

OUT OF LA NEGRURA OUT OF BLACKNESS



PHOTO: MARISOL DIAZ

Sita Frederick

Marion Ramirez

Rokafella

Pepatian is the producer of Out of La Negrura/Out of Blackness, a collaborative dance theater project which began literally from a dream of "Bessie" award-winning choreographer Merian Soto. We were in Philadelphia, sitting in a cafe on a snowy afternoon when she told me about her idea for a project that would bring Latina women together to create a spiritual reinvigoration of their connections with African ancestry: "I even have a name for it." She linked her fingers together and brought them toward herself and then outward towards me, with her fingers intertwined, palms up, over the table. As she let her fingers and hands spill open, she announced: "Out of la negrura." I couldn't resist both the idea and the way it was presented as an embodied thought. It felt like a real and clear direction. We brainstormed about who might be interested, I made the calls and suddenly we had a project with Sita Frederick, Anita "Rokafella" Garcia and Marion Ramirez. The first performance at the Huntington Summer Arts Festival also included Awilda Sterling-Duprey, but she moved soon after to Puerto Rico. The three artists and I have been moving this project along steadily for a couple of years, working around overseas residencies and work, marriages, grad school, and beautiful babies. At our most recent residency, through an invitation from the great Jim Self, in Fall 2008 at Cornell University, the project really sunk in deep. I interviewed the artists about the directions the work was taking and their own artistic growth and practice, and they kept talking long after the tape had run out. We hope you enjoy reading their thoughts and insights.

*All best wishes, and thank you Trajal and Tim!
- Jane Gabriels, Director, Pepatian*

JANE: At the showing yesterday, a student said she felt you were evolving dance forms with the way you're working together. Can you talk about that?

ROKA: In this piece, we construct it, and we deconstruct it. To me, I feel like that's the part that we're evolving. Usually you see something that's totally abstract, but we pulled from everything - storytelling, free writing, acting - all these different things composed this piece. In that sense it's evolutionary, because artists don't usually step outside of their comfort zone, and we just did it.

SITA: In my dance classes this week, I talked about folkloric movement from the Caribbean and how we have this idea that it's static. But that's not true. Salsa, Rumba, these forms are very dynamic. Ballet too. We get these stereotyped ideas of how dance looks. Even Roka can attest to how Hip-Hop has evolved since 1985; it's not the same music, it's not the same moves. I think what sparked her interest is how we took these forms, and how we made them our own, to such a degree that it became something more evolved. That's what I understood her saying, and that's powerful. The sense of history traveling through our bodies. We took that serpentine spine, the move with the arms and torso, Yonvalu [from Haitian folklore], and Roka made the connection to the way the arm waves, and she shows how that motion is the Wave in Hip-Hop. That's history. And Marion, you take that movement into your spine,

and you look it as a spine that is waving, looking at the core movement, and not thinking about it in terms of that cultural background and history. That in itself, how we're doing it all together, is what's evolving. The idea itself.

MARION: So movements are not locked to a context, not locked into a time, or a group of people.

ROKA: Well, they're locked in my body as a wave; in her [Sita's] body as Yonvalu. I didn't do it the way she did it. Three different languages but the feeling is the same. I think she [the student] was amazed that we didn't all agree to do a movement this one way, with this one message. She was impressed by the permission to make these creative decisions and move in these different ways.

SITA: And that was also what the other lady said, the dance professor who remarked about the two headstands that you [Rokafella and Marion] both did. She said there was such an integrity to the way that you each did your very individual headstand, and that the way you each do a headstand evolves its form. That's part of what we're saying, and it's something that couldn't be said by other dancers that weren't Marion and Roka and Sita. We do come from very different backgrounds; it's not that we're not allowing ourselves to be locked into our own things, we're blending. We're trying each other's stuff. That's what makes it work. None of us are saying "No, I won't do that movement."

MARION: If you teach me, I'll try...

SITA: We are evolving it, by taking this core movement and making it our own; not culturally doing it together, and not separate either. We're evolving it by trying each other's movement.

ROKA: I'll follow you. I got myself in the zero zone, and said, "I'm going to copy you."

JANE: When do you own something in your body? When do you own it, and how do you know? I see dancers making themselves into works of art; you are a work of art. You chose the training. When is it no longer training, but more about this is who I am now, this is what I do.

ROKA: I think for me it just happened after a certain level of mastery in the dance. Then I could pick and choose different vocabularies in that dance style. And if someone challenged me, what?! I've got all the technical things. Don't challenge me! And if you're going to challenge me, then let's do it. I know my throne is Breaking. I can sit there. I have poppin' and lockin' but I leave that to the masters. I can get down with house and all the other things... I'm still a beginner at 990s. I don't have the mechanics. I'm an advanced level breaker but I'm a beginner in that move.

MARION: I've done different types of training. I started very young. When I was little, I would identify as a mime. That was kind of my thing. I was in children's productions, in the principal role. Later when I was in ballet, I was 100% into ballet. I could jump and feel like I was flying. It was never really about competition. But my pointe was not good enough, my knee was not



PHOTO: MARISOL DIAZ

straight enough. Then I thought, it cannot be that I don't have a future in dance because I don't have this one line. I have to perform. They would give me roles to be in character shoes. I knew I was a performer, it was a theatrical thing, maybe not with words, but it had to do with expressing myself with my body. I did Flamenco, and then modern dance - Graham, then just Cunningham. Just this, just that. Then I did a year of karate. Everytime I felt like I was hiding myself or had this form that I could say I was doing. I could say "I am a Flamenco dancer," and I could feel proud of that. Now I have practiced for enough years, my body is more available, it's ready to go. I don't need this one thing to represent me any more. How to connect to myself and what surrounds me is what I want to keep discovering. I'm still finding how it all comes together. The reality is that in my history, I've never stuck to just one thing, one form.

SITA: I think I identify a lot with that story because I started as a performer and have always thought of myself as a performer. What I'm finding is that I am a creative person that makes performance, video, sound design, dances, writes, and that I'm interested in community, and making work in public spaces and in the theater. I think that there are forms that I love and borrow from when I work; it's more about the creative process in some ways. Talking today helps me see that. I read that Anna Sokolow said she never chose one style of dance. I feel like forms are tools; I use them, I don't own them. I just did a Salsa project, and some people were upset with me. I had to deal with that, with people asking me "YOU are directing a Cuban Salsa project?" Immediately, they would test me. I would tell them, "Yes, I've been to Cuba," and then people were so skeptical.

MARION: And you could say, "But here's what I have..."

SITA: People would judge that it's not enough. And I would have to think, yeah, but you're not doing it. You go out only for social dancing. You can say it's not whatever, but just wait, it'll get there. Still they let me know that I don't come from their community.

MARION: It comes back to ownership. When can you say to yourself, this is now mine, this is now part of my vocabulary, and re-accept yourself? You can recognize that these movements are yours, no matter what they think.

SITA: Dance is a tool; I even used Rumba when I wasn't that good at it! I was inspired by [how] it added theater to the piece. No one could tell me, "What? That is not Rumba." I didn't use it only in its traditional sense.

ROKA: Even when you have the validation, the critics will ask, "Where was the choreographer going with it? The theme wasn't totally clear, it wasn't poignant." But as a person from the community, I know what I'm doing. People out there are ready to question, but when we self-question, the whole thing crumbles.

SITA to ROKA: But you have this power in coming from the place where the form of Hip-Hop was born, you are of and from Hip-Hop in NYC.

ROKA: But a lot of what I heard was: "You're not old school, you're not 45 years old, where were you when we started Hip-Hop?" But Kwik and me, we're keeping it moving.

SITA: And people respect you.

ROKA: And I am from NYC, I saw it, I felt Hip-Hop.

SITA: I feel like I am always the guest.

ROKA: If you allow it. It is one big house... no, it's a big estate, and all of us have potential to build a house in this estate. Some old school guy built his house in 1974 and I built mine in 1987. I will still serve you if you are my guest. I learned that in Europe, I saw white boys getting down and I had to give it to them. We all had common bruises, insecurities, the possibility of humiliation in the circle.

SITA: That whole approach of "not enough to go around" keeps us down.

ROKA: Right. Like: "What me? Settling for crumbs? What?!" I don't think like that.

MARION: With teachers, they give you new tools, you are inspired, but it's important to follow your own path and stay close to yourself.

ROKA: Yes and with my students what can happen is that I see them later in a failed situation and I'm concerned that they complete their studies. But I don't give them my secret sauce. That is something they have to find on their own. In Hip-Hop, students don't come back to their teachers, they don't want to say that they learned anything from anyone else. The core of Hip-Hop is so rebellious.

SITA: It's all about the crew.

ROKA: After four years of concentrated study and their breaking is coming on, I make my peace with being a teacher knowing that this person will battle me later. It hurts. They've learned to throw this move on top of that... and then they want to battle me. I don't want them to because now I have to crush them, in front of everyone. Why would you do that? Battle your teacher? A guy thinks he's better than me, and then I take him out. It's a street dance. I ask myself, why am I even looking for love from a student for my teaching. It's like one-upmanship to take me out, like I'm an icon.

SITA: It speaks to the instability, how you have to fight for your crumb.

ROKA: Like a pie, with the slices getting thinner and it's running out.

SITA: Hip-Hop is all about competition, it's close to gang mentality. And it's really felt. It's not violent, it's a dance, but it's like you feel it more. It hurts.

ROKA: It has a strong intent.

MARION: Like a tribe. I question why that is necessary. I understand I come from a different place, growing up around dance forms in Puerto Rico, and in the contemporary dance world there are a lot of battles inside too, but they're not expressed the same way, as you describe.

ROKA: Everyone is trying to carve their own identity.

ROKA to SITA: You have your niche, inhabit it. I make a parallel to your situation as if you are an advanced b-girl who lost a few pivotal battles and that caused you to think that you were not as good as the others.

SITA: It's like functioning from a place of trauma.

ROKA: From being picked on. You have to come with a blank slate, the breaker zero, to carve out an identity. Like, why you challenging me? I'm bigger than you, let's do it. It's testosterone, not for women. But in Breaking, you take that testosterone and you work with it to make your brand bigger than theirs.

JANE: One last question: As women artists, with challenges and competition, how do you nourish yourself in all that? How do you take care of yourself as a working artist to keep doing the work? Because you do, in fact, keep going.

MARION: The more I nourish myself, and the more I find my ground as a woman, this supports my work as an artist. It just gives me more of an eagerness. I trust the work will come. I am practicing to keep grounded. Even with not enough money, it's never crossed my mind that I would stop dancing. It's not even an option to stop. Connecting with myself, where I'm at and expressing it, that nourishes me, and makes me continue.

ROKA: I am still pursuing headspins and flares. Sometimes I get burnt out. Then I go to a Salsa club or a house party, take a beginner African dance class, just get into something different from Breakin'. I leave what I know is my house. My house is where I feel like I'm nourished; I get fresh perspective breaking with new breakers, and by the dance communities. Or I hang out with an older generation, my parents, neighbors. Sometimes it's all a conversation down memory lane and I have no contribution, I'm just listening. I can't talk about riding a horse in Puerto Rico! But I feel nourished by that talk. There's that understanding with my elders, I understand there are going to be blind spots, I feel more compassion. I think I'm nourished by...

SITA: I'm nurtured by my daughter. I have that reference of being a daughter, but it's a wild trip to be the nurturer. She's just 14 months and she's figured out how to take a step! She teaches me. She makes me slow down and makes me feed myself, and feed her. It's good, it's healthy and I think it's made me a better artist. I have had support from my mother-in-law and my mom, she never questioned my choice to be an artist. I have had people tell me that they believed in me and what I'm doing. My husband will say something like, "You wouldn't do it if there wasn't a baseline." I've fantasized about leaving New York, about what it would mean in terms of community. Here there are things...

ROKA: The pace, the pressure...

SITA: The pace, and the costs. It can be very oppressive. I've had so many opportunities outside of New York, and it's been healthy to leave the pressure of New York and go where time moves at a different pace. When I come here, to Cornell, for here, I am the expert. I would never claim that in New York City. There's really no need, but that's how I see it, that's the way I often feel.

ROKA: But we need what you bring. You have such a different way.

MARION: You are advanced in who you are.

SITA: (laughing) And Roka nurtures me, and Marion nurtures me... A lot of it comes back to whether I'm clear in a spiritual way. That is my baseline, that is my foundation. I'm on it. I know when I get off, I stop myself: no wait, I'm trying to be an artist. But when I get back to my spiritual work, I remember, oh this is how I am an artist. Josefina Baez taught me that they're not separate worlds. You do not have separate parts of you.

MARION: I think that I have had a lot of teachers help me get where I am. I touch base with them often. It's like food. To talk to people I admire, I see things that I admire, and go there to support them. I go back to help others that are climbing also.