Vargas, 2022; Briteramos, 2023). Bragin (2014) also mentioned how during FOX TV’s *So You Think You Can Dance* in season eight, they invited choreographer Kumari Suraj and captioned a photo online stating,

> *Waacking is a style of street dance that originated in Los Angeles in the early 70s. It takes a lot of skill, precision and control. It is typically choreographed to Disco music as the driving rhythms and defined beats compliment the quick hand and body gestures.*

This implies that these narratives and perspectives continue to cater to the heteronormative audience; however, the trajectory loses and erases the origin of culture and roots, resulting in no credibility given to the pioneers from the gay community. Punking originated from the West Coast of America, where Hollywood was the center of films and acting, expressing the oppressive stories of their daily life as gay boys, performing and acting out their favorite films and comic books.

I have always resonated with the vogue and ballroom culture because it represents the ultimate embodiment of what it means to embrace femininity beyond traditional gender roles and

my male physical body. Before the TV show RuPaul's Drag Race, drag culture emerged in the 1960s, with gay men dressing up as drag queens and female impersonators, differing from transsexuals (Moncrieff & Lienard, 2017; Balzar, 2005). Crystal LaBeija, one of the pageant contestants from the documentary The Queens, established the House of LaBeija in 1968, where they hosted balls of their own, eventually leading to more houses such as Extravaganza, Corey, Ninja, Dupree, and Pendavis in the ballroom culture of Harlem, New York (Vogue, 2023). During the 1970s, at a club called Footsteps, Paris Dupree pulled out a Vogue magazine and struck a pose to the beat, then flipped to the next page and posed again to the next beat, eventually leading all femme queens to catch on and start posing against each other (Vogue, 2023). Three different styles of vogue performance have evolved over time: Old Way, New Way, and Vogue Femme (Jackson, 2002). Old Way is a style that borrows movements and poses from Vogue magazine, emphasizing posing like models and moving with clean lines. New Way is a style that highlights flexibility as well as clean arm control with both symmetrical and asymmetrical arm movements. Vogue Femme, widely used today, expresses dramatic, soft, and feminine movements. This style incorporates five elements or languages: hand performance, catwalks, duckwalks, floor performance, and spins and dips.

In ballroom culture, there is usually a mother/father who serves as the parent of each house, offering social support, a network of friends, and a social setting that allows free expression of gender and sexuality (Arnold and Bailey, 2009). Bailey (2011) mentioned how these members of the house came from all black and Latino backgrounds, identifying as men, women, lesbian, gay, bisexual, straight, or queer, structured socially rather than biologically. Houses played a significant role in fostering kinships, providing guidance, and organizing balls for competition and socialization (Bailey, 2011). Bailey (2011) also further explains how gender

systems in categories at ballroom reflect lived experiences through performances. Each house selects its members to compete in categories such as Butch Queen for gay men, Femme Queen for transwomen, Butch for transmen, and Men and Women's vogue (cis-gendered of all sexualities).

Ballroom culture gained wider visibility in the 1980s with the release of the documentary *Paris is Burning*, which showcased the voguing scene and individuals affected by AIDS. Similar to how punkers faced AIDS, many gay and trans individuals in the ballroom community grappled with the stigma of homophobia during this epidemic. When Madonna released the song *Vogue* in 1990, it brought positive attention to the community by increasing its visibility and hiring prominent ballroom figures to choreograph and assist her tour. However, some members of the community were frustrated by the lack of acknowledgement and recognition given to them in return and the cultural exploitation and commercialization (Vogue, 2023; Chatzipapatheodoridis, 2017). Just like whacking, this also illustrates homophobia and the disregard for its origins, erasing the authenticity of the culture and its history. However, despite facing adversity and undergoing significant transformation, this culture has demonstrated its resilience and ability to thrive, providing queer individuals to preserve and nurture their identities.

Learning and understanding these socio-historical contexts has deepened my connection to why I resonate with shaping my identity through various Hip-hop subcultures and dance styles. My upbringing as a gay man may have differed significantly from the experiences during those historical times, however, immersing myself in a culture that shared similar lived experiences was liberating in guiding my development of identities and provided a sense of solidarity. This involvement had a profound impact on me, enabling me to authentically express

my identity by adopting and integrating these movements into my repertoire and expanding my creativity in crafting my stories. Hip hop serves as a cultural identity that is exclusive to one particular group which reflects inclusivity and diversity, transcending race and ethnicity (Nguyen & Jacqueline, 2019), such as embodying house dance disregarding anyone's identities and offers a space for self-expression to all and challenging my masculinity and femininity through voguing.

CHAPTER 3

Research Methodology

Qualitative interviews will be conducted to gather perspectives from Hmong artists who are educators, artists, and professionals. The goal is to document representations of Hmong experiences in dance by engaging in a semi-structured interview and open-ended conversation to explore the dynamics of the third space from the perspectives of Hmong artists, ranging from queer individuals to women, and men. Some questions will be stated below; however, you may also refer to Appendix B for the full list of interview questions.

Interview with Hoshia-Aaron Thao: Identities are Performative

I had the pleasure of virtually meeting and interviewing Hoshia-Aaron Thao, a ballet choreographer and director of the Hudson Valley Theatre company on a Zoom call. Thao is a Hmong American, born and raised in the Twin Cities, Minnesota, who currently resides in Westchester, New York. Before pursuing a career in ballet, he had a bachelor's degree in human biology and spent two years as a student in medical school at the University of Minnesota before dropping out. To begin the interview, I posed a general question: "How did you get into ballet, and what made you pursue dance?" Thao explained,

> *Growing up in the Twin Cities, there were so many programs and support for the performing arts so I started as a violinist for almost 18 years and throughout college. I went to Brown University and when I came back to the Midwest where some of my siblings were living, I was looking for an artistic outlet for myself personally.*

He then shared a personal story about dealing with depression during college when he came out as a gay man, particularly to his family, who were very religious. This revelation tested his relationship with his family. Thao continued, stating that as the oldest son, he felt pressure from his parents to conform to certain expectations that didn't align with who he truly was. Consequently, he sought something to explore his voice and authenticity to heal which was through ballet. I proceeded with some context of my research about the Hmong diaspora and the cultural resistance of Hmong dance. Then I quoted from a research article saying hip-hop is a tool for Southeast Asian youth and transcends race and ethnicity (Nguyen, 2019), embracing and appreciating people of all cultures and backgrounds. When I asked Thao if ballet helped form his identity, he said,

> *Dance is my identity. My identity is all dance related and I really do find joy being able to. Our adaptability as Hmong people like our language reflects that too which is why we're able to survive. A lot that is adaptive, we certainly have used all these tools to our benefit and the venue to express ourselves is a necessity for immigrant children.*

During this conversation about immigrant children, he brought up an important point about immigrant children. Immigrants who migrate to another country typically experience varying levels of acculturation, adaptation, and assimilation. According to a study by Nkauj Hli Melinda Lo (2017), Hmong immigrants who came to America encountered the challenges of adapting to American culture while raising their children in two different cultures. These children, born in another country and raised in America, face the task of preserving their cultural

heritage while developing an American identity, leading to confusion and a loss of identity while navigating a new cultural environment. Similarly, second-generation individuals may undergo a comparable experience; however, they may find themselves grappling with feelings of disconnection from their family and cultural roots in the face of the dominant culture. Thao said that he faced challenges as a 1.5-generation individual, experiencing cultural pressure to make his family proud in the US while bridging the gap between his immigrant parents' generation and the second generation, which includes his siblings. He stated that,

> *It's not possible all the time. By going through that, you're going to lose something to be able to gain something. If you're doing exactly what your parents want while assimilating and staying true to your Hmong identity, you lose a lot of yourself and there's no room for you anymore.*

The topic of gender and sexuality arose during the interview. Thao mentioned that coming out as gay was liberating for him and freed him from adhering to Hmong customs and traditions. This meant he no longer felt bound by the responsibilities of a traditional Hmong man, despite being the oldest son. Consequently, his younger brother had to assume that role. Thao's decision to step away from this role allowed him to develop a new sense of identity through dance.

> *By choosing a profession in the arts, you are choosing in many ways to free yourself from some of the customary responsibilities that you have.*

I responded about my personal experience as a gay Hmong man, explaining that when I came out to my family, most of the responsibility fell on my younger brothers. There were times when I wasn't included in family conversations because I was almost considered an outsider. Additionally, living far away from them made it difficult to stay in touch with family. Seeking clarity, I posed the question, "My research spoke on retaining cultural identity, but you mentioned stepping down from your role as a traditional Hmong man. Are you suggesting that we have to abandon an aspect of our identity at some point in life?' He responded,

> *Identity is a journey and constantly evolving. Identities are composed of what you are seeing. There are internal identities I can choose to identify as. Identity is a choice. When I say I have to drop and to be able explore parts of that, I'm never not going to not be Hmong. I know a few Hmong gays who are disowned by their family, who do not identify Hmong as a choice. Just like in dance, it's a creative choice to choose and perform. Identities are somewhat performative and you have to choose for yourself.*

Reconnecting this idea of performative identities, dance offers a space where people get to perform an identity and take on a role they can artistically and creatively choose. Bouncing back on the framework of third space, it seems to me that it serves an explorative realm where people shape into an identity to perform on their physical body. Thao mentioned during this interview that whenever you step into a space or room, you're going to perform certain roles and it reminded me of Erving Goffman's dramaturgical theory. From a sociological perspective, dramaturgy analyzes how individuals construct, present, and manage their behaviors in social

encounters (Ercan and Carolyn, 2022). People may adapt and shape their actions to express specific impressions and social expectations. Goffman's concept of the front stage and backstage resonates with me in the context of dance. The third space where dancers are performing serves as the front stage, where they can express a narrative and identity, whereas the backstage reconnects the dancers to their truest selves.

Drawing on the idea of this theory, impression management may also be relevant to this research. M.R. Leary (2001) refers to it as self-presentation, describing the processes through which individuals attempt to control how they are perceived by others. Expressing a certain impression may help individuals integrate into society, shaping an identity to conform to desired norms. By applying this theory within dance, the third space becomes a canvas for dancers to paint their expressions, offering a space for the audience to construct and interpret stories. When a choreography incorporates a concept or story, dancers may assume roles to fulfill audience expectations and evoke emotions. Their true identity is often obscured within this performance space, where their outward appearance may not reflect who they truly are. Goffman's framework also consists of *setting* which refers to the physical environment or context in which interaction takes place and how it shapes behaviors and communication (Ercan and Carolyn, 2022). Props such as clothing can shape how dancers interact and behave through an embodiment of the character. In vogue and ballroom culture, fashion is syncretized to reflect identity, character, self-expression, and personality. Susman (2000) explained in her book how gay men have a wide variety of competing roles on runways, such as portraying straight men and embodying realness in drag as a woman. Fashion shapes and is used to shape different manifestations of identity, offering opportunities for the self-fashioning of identities (Susman, 2000).

Expression through dance and identities can also possess the power to negotiate expressions of gender and sexuality. Gender norms construct the way we are presented and perceived in the eyes of people. It is how we act socially with others through our behaviors, whether they are perceived as masculine or feminine. A research study by Thepsourinthone (2022), which examines gay men within heteronormative gender and sexuality norms, explains how females who diverge into both acts of masculinity and femininity are typically accepted; however, males who adopt both expressions are not usually socially favored without experiencing some form of repercussion. Men who are heterosexual and enter a workspace that is non-traditionally for men, where the majority are females, face challenges to their masculinity. Feminine traits are often characterized as emotional, nurturing, and soft, which creates problems for men in challenging their identities, sexualities, and what it means to be a man (Pullen and Simpson, 2009). For example, ballet is often viewed as a highly feminized activity, so as a result, male ballet dancers must negotiate their identities as men while performing a highly stigmatized activity as effeminate (Haltom and Worthen, 2014). The way we perform gender and manage our masculinity and femininity can be best supported through the work of Judith Butler's performative theory, describing it as the idea that gender is an act of performance or the repetition and enactment of gender performance, which involves negotiation, recreation, and maintenance of difference when doing gender (Butler, 1990; Meyerhoff, 2014; Pullen and Simpson, 2009).

During my conversation with Thao, he discussed the reasons behind his decision to establish his own ballet company, expressing his desire to provide a platform for dancers to share stories that he believed were meaningful through ballet, thus giving them a voice. Stories conveyed through dance have a profound ability to represent and evoke emotions through

concepts and costumes. He recounted creating a choreographic piece depicting his mother's journey in the Hmong diaspora, which incorporated traditional Hmong instrumental music, with costumes designed by his mother. While many from the Hmong community supported and appreciated the performance, Thao encountered discomfort from the Hmong community who questioned the use of white women in traditional Hmong clothing instead of hiring Asian women for the roles. In response to this feedback, he aimed to emphasize that every immigrant to America has a unique story, leading him to develop a new piece titled "Icarus." The performance represents immigrants from various backgrounds such as Ukrainian, Irish, and Italian in the 1950s. He choreographed this piece to allow his dancers to have a voice as well and represent their background, infusing empathy and personal experiences into their performances. Similarly, one of my choreographic works called "New Beginnings" was a Hip-hop contemporary piece that incorporated elements of Hmong dance and traditional clothes. Although most of my cast were white women, the intention was purely to share my narrative of the Hmong diaspora and cultural identity.

Interview with Brandon Yang: Hmong Dance as a Somatic Practice

I conducted my second interview via Zoom with Brandon Yang, who earned his bachelor's degree in Fashion Merchandise from Fresno State. After, he pursued a dance credential at California State University of East Bay as part of the first cohort while concurrently completing his MFA in Dance at Saint Mary's College of California. Yang previously served as a Hmong dance teacher at McLane High School in the international Hmong dance program but now holds the position of campus culture director at Design Science Middle College High School, where he teaches dance exploration and appreciation.

I was particularly interested in Yang's background in Hmong dance where he served as a teacher at McLane High School and instructed traditional Hmong dance. In his thesis research, Yang (2022) stated that his identity is shaped through a somatic approach, describing how his body moves with fluidity, sharpness, and delicacy in Hmong dance. As I have mentioned in previous chapters, Hmong dance is often associated with femininity and is primarily performed by Hmong women. However, Yang discussed about a time when he was teaching Hmong dance to male students and expressed to me,

> *People may say that there are a lot of movement of pinching and flicking that are too feminine for me and I will tell my boys that if you think it's too feminine for you, I am going to tell you that there are no specific set of how it should be done but it's up to you as a dancer to choose your hand to move in a specific way.*

Yang explained this to me by expressing how there's elegance in Hmong dance that may present his femininity, but also some aspects where it may be masculine as well. He also goes on to explain how he connects with his male Hmong students through a cartoon show called Avatar: The Last Airbender, highlighting how the swirls and open palms can resemble casting air, similar to the martial arts movements from the show. This implies that Hmong dance can be approached somatically, focusing on the individual's internal experiences, awareness, and expression, without judgment, and embracing ownership of their body. By embracing Hmong dance as a somatic practice within the Hmong community, it allows Hmong men to deconstruct notions of gender and sexuality, enabling them to explore the expression and authenticity of their identity.

Yang is a phenomenal artist and educator who brings a unique perspective to the field of dance through his experiences in musical performances, dance, and fashion. His initial interest in dance stemmed from exposure to the intricacy and appealing attraction of Irish dancing at a young age, and later, he participated in Hmong dance throughout his childhood. Yang received his first training in ballet and modern dance while attending Fresno State University, where he began pursuing dance as another facet of his journey. Before this interview, I was already familiar with Yang and his choreographic works and had observed the incorporation of ballet and modern dance elements into Hmong dance. I asked him if there was a specific reason for integrating balletic movements into his choreography as a means of expressing his identity. However, he expressed that the integration was solely due to his attraction to the aesthetic and beauty of ballet, which facilitated his choreographic process. Additionally, he was also exploring contemporary Hmong dance by blending the two styles to create something different from traditional Hmong dance which could also be an exploration of the movement qualities of both styles of dance.

In a separate interview with a classmate from my cohort, Emily Chapman, who received her bachelor's degree in Dance from the University of Utah with a specialization in ballet, I asked if ballet serves as a tool to express cultural identity similarly to hip hop. She explained that while ballet may not reflect her identity in the same way as hip hop, it remains a significant part of her identity, enabling her to assert control and power over her life and body. Chapman also explained that while balletic movements convey emotions, they primarily serve as a technique to achieve an external ideal of beauty. Therefore, while ballet was used purely as a choreographic tool for Yang, it still reflects a process of presenting an external portrayal of Hmong identity through movement and fashion. I concluded with one last question by asking, “What is Hmong

dance to you? Going back to your roots in fashion, would you say it has provided avenues and ways for you to create ways in presenting and preserving your cultural identity?" He beautifully ended it by responding,

> *Hmong dance is storytelling. Hmong dance is a translation of the paj ntaub that we have of trying to communicate not just through the fabric cloths. Back in the days, if people did speak Hmong, they would cut their tongues so we would have our Hmong motifs to communicate. Now through the Hmong-American experiences, we have these amazing Hmong dance groups performing. They are the thread and stitches telling our story on stage to our people. I see that Hmong dance is our Hmong embroideries stitching together. The flicking and pinching of the fingers in Hmong dance are also the stitching of our stories for everyone here.*

Interview with Magnolia Yang Sao Yia: Hmong Identity and Spirituality

In my third interview, I had the opportunity to discuss my thesis research with Magnolia Yang Sao Yia, a graduate student at the University of California, Riverside, who is currently a Ph.D. candidate in Critical Dance Studies with a designated emphasis in Southeast Asian Studies. A part of Yang's research is on Hmong dance and examining how Hmong Americans perceive Hmong dance within the community, as well as expanding the definition of Hmong dance by studying the dance practices and forms performed by Hmong Americans. She comes from an immigrant family who sought asylum in France during the Secret War before relocating to the Twin Cities, Minnesota. There, she learned Hmong dance from her mother and explored various dance styles through school and extracurricular activities. She received her bachelor's

degree in dance from the University of Minnesota and also worked with Ananya Chatterjea's dance company. After moving to the Twin Cities from France, Magnolia participated in various dance competitions at school, including jazz, lyrical, and hip hop. She also recalls attending clubs in the Detroit Metro area where DJs played electronic dance music, trance, techno, and house. Reflecting on her upbringing, she mentioned,

> *I was already immersed in different dance spaces. It wasn't just Hmong dance. It was American dance and then it was social dance, freestyle, hip hop and house dance. Those were the three dance spaces I jumped in and grew up into.*

Similar to Brandon Yang's experience with Hmong dance, Magnolia Yang's first exposure to a dance space occurred through Hmong dance during her childhood. I also grew up watching Hmong dance performances by my sister at a very young age. These early experiences within our cultural dance spaces contribute to the formation of our sense of identity as we immerse ourselves in our cultural heritage. Later we start to form new identities within crossing cultural spaces. I asked Yang a question regarding her dance experiences in social or house dance freestyle settings about how these spaces influence or affect the way she may present or form her identities. She responded,

> *Hmong dance is one way for us to understand to be Hmong. A lot of my own choreography, it has a lot to do with home, belonging, Hmong identity, spirituality and gender. Because of these different themes that I am exploring, sometimes*

there's a limitation to technique in form. For example, Hmong dance as a dance form may have a limitation as a form that can actually provide for me.

It seems to me that to understand what it means to be Hmong as an artist, adopting various dance forms is an imperative aspect of exploring what it means to be Hmong. Our culture and dance have been shaped by a multitude of cultural differences and influences that may not be entirely homogeneous. Magnolia expresses that she may feel more at home with house dance and even Yorcha, but she takes it in a direction that makes her feel Hmong through her body because of the connection and embodiment of the Hmong diaspora. She also added on about the spiritual experience within the space of house dance, where she taps into a place that connects her to the ancestral spirit, creating a sense of Hmong identity through this African diasporic form. Just as Hmong people practice mediumship through shamanism, for her, it is through house dance, similar to the practices among African and indigenous people.

To conclude this interview section, dancers delve into different spaces, aiding them in reaching their goals of understanding various aspects through diverse forms of dance and serving as a pathway into new explorations and ideas when there are limitations. Blending different dance art forms allows the ongoing expression of narratives, identities, concepts, and transcendence beyond dance. Humans are adaptive in the space we enter, whether it's made through a creative choice, negotiation, performativity, emotionality, or spirituality. Dance spaces have the power to take people onto a spirituality where meaning and purpose can be sought and achieved (Gronek et. al, 2023). Experimentation across different mediums also fosters a sense of adaptability and innovation, enabling them to discover new ideas during the creative process that evoke emotions within themselves and connect with something greater than the physical body.

Interview with Page Yang: Freeing the Voice and Divergence within Hip Hop

Page Yang is a multi-faceted artist, dancer, filmmaker, mentor, and teacher, born and raised in Sacramento, California. She currently resides in Atlanta, Georgia, where she works as a professional dancer and serves as the operation manager for black arts nonprofits, promoting and supporting black artists across various avenues. Yang began dancing at the age of 6 and immersed herself in street dance, hip hop, and freestyle spaces wherever she could. Growing up in an immigrant household, she also faced the challenges of discovering and finding different fields of study in college that would best support her career to provide stability and security for her parents. However, she realized that she was more passionate about dancing therefore earning her BA in Dance from Sacramento State University. As I am writing this right now, she is in the process of accepting an offer to pursue her MFA in Dance.

In my conversation with Yang, I asked her how street dance and hip hop spaces have formed the artists you are today and how they served as an exploration of your identity and she replied,

> *Being born into an immigrant family, it was really drilled into us to stay out of harm's way. We need to not cause too much chaos because of the freedom and opportunities here by staying out of trouble and disruption. It made me learn through observation and at ease but on the contrary, it also made me initially timid. My family was huge on maintaining that freedom but what was taking my freedom was all the things instilled in me. Dance gave me back my voice and freedom. I can dream a lot bigger. Street dance, at least the freestyle community that I grew up with, nurtured that freedom in me.*

From my perspective, the freestyle space has allowed Yang the opportunity for introspection and self-reflection. I found it resonating when she brought up her experience of having to disrupt that freedom to claim it, almost as a form of resistance, enabling her to emerge and grow into something greater. This has led me to think about improvisation and how chaos and disruption open up new possibilities. Improvisation is rooted in spontaneity, exploration, and experimentation which allows dancers through a process of the unknown and known in the realm of dance (Carter, 2000; Ravn, 2020). New and innovative ideas are formed through these spontaneous movements, fostering creativity and an emergence of cultural resistance and identity in dancers. Improvisation is an important aspect in the African diaspora, black vernacular dance, and social/street dance, which then allows dancers the freedom of expression and evolution (Jackson, 2001). Through improvisation, which in Yang's case is freestyle, has created a sense of agency to drive action for her own choices and the ability she has to dance outside cultural and social boundaries to create her own identity in dance. I responded by saying if practicing and performing those art forms also enables her to express her Hmong identity. She explains,

> *Through those forms, I'm able to tap into what it feels like to be Hmong. I don't always care to present myself as Hmong. My identity as Hmong is not the only thing that matters and not the only lens that I see myself in my world through. I also see myself as a woman and Asian American.*

Being Hmong is a cultural identity, and Filippidou (2023) expressed how identity often denotes the identification of an individual or group, including the notions of otherness. Cultural

identity is shaped by the way others perceive us and how we see ourselves (Royce, 1982). Yang identifies Hmong as her cultural identity, but through others' perceptions, she acknowledges that she is a woman and Asian American. While we choose where we belong in certain cultural groups, we also construct our identity through the process of interaction and socialization, which are forms of communication (Filippidou, 2023). Dance serves as a non-verbal communication through the expression and embodiment of movements, gestures, and language (Taylor, 1994). Therefore, it is a form of communication of how we identify ourselves and interact with others through dance.

Filippidou (2022) also investigated the relationship between dance and the ethnic identity of the Gagauz group in Inoi, Greece which they adopted music-dance repertoires from Greek culture as a cultural element in reconstructing their identity to acculturate and integrate into their society. This research has drawn back my attention to the acculturation of Hmong people through dance and the dominant culture in the diaspora. Hmong dance, through its appropriation and adoption of Lao and Thai dance, music, and clothing, exemplifies the parallel experience of the Gagauz people in integrating into a dominant society to assert and reconstruct their identity. This is evident at Hmong New Year festivals, where Hmong people dress in a diverse array of cultural clothing, from Thai, Lao, and contemporary Hmong American styles.

I recently stumbled upon why dancers are highly interested in performing an aesthetic or identity that displays sexual, erotic, or feminine characteristics, in terms of expressing gender because I also delve into these spaces as a gay man who choreographs these movements on dancers. This prompted my next question of a new topic and stated, "Identities are performative as well as arguably expressing gender, why do you think dancers may be interested in performing concepts that are sexual or sensual, not as a calling for sex or mating but as a form of

expression?” She mentioned how in Northern California, women may dress more masculine and present tomboy features like wearing baggy pants and t-shirts. Yang also expressed from her experience that now, grown, she has embraced that part of herself and explored her artistic development by being confident in her sexuality and sensuality. I asked her, "Do you think being a Hmong woman played a factor in exploring that part of you?" She responded by saying how she has female figures in her life who presented a strong mentality and independence, which might have influenced her to bring that mentality into dance to assert herself against men during dance battles. However, she hasn't seen enough Hmong women celebrating their sexuality and bodies in the same way as the general community does.

There are criticisms, as Yang also noted, suggesting that women who engage in erotic dance are often viewed as performing for the male gaze, seeking sexual gratification, objectification, and perpetuating sexual labor. However, in a journal by Gibson Ncube (2013), the argument is made that erotic dance can be a source of liberation and empowerment for women. It allows them to break free from cultural taboos and patriarchal stereotypes, providing them with a sense of agency and independence. This liberation enables women to escape from submissive and subordinate roles. The repetition of certain gendered behaviors associated with femininity contributes to the construction of women's identities, influenced by social norms and heteronormativity (Butler, 1988; Ncube, 2013). Erotic dance provides a space for dancers to negotiate and construct their expressions, whether they lean towards masculinity or femininity. The power and knowledge that women gain from this enable them to exercise control over aspects of their identity both within and beyond the realm of dance (Ncube, 2013).

I’ve been following Yang’s journey for quite some time and am familiar with her choreographic works and freestyles. I noticed how her movements felt 'hard-hitting' and

'powerful,' which led me to ask her a question if she believed that hip-hop culture had influenced her to embody what I perceive as masculinity in dance. She affirmed this with her response,

> *It definitely had some inspiration for sure. The majority of my experiences have been freestyling and street dance culture. I'm constantly experiencing battling where I have to come in a little more dominant. Initially, it felt like you had to come in aggressively but now you don't have to be that way in a battle and people have pushed the limit where you don't have to be aggressive all the time.*

Aprahamian (2020) describes breaking as a male-dominated arena where women were mostly excluded from participation even though they had made contributions to hip hop culture. For women who enter male dance spaces, it represents an opportunity to enact countercultural femininity, positioning them as producers rather than objects for consumption within hip hop (Aprahamian, 2020). Although Yang does not practice breaking, it is still a form of street dance and freestyle. This means Yang's experience, as a woman, strongly reflects how she utilized street dance to assert her voice in competition and to insert herself into a space dominated by male dancers. Nevertheless, these street and urban dance styles provide women with a sense of belonging, authenticity, opportunities to explore gender identities, and ways to view and explore their bodies, dressing and moving in certain ways to mimic aggressive characters and competitiveness rather than embodying sexual objects and subordinate roles (Koutsougera, 2018). Conversely, engaging in erotic and sexual dance outside of the hip hop spaces allows Yang to embrace her femininity and the maturity she has developed, claiming a sense of power to experience womanhood through her body.

Interview with Gary Yang: From Gangs and Violence to Breakers

This last interview delves into the impact of Hip Hop culture on Hmong male breakers and offers a general overview of its origins in the Fresno community. Despite my familiarity with queer Hmong men and women in dance, I recognized the absence of perspectives from heterosexual Hmong men involved in dance. Interviewing Gary Yang provided me with valuable insights into the experiences of Hmong men participating in breaking within the Hmong community, an opportunity for which I am deeply honored and grateful to share and document in this research. I hope this section of the interview will illuminate the influence of hip hop culture and the significant impact on Hmong men, who have forged their sense of identity through resilience in overcoming gang affiliation, violence, and the pressure and expectations of traditional Hmong customs and values.

Gary Yang was one of the pioneering Hmong breakers in Fresno, California during the 1990s. After working as a certified nursing assistant for a decade, Yang rekindled his involvement in the breaking scene in 2015, initiating jam sessions within the community until 2018, when he hosted his first jam session called “The Next Level.” He currently holds an associate degree and is now pursuing his bachelor's degree in administration at Fresno State University in hopes in the future to unite the Hmong breaking community across generations. Outside of school, he is an organizer and promoter and works as a recreational specialist in the community by hosting sessions and events such as the Hmong New Year festivals.

In the late 1990s, jam sessions began way back at the Hmong New Year festivals and have always been there since. Breakers and crews would attend the festival to dance with each other, wherever they could find space, bringing together the Hmong communities from places

like Sacramento, Stockton, Merced, Minnesota, and Oklahoma. The Hmong New Festival is one of the biggest cultural celebrations for the Hmong community in Fresno, CA where many folks dress in traditional clothing to dance, sing and eat. Some of the pioneering breaking crews were Bumz and Smurfs from Fresno, which later emerged the next generation of crews like DIS (Dance in Styles), Velocity, Puppet Masters, and Wizards (Slusser, 2017; Song, 2019; Woon, 2011; Yang, G., 2024). My first question began with "How did you initially start dancing, and where and how did you learn to break?" He replied,

> *The way that I started dancing was in the late 1990s for me but my brothers and uncles started in the early 90s. They were part of the Southeast side of Fresno where Zos V-Nai on Kings Canyon and 9th. My exposure to breaking was through my brothers and uncles in the living room in my grandma's house. I was in elementary school and they were in middle school at Sequoia and Kings Canyon. A lot of them started at the DJ and house parties. There was no internet so we watched a lot of breaking through old video cassettes and from the movie 'Beat Street' and 'Electric Boogaloo.' They used to go to house parties and do airflares which the crowd would love it. Fresno was known as the power move Mecca and all we did were power moves, flips and tricks. We didn't know the 4 elements of hip hop and history, and were only exposed to breaking. Being in these low-income areas and not having the proper resources like social media or even access to studios because we couldn't pay for it. Our parents weren't very open to American sports and ideas so we were all learning from each other.*

Access to social media and resources was very limited and the internet was not highly available at the time so Yang also expressed they would film themselves with cameras and monitor their progress, highlighting the experimental and improvisational nature of their practice.

My understanding of Hmong men's participation in breaking was truly something I was interested in. As I mentioned in my previous chapter, traditional Hmong dance primarily aligns with femininity and is often associated with Hmong women. This prompts me to inquire whether breaking served as a creative outlet for Hmong men's identity, particularly when considering their gender roles and responsibilities in preserving traditions, culture, and customs. These responsibilities can impose considerable pressure and foster a survival mentality and coping mechanism. From the perspective of gender and sexuality within Hmong cultural contexts, I imposed a question as to why many Hmong men are involved in breaking. Yang explained,

> *Being a Hmong man and being raised with such cultural values, kev cai (hmong culture) that we were brought up with, breaking is a very masculine scene, bravado. What kind of dance can you go in aggressively? Showing bad body language and profanity and still being accepted. We talk about the positives of hip hop but you can't ignore the negative and bad parts of the history and as Hmong men, we already saw that inside our culture. I was never that kind of bravado guy and was more of a non-conflicting guy so I would break and walk away. Then there are some that break and talk smack. In the 90s, this is a time in Southeast Fresno with all these gangs, violence and all these guys going to jail. They were trying to get out of the gang life. So they went into breaking to identify with a crew*

or clique so if a gang tried to recruit them, they could say "no i'm a breaker and this is what i do" which they will leave. Being Hmong American, no one was brought over rich. Everyone had to get educated or start a business. Breaking started in the ghetto, in the Bronx and just like in Fresno, it was the same thing.

What Gary is saying is that Fresno was like a mirror reflection of the Bronx, staying true to its origins. While some Hmong gang members found an exit through breaking, other breakers lost their way into gang affiliation. Many jam sessions take place in various environments, from the living room, garage, parks, and public spaces, which is why they are prone to facing challenges navigating through harassment and gang-related neighborhoods (Slusser, 2017). Reflecting on the Hmong diaspora and resettlement in America, Hmong youth faced the challenges of negotiating their identities as Hmong Americans, especially while living in low-income neighborhoods characterized by high unemployment and low socio-economic status. They may encounter conflicts such as familial disadvantages and high expectations of following the family's footsteps or legacy (Lee, 2023; Thornberry et al., 2003). However, because Hmong families lived in poor and low-income neighborhoods in the 1990s, along with other Southeast Asians like Lao, Mien, and Cambodians, they shared the same experiences as the Black and Latino communities, which led to borrowing and adopting hip hop culture within that community, where they adopted hip hop culture as a creative outlet and expression (Song, 2019). The hypermasculine nature of hip hop dance battle scenes often results in male dominance, characterized by physical strength, aggression, sexuality, and boldness (Rodriguez, 2018). When reflecting on cultural norms and traditions, they significantly influence perceptions and expectations of masculinity and the role of Hmong men within the culture, resulting in pressure

to conform to these ideals of masculinity and what it means to be a Hmong man. However, the space provided by breaking and being part of a crew offered mentorship and kinship, nurturing their development and helping them negotiate their identity. When breakers discover someone who also breaks and joins their crew, they feel a sense of family and belonging, which creates a foundation for family-like relationships (Woon, 2011; Langnes, 2014). Similar to vogue and ballroom culture, these kinships offer a nurturing environment for the community and family to teach and include those who have been marginalized in society (Arnold et al., 2009).

Gary Yang heard stories from friends whose lives were transformed by breaking, allowing them to break away from the gang lifestyle. This prompted Hmong families to relocate from the town, seeking distance from gangs, drugs, and violence. Initially, immigrant parents perceived their children's involvement in breaking as part of the "gang life," termed *me nyuam laib* in Hmong, because they were always outside of the house participating in breaking with groups of friends. Hmong men hid this aspect of their lives from their parents, fearing disapproval; however, breaking actually provides a more viable alternative path to avoid association with gang life. In the documentary *Among B-Boys* (2011) by Christopher Woon, after witnessing their children participating in battles at the Hmong New Year festivals and competitions, many Hmong family members now express support for Hmong men in breaking to stay off the streets and away from gang life. It kept them productive and away from any negative influence outside of home and school.

It seems like there was a difference in experiences and evolution in styles in the generation of breakers in the 90s until 2005-2010. Based on the insights of 'Among B-Boys' (2011) and Yang, in the breaking scene in the Hmong community during the 1990s, they primarily focused on power moves, initially perceiving it as an athletic sport limited to those

with physical capability. However, in the early 2000s, with the increasing accessibility of the internet, more Hmong breakers started incorporating toprock, downrock, and footwork into their style, which became more inclusive of others. The documentary also featured two of the world-known Hmong b-boys, Villn and Impact, who are part of Kinjaz. They mentioned how they started with power moves as well, and it wasn't until they joined the Underground Flo crew and learned toprock and footwork. Participating in battles in the Hmong community exposed and influenced many Hmong breakers to learn different styles of breaking and routines instead of relying solely on power moves.

Yang elaborates on how breaking became an intergenerational tradition, with him passing on his knowledge to his younger brothers, nephews, and children, much like his older brothers did with him. Not merely as a means to be productive and avoid trouble, but also as a pathway to understand the meanings and purpose behind cultural identity within both the Hmong and hip-hop cultures. He has been exploring this aspect of Hmong breaking history and recently participated in an AAPI Hip Hop Summit event at San Diego State University where they had discussions on how the Hmong breaking scene parallels that of other Asian communities. One last question I asked him is "Based on the experience of the youth, what do you see today with their involvement in hip hop? He finishes off the interview by stating,

> *My whole thing with the youth in hip hop right now, I really want them to fall in love with it. Even if they're just learning it to do a cool move, get the girls, or stay in shape. Whatever their goals are, I want them to dwell into it in a way they can learn, embrace it as an identity to them and think that they can be a part of it. The influence is different now. They have clubs where they can learn and teach. They*

> *have people coming in to dance and helping them, exploring their own movements. You're going to see more acceptance (in dance).*

Based on my understanding, he implies that our new generation is advocating for increased involvement in dance, unlike in the past. Hmong individuals are pursuing higher education, equipping themselves with the knowledge and power to advocate for more accessibility and openness in dance. Additionally, they are helping youth navigate their identity as Hmong Americans while preserving cultural identity and fostering an environment where they can thrive.

I wanted more insights into the breaking experiences from Hmong men so I conducted a short interview with my brother, Jarvis Xiong. He started when he was in 7th grade in 2010 and asked him why he started breaking and if he could recall his memories with his crew. He replied,

> *I think I was just trying to find my identity and there were groups that were doing sports and I just landed on breaking to try it out. At one point not a lot of people stuck to it but I stuck to it for many years. A lot of people tried and gave up the next month. Crews started small and eventually with a group of friends that you meet at school in middle school and high school, it gets bigger and bigger. I was in Reverse crew when I stopped dancing. They went into Floor Artist crew.*

Jarvis also mentioned how when he got into breaking, he did his research and watched videos online to learn how to break, highlighting how the newer generation of breakers now have accessibility to resources and the internet, especially given the commercialization of hip hop

culture in media. I wanted to continue understanding more of the differences of both generations of Hmong breakers through his lived experiences so I asked him, “From your perspective, did you see or experience any of your peers in gang affiliation during your time in breaking?” He replied,

> *I was a little kid. How I saw breaking when I was growing up, you want to meet new people and engage with them no matter if you’re a gang member or not. I do agree it does kind of stop at that point of them being a gang member to just being a friend dancing with you. During that time (in the 90s), there was but you don't see it now. When you break, you just break. I don't see it being like ‘if you're a gang member then I don’t like you and cause problems with you.’ When it comes to breaking, everyone just comes together.*

The way my brother stated this reflects Nguyen and Ferguson’s research (2019), which suggests that hip hop as a cultural identity transcends phenotypic racial and ethnic characteristics and disregards individuals' backgrounds. Jarvis additionally highlighted how being in a crew can often carry a negative connotation of "being affiliated with gangs," which could be the reason why immigrant parents perceived it as *me nyuam laib*. To conclude this interview with my brother, breaking was not only a source of fun for Jarvis but also a means to engage in discovering and shaping his identity. He expressed a desire to pursue breaking as a career when he was a kid because it was his vision for everything he knew, but it eventually fell out. I believe this speaks volumes about why Hmong dancers may have fallen out of dance because it either lacked support from families or wasn't seen as a sustainable career. Reflecting on the differences

between generations within the Hmong community, those who were born and lived through the 90s encountered violence and gang activity, which complicated their sense of identity as Hmong Americans. On the other hand, second generations who came of age in the later 2000s may not have faced these experiences, but they encounter challenges in navigating their identity in American culture, requiring them to invent new ways and adopt other cultures while retaining their Hmong cultural identity.

Breaking has come a long way in the past 20 years in Hmong communities and was perceived as gang affiliation through the eyes of immigrant parents. However, many Hmong breakers were able to deconstruct that idea and challenge the ideals of traditional Hmong culture, enabling them to assimilate and develop their own identity while being Hmong American in the space of dance (Song, 2019). It also seems like breaking has contributed to a decrease in gang activities among the Hmong community. Hmong breakers are finding their voice through a liberating art form by actively participating in inclusive hip hop communities that reject violence and exclusivity. Similar to the findings from a study conducted in Ecuador, breaking offers an alternative path away from gang activities, showcasing resilience and promoting values of love, peace, and equality, regardless of their upbringing and identity (Bakker et al., 2018). Instead of experiencing marginalization, it fosters the construction of an alternative identity that is independent of social backgrounds and identities (Langnes & Fasting, 2016).

CHAPTER 4

In this chapter, I will explain the creative process and works that reflect my research. The dancers cast in this thesis work come from diverse backgrounds. This process investigates their experiences within the third space and examines which acculturation strategy they are experiencing. Through choreographic works, my goal is to provide a space for non-Hmong-identifying dancers to explore the multiplicities of my cultural and performative identities, and to understand how dancers construct their own identities.

Thesis Concert, titled "Transcendence Within the Third Space"

In my thesis concert, there are in total 4 choreographic pieces, however, I will explain two main choreographic pieces that each reflect my Hmong and hip hop cultural identity. The first one is titled 'New Beginnings,' I integrated elements of Hmong dance, contemporary/modern, and hip hop. The concept of this piece consisted of three specific songs that I selected to create the outline of the story. The costumes drew inspiration from traditional Hmong clothing and sewing embroideries featuring the colors of red, blue, and yellow. The pants included asymmetrical, flowy layered pants for a contemporary aesthetic. "New Beginnings" was inspired by the story of the Hmong people who fought alongside the American CIA. It narrates their journey of leaving their homeland and immigrating to another country, where they had to assimilate into a new environment, culture, and society. The music I selected, "Aero" by Ryan Taubert, inspired me to create two movement phrases that featured a lot of hand gestures and arm movements commonly used in Hmong dance. Towards the middle of the first song, I created a third phrase inspired by traditional Hmong dance. Overall, this song evokes sensations of the "jungle, tribal, and warrior" themes, which I aimed to connect with the agricultural essence of the Hmong people living in the mountains. The second song, "Morning's Wing" by Tony

Anderson, conveys an intense sense of loss and destruction to evoke emotions of grief and death. I have also edited this song to include sounds of *xim sauv* (similar to an Asian fiddle instrument), helicopters, gunshots, and bombs in the background to create a realistic experience for the audience. This is an improvisational solo in which I performed, seeking a spiritual journey within my own internal experiences and connecting to my ancestors. As I performed this solo, I had a projection displayed behind me, portraying videos of Hmong people who were in the war, helicopters, and bombings. The goal of this solo piece was to connect dance as somatic and transcendent through improvisation. Another inspiration that I drew from was from a movie called "Avatar: The Way of Water" written and directed by James Cameron. The story takes place in a world called Pandora, inhabitable and far away from Earth. Pandora is inhabited by a group of species called Na'Vi and one of the characters, Jake, who was previously human before his consciousness was transferred into a Na'Vi-human hybrid avatar, started a family in this world. His family faced some conflicts and threats from humans, therefore, leaving no choice but to leave their home to protect his family. They found refuge in the village of Mitkayina tribe where they had to assimilate into their way of living to be accepted into the community. The third song used in "New Beginnings," is "Nothing is Lost" by The Weeknd, a soundtrack from the movie. After listening to this song and watching the movie, I felt a sense of hope and a new beginning, which I believe described the journey of the Hmong settlements in America.

The second choreographic piece is titled "Come as You Are." When I was developing this concept, I was aiming to create an underground club-like environment and came up with a non-fictional name called "DMC" which stands for devil-may-care. This term often goes by the saying, "If the devil doesn't care, why should I?" Thus, creating a sense of carefree attitude in the way you dress, act, and perform in the realm of dance. In the very beginning of this piece, I

created a scene almost as if someone is walking down the alley, and as they approach closer, the music starts to get louder. The dancer is fully covered in a long coat from top to bottom and as the curtain rises, symbolizing the "door," she takes off her coat and enters the clubs in an outfit that expresses herself. I also drew inspiration from a documentary film called *Check Your Body at the Door* and *Come As You Are,* hence the title of this piece, and edited by mixing quotes that were said in the documentary into the music. For the music, I hired a friend of mine to mix the music and quotes that were said in the documentary which consisted of many house music such as Redlight by Swedish House Mafia, Matador by BLVD, Dresscode by Mau P, and One Chance by NGHTMRE and Knock2. This choreography included hip hop, house dance, whacking, vogue, and heels choreography. I ensured that the voguing section had a "crashing" sound on the 4th beat of the measure bar as well as mixing polyrhythmic sounds in the whacking section to accentuate the ripples of overheads and arm circular rotation. Since the concept revolves around gender expression and identity, I incorporated and choreographed a wide variety of movements perceived as both masculine and feminine, aiming to explore the nuances of movement qualities. Each section of the piece had its specific dance style and embodied my hip hop cultural identity, reflecting the experience of underground club and ballroom culture. The costumes in this piece were unique, particularly because I asked dancers to choose their costumes that they wanted to wear on stage, whether it was a performative act or an expression of themselves. It was inspired by the concept of "clubbing and feeling good about yourself with no judgment." Heels were an option for dancers to wear, and surprisingly, more than half of the cast chose to wear heels. The decision to include heels in this piece was to allow dancers to embrace their femininity, empowering them to claim confidence and power on stage, particularly since I choreographed sections of the piece requiring strutting and runway-like walking.

Interviews From Dancers and Reflection

I conducted interviews with four of my dancers to provide their insights and reflections on this creative process. Both dancers, Rheylie Bennie, and Mia Marino, expressed feelings of pressure to perform correctly when learning about my Hmong culture and dance from my choreographic piece "New Beginnings," and they never want to make it seem like they are appropriating the culture. I can sympathize with why dancers may feel discomfort and disconnection if they don't share the same cultural heritage as me.

In this thesis concert, I choreographed a solo piece for Mia called “Escape,” which features heels choreography infused with elements of femininity and sensuality. I asked her the question, "Why do you, or other women, find interest in sexual and erotic dance?" She replied by explaining how, when young girls are growing up, whether it's socially, religiously, or culturally, they are taught that it is wrong to touch their bodies or show certain parts of their bodies as women. Mia is a trained ballet dancer, and she expressed how heels choreography allowed her to explore her body and feel comfortable understanding her femininity in different ways as she embraced her maturity, ultimately building more confidence.

As a hip hop dancer, Rheylie already feels expressive through this style of dance and constructs her own alter ego in performance as well. She expresses,

> *I always switch into TMB. That’s my alter ego. Trap Money Bennie. For your Dance Escape piece (New Beginnings) because it was more contemporary modern, it wasn't the normal TMB. TMB is very much New Slate (Come As You Are) and hip hop or any hard hitting stuff. It was like a mellow and just Trap*

Money. Not the Bennie part. For ballet, it's Bennie. For contemp/modern, it's Trap Money. For hip hop and beyond, Trap Money Bennie.

The way Rheylie described her alter ego relates to how Langnes and Fastings (2016) described it as a construction of a character through alternative naming, clothing, and attitude. Just like b-boys/girls, they create a nickname or alias for themselves as a reflection of expressing their style, personality, and individuality. Through the construction of identities, an individual would embody a persona and attitude to present themselves as the "best" (Langnes & Fastings 2016). It also involves managing their impression, motivated by wanting to achieve the best perception of the individual's image (Leary, 2001). Through this process of negotiation and conformity to certain behaviors, an alter ego is thus formed as a form of empowerment and self-expression in confidence. Since Rheylie finds more confidence in performing in hip hop dances, she fully embodies TMB in her performances.

Both Zuri Fors and Lauren Lim participated in all the pieces from the thesis concert. When discussing performative identity, they don't necessarily create their persona or character. It was interesting to learn from this perspective that instead of constructing their own performative identity, it was more about understanding and exploring different movement qualities through the concepts and differences in dance styles. It felt like they were exploring different sides and versions of themselves on stage.

Upon reflecting on my interviews, I realized that these four interviews weren't enough to grasp the whole reflection of this creative process, and felt compelled to include more of my dancers in this conversation to gain deeper insights. I noticed that these four specific dancers perceive and perform differently, which may depend on their upbringing, training, and lived

experiences. However, that may also not be the case. Out of all four interviewees, only one of them was a hip hop dancer, while the other three were trained in ballet and modern dance. This pool of interviews was limited in my research. Seeking more insights from my whole cast could potentially be achieved within a wider range of results through a quantitative approach. While my intention in presenting various choreographic works through different styles of dance was to provide a space for dancers to explore and foster a multiplicity of performative identities, it has come to my attention that the focus may lean toward the quality of their performance and movement execution.

Additional Surveys From Dancers

I have a total of 18 dancers in my cast for the thesis concert, and 14 have filled out the survey forms. Go to Figure 4.1-4.5 to see a visual chart of the survey. When asked which dance style best fits them, there are 5 modern dancers, 4 hip hop dancers, 1 jazz dancer, and 1 who identifies as versatile in all styles of dance. Eleven out of 14 responded that they mainly focus on exploring movements and understanding choreographies, while the other 3 also construct their own identities with a focus on movement qualities. However, 13 out of 14 do like to bring their personal experiences to improve and enhance their performance. Ten dancers like to show different sides or versions of themselves, while 4 dancers prefer to create their character in performance. For the last question, I asked them which one they relate to more, and 13 chose "dance is transcendent," while one dancer chose “identities are performative.” This suggests that the majority of the dancers preferred to explore certain qualities of movements and choreographies rather than constructing their own identity, which is why more felt that dance is transcendent. Although I may have choreographed my Hmong culture and hip hop choreography to showcase performative identity, their perspective on it was to show different sides and

versions of themselves, staying true and embodying their own experiences in the third space. This also demonstrates that their experience in the third space differs from mine, as their perception is grounded in movement exploration. My own experience in the third space revolves around the multiplicity and hybridity of cultures, enabling me to construct my own identities for negotiation.

By connecting it to the acculturation model theory, I have constructed a chart that provides examples of what I have observed from dancers through each strategy. This visualized chart illustrates how dancers engage in various cultural contexts.

Figure 2. Examples of Dancers' Acculturation Experiences in the Third Space

Assimilation	Modern and ballet dancers performed in hip hop pieces Learning new dance styles or changing their aesthetic to conform to the style of dance
Integration	Learning and performing with elements of Hmong culture and clothing Adding techniques from their experiences to another style
Marginalization	Dancers survey that dance is transcendent more than identities are performative Focusing on the internal feeling of dance, no perception of the outside/appearance/identities
Separation	Some hip hop dancers opted out of contemporary/modern pieces Not conforming or performing to any

	identities. Staying authentic to themselves

In the following chart, I will illustrate my experience in the third space to compare and contrast with the dancers' experiences. Since I participated in my thesis concert, I believe it's also important to share the differences I may have felt, both similarly and differently, compared to these dancers.

Figure 3. Examples of my Acculturation Experiences in the Third Space

Assimilation	Removal my Hmong cultural identity and presenting myself a as hip hop or contemporary dancer Presenting more of the essence of feminine energy and aesthetic in contrast to my masculinity
Integration	Adding elements of my Hmong cultural heritage into choreography Presenting my culture through costumes, music and movements in a concert-like stage/production Adding all styles of dance together, a hybrid and fusion-like aesthetic
Marginalization	Performing improvisation, moving the body with just the feeling of the movements No display of a certain dance styles or identity Feeling of transcendence and somatic movements
Separation	Not only presenting and conforming myself as a hip hop dancer but also displaying my cultural heritage as who I am in different

	pieces

After examining the two charts, I've come to realize that dancers may not perceive identities and cultures in dance in the same way as I do. Each dancer's experiences and backgrounds shape how they embody culture within dance. Since cultural identities are multifaceted, a dancer's relationship with dance could be different for each individual, based on their interpretation. Depending on their journey and connection with dance, some may view it primarily as a theatrical performance, focusing on techniques and movement qualities. However, as I connect dance through my research in the Hmong diaspora, I negotiate and consider how to embody each identity within different cultural contexts in dance, recognizing the nuances and interconnectedness between dance, identity, and cultural heritage.

CHAPTER 5

Conclusion

This study examined the Hmong diaspora, investigating the emergence of Hmong dance that is heterogeneous, transformed, and influenced by other cultures. The immigration of the Hmong people from China to America altered new experiences of the Hmong communities, sharing solidarity and experiences of other communities that were once marginalized. Through autoethnographic research, I explored the lived experiences of Hmong artists, including myself, within the areas of the Hmong cultural identity, queer identity, and hip hop identity, providing numerous cultural and historical contexts to support this research. Within the third space, cultural resistance occurs between the interaction of the dominant and minority cultures, providing individuals or groups the opportunity to assert their identity across various cultural contexts, leading to the emergence of hybrid cultures and identities through the concept of acculturation. In the realm of dance, dancers may perform and construct certain identities, negotiating and redefining gender and sexuality and transcending ethnicity and race, extending beyond cultural boundaries and the physical body. Sets of choreography and concepts then provide the space where dancers can perform identities that they may construct to enhance their performance or experience a transcendent feeling of liberation away from their own identities.

Research Findings

By connecting the Hmong diaspora and the concept of acculturation, I've discovered how Hmong artists perform their cultural identity, both preserving and performing new identities. My research aimed to also help me understand how this might translate to different dancers and the performative aspect of integrating into different dance cultures and identities. Initially, I assumed that performative identities might arise from experiences of assimilation, marginalization, and

discrimination, where cultural resistance occurs. Therefore, if dancers have experienced those, it could be a reason for adopting performative identities, particularly in the context of hip hop culture as a form of self-expression and resistance, but identities can be performative regardless of the individuals' experiences because, by nature, performativity actively constructs different aspects of themselves in response to social contexts and expectations. While personal lived experiences may influence the performative aspects of identity as a strategy to enhance their dance performance, identities can also be performed as an artistic choice to embody personas and convey messages that connect with the audience. In the context of cultural identity, there is the Self, to which an individual may self-identify as they see fit. However, the Other represents the perception and interpretation of the audience, contributing to the performative aspect of conveying a story or narrative within dance. Overall, identities remain performative regardless of whether dancers perceive dance as a theatrical performance focused on techniques and movement qualities, leading me to consider that everyone's experiences in the third space are different, and the possibilities are limitless. The experiences in the third space may be a cultural resistance similar to the Hmong diaspora, hybridity of cultures and identities in dance, or possibly a mix of both resistance and hybridities. It is constantly evolving and changing over time because it is a journey to understand and embody cultural contexts within dance.

Limitations Within the Research

Although my research primarily examined the Hmong diaspora and the experiences of the Hmong artists I interviewed, not every dancer that I cast experienced the third space in the same way as I did. These dancers are participants from various backgrounds, which may lack consistent documentation aligning with the research I aimed to conduct. The perception of performativity and identity differs for each dancer, which was evident in their experiences

compared to my understanding of identities and culture in dance. Nevertheless, this research provided insights into the correlation between the idea of acculturation and dance. It helped in understanding how dancers approach their artistic choice of performance identities, movement exploration, and transcendence.

Areas for Future Research

This research has provided me the opportunity to delve into my own cultural heritage and history, knowledge that I did not fully receive while growing up but rather acquired through oral history and cultural transmission within my community. By exploring these cultural contexts and historical insights, the research contributed to understanding dance identities as performative, particularly within the framework of my Hmong cultural identity, queer identity, and hip hop identity. The process and journey of interviewing these Hmong artists has been one of the most affirming and healing experiences in my life, allowing me to connect with the few Hmong American dance artists and scholars I currently know today who share the same profession in dance. I believe this research will be significant and make contributions to Hmong scholars who are continuously seeking to understand the Hmong diaspora and document their experiences in comprehending what it means to be Hmong today in America whether it's through areas of natural sciences, social sciences, arts and humanities.

List of Figures: Quantitative Data Collected from Thesis Concert Dancer Survey

Figure 4.1: Dancer's Style of Background Survey Pie Chart

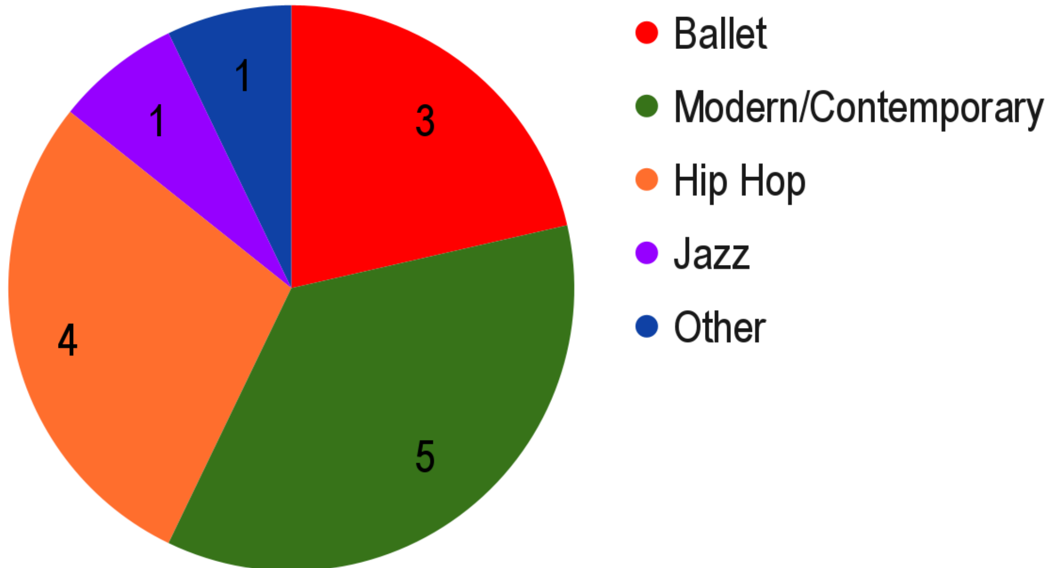


Figure 4.2: Movement Quality & Identity Construction Survey Pie Chart

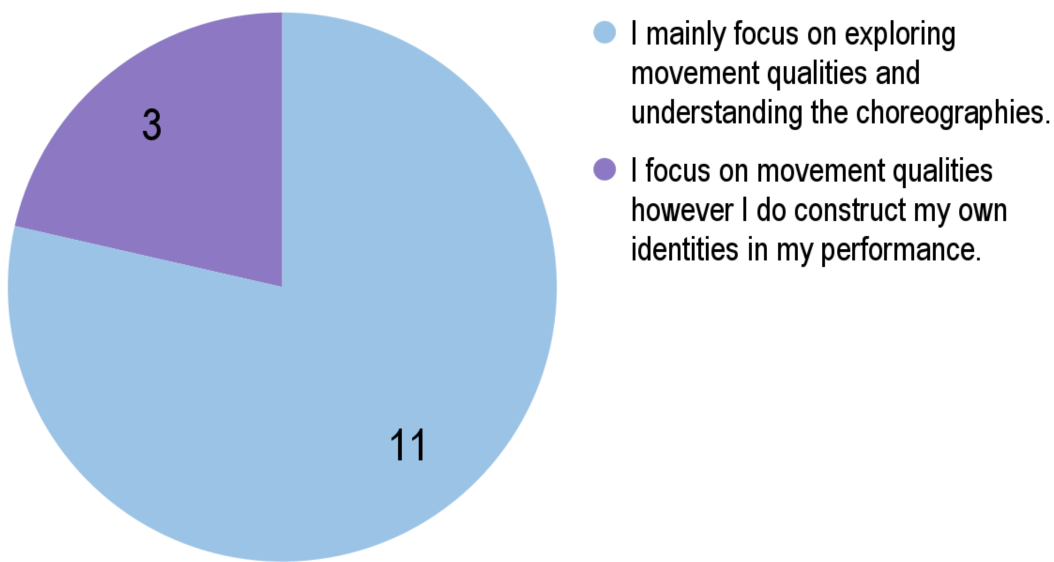


Figure 4.3: Drawing Personal Experience Survey Pie Chart

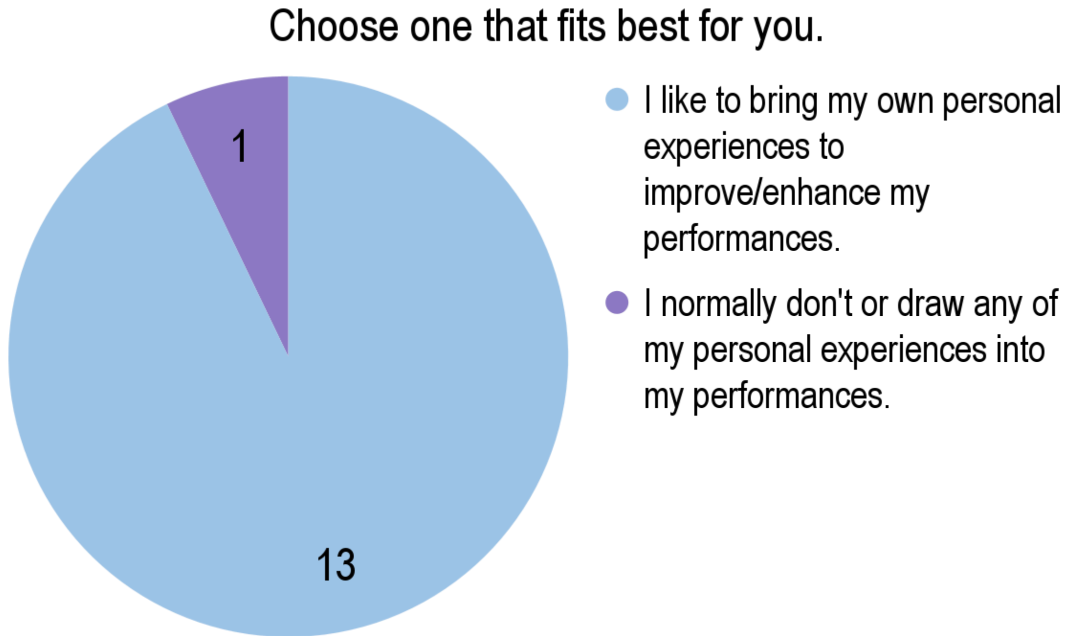


Figure 4.4: Different Versions of Self & Character Survey Pie Chart

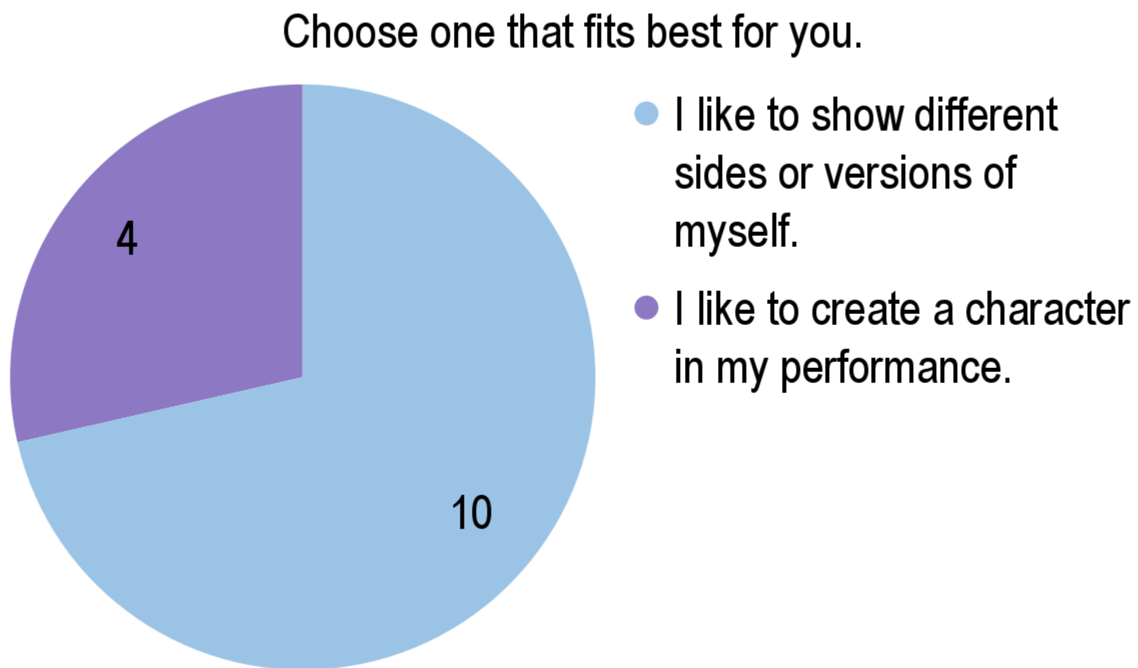
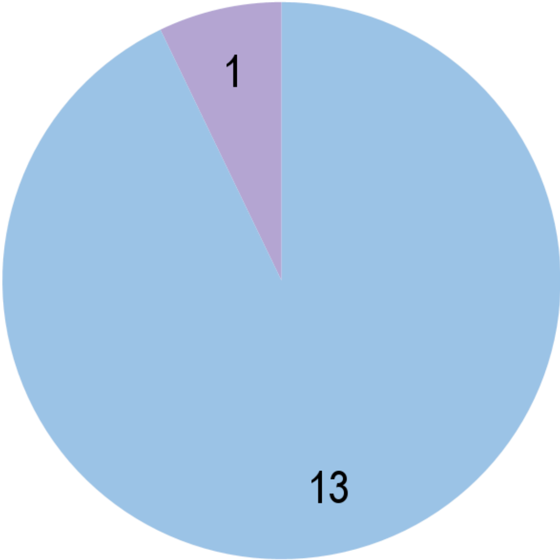


Figure 4.5: Dance is Transcendent & Identities are Performative Pie Chart



Appendix A

Consent Form

My name is Julian Xiong and currently a 2nd year Dance MFA student at UC Irvine, conducting a qualitative interview. The purpose of this interview is to speak, share, and exchange knowledge on the history of the Hmong people and diaspora. I propose that insights from the Hmong diaspora help us understand the development and growth of the culture through the influences of cultures from their migration settlements. It is also a valuable reference for understanding how dance has changed over time and how Hmong Americans' identity has emerged from the influences of other cultures, creating avenues and methods to preserve our cultural identity and develop new identities in the realm of dance. I aim to collect data from the Hmong community and shed light on the experiences of Hmong artistic development and the impact of dance on Hmong cultural identity in academic research. This thesis research aims to provide additional perspectives from Hmong dance artists, educators, and professionals for aspiring Hmong youth who may be interested in pursuing dance in higher education in the future. I thank you for being a part of this research.

This research is reviewed and submitted to the Institutional Review Board (IRB) to ensure the subjects in this interview are conducted ethically and in compliance with regulations and guidelines. At any time during the interview, you are welcome to choose not to answer if you do not have a response, and you may also stop the interview if you feel uncomfortable. Not every question needs answers to the research questions, as we are all constantly learning and building together. This is a conversation to create a space for discussion, exploration, and collective

growth. Although the research questions are open-ended, this interview can be a minimum of 30 minutes and not necessarily longer than an hour. However, we may also agree to extend the duration for a longer period if necessary. If you prefer to keep your name and identity confidential, I will honor that request and use a different name to protect your identity. The recordings will also not be duplicated or distributed to anyone.

I understand and acknowledge that I am consenting to an interview for educational purposes. The interview will be recorded, and the data will be used for research only for a Dance MFA thesis.

________________________	________________________
Signature	Date

Appendix B

Research Question Interview Guide

1. Why did you choose to pursue dance? What obstacles and challenges did you face and have to overcome?
2. What kind of experiences in the realm of dance have influenced your artistic development? Challenges, breakthroughs, inspirations, training, performances.
3. How has the experience of being a Hmong dance artist influenced your development in identities and as an artist?
4. Have you produced a choreographic piece relating to Hmong culture and history? If so, describe your choreographic process.
5. How has dance functioned as a tool for you in preserving Hmong culture and exploring your identities?
6. How was your experience growing up learning Hmong culture and history? Did that make any impact on the upbringing of your cultural and American identity?
7. In what ways has your engagement with dance influenced the connection to your Hmong identity? Has it fostered a sense of belonging within Hmong culture both artistically and culturally?
8. How do you perceive Hmong dance and its impact on Hmong culture?
9. Our Hmong cultural identity has evolved at the intersections of cultural, socio-economic, and political identities. What does it mean to be Hmong now, considering the differences among generations?

Appendix C

Thesis Dancer Interview Question Guide

1. Have you ever been choreographed to embody someone else's cultural identity? If so, what was your experience like?
2. Have any elements of Hip Hop influenced your experience during the creative process?
3. What attracts dancers to the aesthetic of sexual and erotic dance?
4. Reflecting on the research, what insights or outcomes have you gained? Any positive or negative discoveries?
5. Do you explore performing different identities during rehearsals and performances, or do you focus on another aspect? If so, what is it?

Appendix D

Thesis Concert Dancer Survey

The vision and intention of choreographing five pieces was to offer a space where dancers could delve into a multiplicity of identities to embody and perform. However, this may not be the case for every dancer. This survey aims to understand the experiences of Julian's dancers during this creative process, whether they have been involved from the very beginning, joined towards the end of the process, or from their own previous experiences in performance.

Hip hop culture emerged from marginalized communities and represents a form of cultural expression and resistance against social and economic injustices, especially when looking into the contexts of hip hop, breaking, whacking, vogue, and house dance. When stating "identities are performative," it means that individuals construct an image or character for themselves through behaviors, actions, and representations. This construction can be influenced by a wide range of personal experiences, cultural backgrounds, societal expectations, and norms. Therefore, when on stage, the performance of identity transcends from personal experiences and shapes how individuals are perceived by others, navigating through negotiations and redefinitions of identities. These identities include but are not limited to, ethnicity, race, gender, and sexuality. However, this may not be the case for every dancer, as some may view these choreographies simply as an exploration of movement qualities and performance.

1. Which style of dance do you specialize in? (Please choose one that fits best for you)

    - ☐ Ballet

- ☐ Modern/Contemporary
- ☐ Hip Hop
- ☐ Jazz
- ☐ Other

2. Choose one that fits best for you.
    - ☐ I mainly focus on exploring movement qualities and understanding the choreographies.
    - ☐ I focus on movement qualities however I do construct my own identities in my performance.
3. Choose one that fits best for you.
    - ☐ I like to bring my own personal experiences to improve/enhance my performances.
    - ☐ I normally don't or draw any of my personal experiences into my performances.
4. Choose one that fits best for you.
    - ☐ I like to show different sides or versions of myself.
    - ☐ I like to create a character in my performance.
5. Choose one that fits best for you.
    - ☐ I relate to "dance is transcendent" more.
    - ☐ I relate to "identities are performative" more.

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