

The Impetus

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Abstract

The Impetus traces a deeply personal and transformative journey from a classroom dance educator to a passionate screendance artist and festival director. What began as a desire to preserve the fleeting beauty of student performances evolved into a vibrant, interdisciplinary practice blending dance, film, visual art, and community engagement. Set against the backdrop of New Jersey's parks and public spaces, the narrative follows the author's early experimentation with smartphone videography, her evolution through graduate studies, and the pivotal role of mentorship and collaboration in developing her artistic voice.

Through a blend of intuitive practice and formal education, the author examines the technical and emotional aspects of capturing movement on camera. The essay reflects on projects influenced by spontaneity, natural landscapes, and social issues—including addiction and climate change—and culminates in the establishment of the *mignolo international screendance festival*. Throughout the piece, a compelling metaphor is woven in: the carousel—symbolizing structure, unpredictability, and the cyclical nature of creation.

Ultimately, *The Impetus* reveals how screendance became a vessel for preserving ephemeral moments, fostering artistic community, and amplifying diverse stories through the convergence of motion and media. It celebrates the resilience of both students and educators, the magic of collaboration, and the enduring power of dance as it evolves beyond the stage and into the cinematic realm.

The Impetus

The impermanence of dance is captured in snapshots of the memory, fleeting, an art to be lived and escaped in time and space. This thought haunted me as I dwelled on it during my morning drive to work in the early months of my sixteenth year of teaching. I spent years working with students to craft dances to be performed on stage at the end of the school year. How could I seize the choreography and hand it to them in a container to take with them once they finished my class? I wanted the experience to last more than a brief moment; I wanted it to last a lifetime.

In September 2015, I embarked on a new teaching journey as one of the Ocean Township High School dance instructors in Monmouth County, New Jersey. My route took me down a stretch of W. Park Avenue in Oakhurst each morning. The drive, while routine, became a moment of reflection and inspiration as I approached Wertz Park. Bathed in the soft, golden hues of the early morning sun, the park transformed into an enchanting realm. The trees whispered tales of old, and the shimmering dew on the grass seemed to dance to its own rhythm. It was a daily tableau that left me spellbound. Just as I was deeply committed to nurturing the passion for dance in my students, I found myself equally drawn to immortalize the emotions that welled within me during these fleeting moments of looking down the park's trail. The juxtaposition of



my love for dance and the natural allure of Wertz Park at dawn became a potent reminder of the beauty that surrounds us, waiting to be appreciated and expressed.

My experience with filming had always been limited and straightforward, merely a tool to capture dance movements for future reference. Whenever my dancers experimented with improv or needed to review combinations, I would record them, focusing only on the choreography, with no regard for the intricacies of filmmaking. The world of screendance, a genre where dance collides with the cinematic canvas, was alien to me. Concepts like optimal camera angles, scouting picturesque locations, or even the nuanced craft of film editing, were areas I had never ventured into. Yet, this undeniable pull, a magnetic force, drew me in. Every morning, as nature painted its masterpiece with dawn's first light, I felt a yearning to bring the two worlds I loved together. I envisioned dancers moving fluidly amidst nature's backdrop. I saw more than dancing, I saw stillness, walking, holding hands, climbing trees, and capturing it all on film. I might have been inexperienced in filmmaking, but my passion for blending movement with nature's ethereal beauty drove me to reach beyond my boundaries.

Bringing this concept to life was not just about a grand idea; it demanded meticulousness, persuasion, and an unwavering commitment. First and foremost, I knew the enthusiasm and willingness of the students was paramount. I shared my vision and excitement with them, ensuring they understood the novelty and beauty of the project. Their energy was palpable, which boosted my confidence further. Navigating the administrative aspects of such an endeavor was the next hurdle. My initial chat with my supervisor gave me hope. Her nod of approval was a stepping stone, but the school principal's endorsement would seal the deal. After a detailed discussion highlighting the project's values and potential impact on the student's learning experience, I was ecstatic to receive the principal's support. With the school's authorities behind me, the next layer of consent involved the parents. I drafted detailed permission slips, ensuring all safety concerns were addressed.

With the logistics behind me, my artistic mind began to wander into unexplored territories. Until now, the traditional stage, set with its controlled environment, dictated my choices in costuming. But a park, alive with the elements, changing hues, and unpredictable moods offered a different canvas. The rustling leaves, the spotted sunlight filtering through the trees, and the very essence of nature demanded a fresh perspective. I imagined costumes that would seamlessly blend with the surroundings but stand out, echoing the movements of the dancers with the rhythm of nature. Textures, colors, and fabrics began to flood my mind, painting a vivid image of the spectacle I was about to create. The journey from conceptualization to realization was truly underway, and I was brimming with anticipation.

The task of capturing the dance performance in the park presented a technical dilemma. I knew that the success of this endeavor hinged not only on the choreography and the dancers' talent but also on how it would be immortalized on film. Hopeful, I turned to the TV production teacher at my school, who was well-versed in the intricacies of filming. From prior experiences, I had utilized a camcorder stationed on a tripod to record performances, but the dynamic nature of the park setting demanded a more hands-on approach. When I approached him about using the school's camcorder, I was met with unexpected resistance. His reluctance to allow me access, rooted in worries about potential damage to the school's equipment, felt like a setback. While I understood his concerns, the disappointment was real. His alternative solution was for me to use

my iPhone. I was initially met with skepticism. With the advancements in smartphone technology, I was aware that iPhones had commendable camera capabilities, but I was always a step behind in the tech game. And the phone in my pocket was an iPhone 4. A relic, really, lagging about three models behind the latest. Yet, the idea of relying solely on it for such a crucial project left me feeling apprehensive. While I was familiar with the casual snapshots and videos my phone could produce, I wasn't sure it would meet the standards for my envisioned dance film.

Questions swirled in my mind: Would the video quality suffice? How would I ensure stability? And what about editing? Could I truly bring my artistic vision to life with just the device in my pocket? Despite these uncertainties, I had a choice, to abandon the idea or adapt. Recognizing the importance of flexibility in the arts, I started to research smartphone videography techniques, determined to make the best of the situation. The park awaited, and with it, a dance that was eager to find its perfect frame.

In hindsight, I should have visited Weltz Park alone to familiarize myself with the area before taking the students. However, I decided to bring the students along for the first exploration. At the time, everything just felt aligned. While fully engaged in the experience, we had a great time filming various parts of the dance in different locations around the park. I felt as if I was a student and the park was my classroom. I had no prior experience in shooting a screendance, but I was fueled by inspiration. The combination of the landscape and the choreography intuitively directed my artistic choices. This spontaneous and intuitive approach is emblematic of my work today. From this first experience, I have carried this method through all my projects. I often let the present moment, combined with the surroundings, guide and inspire the shots I capture.

iMovie was suggested as the ideal software for editing videos taken on my phone since I did not have any experience with other editing software, so I decided to test it out. I was pleasantly surprised by its capabilities and quickly became deeply involved in editing. The following spring, I broadened the filming locations to include Palaia Park, just a short walk from the school. I led a dance class to both parks every school year to produce a screendance. This experience was a mutual learning journey for both the students and me. I called these dance films our "Parks Projects," a tradition I upheld with each class until in-person teaching was interrupted by the Covid pandemic.

—Let's take a moment to go back in time, roughly two years before the onset of Covid and three years after I started playing in the park with my dancers. I embarked on an MFA in Choreography at Jacksonville University. During my first summer semester, I was enrolled in an intermedia course, where I was introduced to creating soundscapes and experimenting with editing short films using Premier Pro. By then, I had grown quite comfortable with iMovie and was somewhat reluctant to transition to another tool. However, despite my experience with iMovie, all of which I'd done on my phone, I saw Premier Pro's advantages. The most notable skill I acquired from this new program and brought home with me that summer was creating rolling credits. After completing the summer residency, I continued to film with my iPhone, ensuring I always had the latest model. As I upgraded, I didn't discard my older devices. Instead, I mounted them on tripods, utilizing them to capture diverse perspectives in my shoots.

During my second summer semester, I enrolled in another intermedia course under the tutelage of the accomplished filmmaker Tiffany Santeiro. Not only was she a seasoned professional behind the camera, but she was also pivotal in establishing the Jacksonville Dance-Film Festival. Tiffany didn't just impart technical filmmaking skills, but she enriched us with a broader perspective, enabling us to view our creations through the eyes of an audience. She educated us on the intricacies of camera angles, the power of juxtaposition, the crafting of compelling narratives, and a pivotal realization that a dance film doesn't necessarily require the constant presence of a moving body.

The curriculum was challenging and pushed our boundaries. Armed with new techniques and insights, we were trained to control and influence the viewer's experience artfully. Our course culminated in a special moment of a screening for our creations to be viewed in a theater. Witnessing our work on the big screen was nothing short of transformative. The films looked professional, and there was a unanimous sense of accomplishment. We left that room feeling like authentic screendance creators.

This deep dive into the world of screendance only intensified my passion for the medium. I eagerly anticipated returning home, ready to harness my newfound knowledge and continue crafting films alongside my students.

That fall, I undertook a project addressing the social stigma associated with addiction. Rather than relying solely on the emotive power of music, this endeavor required in-depth research. I engaged with individuals from a 12-step recovery program, conducting interviews to deepen my understanding of their experiences as well as drawing from my own experience as having loved ones who struggled with addiction. This insight transformed my approach to choreography, pushing me beyond the spontaneous inspiration I often derived from music or a picturesque park setting. Instead of the familiar park surroundings, we chose a stunning historic art center as the backdrop for our screendance, with atmospheric architecture amplifying the weighted theme of the piece.

As I approached the culmination of my MFA journey, my focus shifted predominantly to my final thesis performance. The majority of the choreography was rehearsed and filmed within the confines of a black box theater. This setting provided a unique opportunity to utilize multiple cameras and capture the performances from various angles, including a vantage point from the overhead catwalk. There was a distinct pleasure in editing all the footage that was shot within this singular location of the black box, and the experience honed my skills. As I prepared for my MFA performance slated for early April 2020, my group of 10 dancers and I diligently rehearsed and filmed numerous sessions in the black box. Then, unexpectedly, the COVID-19 pandemic struck. Fortunately, due to our proactive approach, all dance sequences had already been captured on film, allowing me to submit a comprehensive final performance piece.

In the upcoming school year, I was dealt a unique challenge, I would be teaching a new dance class for middle school students in a hybrid environment. While half of my students would physically attend the class, the other half participated virtually from their homes. Recognizing this, I spent my summer meticulously designing the curriculum. This curriculum includes a new learning standard mandated by the state, which emphasizes the topic of climate change. To creatively integrate this topic, I proposed an innovative idea: the students' final project would be

to produce their own films. This screendance project would serve as their culminating dance final, allowing them to interpret and express their understanding of the pressing issue of climate change through movement and media.

The results of the screendance projects exceeded all my expectations. Despite the inherent challenges the hybrid learning environment posed, students showcased remarkable creativity and commitment in their work. Those who attended physically collaborated with their peers, fostering a sense of unity and shared purpose, while students working independently at home took pride in their work. The films displayed diverse interpretations, from moving narratives about the earth's fragility to abstract expressions of climate turmoil. Not only did they blend dance and cinematography, but they also displayed a profound understanding of the complexities surrounding climate change. The screendance initiative not only met the state-mandated standards but also became a testament to the resilience and adaptability of my young students in the face of challenges.

During my time in the MFA program, I was exposed to a fresh perspective on dance films and also discovered the captivating world of arts-based research, a discipline in which I quickly developed a passion. The onset of COVID-19, however, reshaped my creative practices, particularly those involving direct human-to-human contact. Despite these challenges, I remained determined to advance my practice and research. Seeking a platform to deepen my understanding and exploration, I applied to a Ph.D. program. I was ecstatic to be accepted into Transart Institute, which partners with Liverpool John Moores University. As I continued my studies, I found myself captivated by the potential of combining different mediums to explore new avenues for choreography.

In April 2021, my ethics approval was granted, and at this time, the restrictions on working with dancers in enclosed spaces, provided everyone wore masks, were lifted. The primary aim of each group of dancers I worked with during my research was to merge visual art and choreography. The dancers would create fluid acrylic pour paintings and, given improvisational movement tasks, explore new movement possibilities. The movement would then be collaboratively composed, and the final piece would be captured in a screendance. When selecting a location for the first film, the dancers and I brainstormed ideas. Filming outside was convenient due to the mask-free environment, and one dancer suggested filming on the beach during sunrise. This idea resonated with all of us, especially since our rehearsal studio was just a short distance from the beach, and we had often been fascinated by the colors of the sky at different times of the day. Moreover, our choreography was designed from vibrant hues found within the paintings the dancers created.

CANVAS came alive against the backdrop of the rising sun, reminiscent of a painting transitioning from canvas to a motion picture. Thus, our collective vision transformed into a breathtaking reality, fusing art, environment, and movement into a singular, evocative experience.

In pursuing further research, I contacted local colleges and dance companies to collaborate. My seventh project introduced me to the notable mignolo dance company in Metuchen, New Jersey. This company was founded by two talented sisters, Charly and Eriel Santagado. Before embarking on our collaboration, I presented one of my films to the Santagado sisters and their

CEO, Tobi Santagado. Coincidentally, they expressed their aspiration to initiate a screendance festival. Furthermore, Tobi implied the possibility of featuring the film we would co-create at this prospective event. This potential opportunity promised a blending of our artistic visions on a larger platform.

Collaborating with the dancers, they devised choreography drawing from the interdisciplinary techniques I formulated during my Ph.D. studies. These methods combined visual arts and choreography. At our initial rehearsal, dancers painted 2 x 4 feet canvases, adding swipes and splashes of color to the white clothing I provided for costumes. As subsequent rehearsals unfolded, we contemplated the ideal filming location for our piece. I introduced an image of a vintage carousel in Asbury Park to the group. Charly nostalgically mentioned her dream of dancing there. The entire group felt it was the perfect backdrop. While I attempted to gain access to the carousel's interior, my efforts were unsuccessful. Consequently, we captured our performance outside, leading me to title our film *Carousel*. The title of the screendance was inspired by more than just its filming location near an old carousel. It goes deeper into the meaning of the carousel and its parallels with the process of designing the choreography and filming dance for the camera.

A carousel is a universally recognizable object. Its distinct shape and whimsical nature transport riders to a different world. Each carousel, though similar in form, boasts a variety of creatures designed for amusement. An integral part of the carousel experience is the unpredictability. You never know when the ride will end, which direction you'll face when it stops, or the view you'll be met with once you disembark. This is often different from the scene you first saw upon getting on.

This carousel analogy resonates deeply with the dance projects I've undertaken. Each involves participants with bodies that, like carousels, may look similar but carry their own unique stories and interpretations. When these participants create a painting, they are often amazed by the resulting blend of colors. Just as every painting serves as a guide for the dance, every carousel creature offers a unique ride. For every project, I provide a structured framework or formula, allowing participants the space to have their own unique experiences. Rather than dictating every move, I let them interpret the guidance of the painting and make their own choreographic choices. It's their decision how the dance takes shape.

Every time I undertake a new project, there's a sense of mystery and unpredictability. Just as one doesn't know which carousel creature they'll ride or the view they'll have when the ride ends, I enter each project unsure of its outcome. I cannot predict which 'creature' or style a participant will choose or the final visual result of the dance, whether in person or on film.

But therein lies the beauty. The process of presenting participants with mediums, canvases, and movement prompts and watching them craft a dance is reminiscent of a carousel. It's cyclical and unpredictable, yet it offers a structure and a familiar form. So, the experience of choreographing and creating a screendance is akin to riding a carousel, as it provides a blend of structure and spontaneity, familiarity, and surprise.

After completing the filming for *Carousel*, I became immersed in my Ph.D. research, writing, and preparation for a summer residency in Europe. Charly offered to edit the film, and I was

intrigued to see her unique take on our material. How would her vision and style contrast with what I had in mind? The anticipation of seeing the film through her lens filled me with genuine excitement.

Tobi approached me with the idea of spearheading a film festival for 'mignolo.' I was thrilled by the opportunity to contribute to the dance company's growth and have a hand in shaping this new event. Admittedly, I was venturing into unfamiliar territory. To grasp the task, I studied existing dance film festivals, examining their websites, mission statements, award categories, and festival guidelines. Using this research, I outlined a blueprint tailored for mignolo and shared this information with the group for feedback and alterations. After brainstorming some names with Charly and Eriel, we collectively chose "mignolo international screendance festival."

In addition to handling the details of organization and planning, I recognized our immediate need for a distinctive logo. The perfect candidate for this task sprang to mind: Ky Park, a former student. Ky had previously crafted an impressive motion logo for me and was on the cusp of attending the prestigious Ringling College of Art and Design. After collaborating with Ky through several iterations, I presented a couple of his drafts to Charly for feedback. Ultimately, Ky delivered a logo that flawlessly captured our collective vision.

With the film festival's preparations in full swing, the logo was the next step in establishing our FilmFreeway account and launching our social media presence. Once set up, it was an electrifying experience to witness film submissions pouring in from all corners of the world. The quality of work was astounding, and the sheer talent evident in each submission left me in awe. The excitement was palpable, and I was eager to showcase and share each exceptional piece with our audience.

Situated in New Jersey, a stone's throw from New York's vibrant dance scene, we received numerous local submissions from the two states. The Mignolo girls' connections to work in the city, Rutgers University, and local dance circles led them to dancers in renowned local companies. Given our roots, I felt strongly responsible for uplifting and supporting these local artists. However, this sense of community didn't overshadow the submitted incredible international films.

Our inaugural festival spanned three days, featuring over two hours of dance films nightly. My enthusiasm got the better of me that first year. From the 98 submissions spanning 23 countries, I passionately advocated for half the films to be showcased over the course of those three days. The range and diversity of the submissions were breathtaking, each presenting a unique perspective on screendance, pushing the boundaries of creative expression. A vibrant tapestry of global and local films inspired me to support many of them.

These screenings were also available online, making them accessible to a broader audience and allowing enthusiasts worldwide to participate in our celebration. The virtual format also provided filmmakers an opportunity to connect with audiences they might not have reached otherwise.

International filmmaker Li Chen, mesmerized us with his cinematic vision and touched our spirits. His film, *Our Planet Destiny*, was highlighted as the "Best of the Fest." He received a

\$250 award, and his film was screened all three evenings. The distinction it gathered was evident in person and from the buzz it generated online.

In addition to the top award, we highlighted exceptional submissions each evening by awarding a new film with an "Honorable Mention" every night. It was our way of acknowledging the extraordinary talent that might not have won a cash prize but deserved recognition. And perhaps one of the most exciting aspects for the filmmakers was the "Viewer's Choice" award at each in-person screening. This allowed our live audience to have a voice, and their reactions and choices provided invaluable feedback for all the participating artists.

After closing the second season's deadline, we moved into the planning stages for the 2023 festival. I remained committed to advocating for the inclusion of local artists and showcasing their work in person, as it provides a platform to be seen and appreciated by their peers and community. While we may not be able to present every film recommended by the jury in person, I am fortunate to be working alongside Charly, Eriel, and Tobi, who bring their open-mindedness, creativity, and collaborative spirit to the table. We all value each other's input and ideas. At the 2023 festival, we added a virtual screening of selected films the evening before our in-person festival.

Our in-person festival began in the afternoon and featured six engaging sessions. As our festival gained momentum and recognition, we increased our prize offerings. The "Best of the Fest" award cash prize doubled to \$500 and was awarded to "The Lines In Between" by Georgia Usborne. Karen Pearlman's "Impossible Image" received an "Honorable Mention" and a \$100 prize. The "Local Favorite" film award also offers the winners 4 hours of studio time at Mignolo Arts Center. These awards were given to Megan Chu for "Those Last Few Weeks" and Jody Oberfelder and Eric Siegel for "Dance of the Neurones."

The day following the festival, we scheduled a special virtual gathering. All filmmakers and guests were invited to attend a Zoom meeting, designed to connect artists from both the virtual evening and the in-person festival. Here, they had a platform to discuss their films, share their experiences, and dive into the inspirations behind their work. More than just a post-festival discussion, this virtual gathering was geared towards fostering collaboration. It provided an invaluable opportunity for networking and building potential future partnerships, creating a community that thrives on mutual support and shared passion for screendance.

For our 2024 screendance festival, we will continue to hold both an in-person and virtual festival. This year, mignolo arts center will be hosting an Art Week from October 5 to 13. The screendance festival will close out the events for the week with a free screening of all finalists and prize winners. We have added one more prize to the festival, as we noticed how many new filmmakers were submitting films. The category is titled "My First Screendance Fest." This allows new dance filmmakers the opportunity to be recognized and awarded prizes alongside seasoned creators.

The opportunity to develop and direct a screendance festival presented itself at a time of rapid growth in this art form. It has allowed me to connect with dancers and filmmakers worldwide as I participate in a shifting landscape that celebrates the unique vantage point of dance on camera. Capturing dance on film is a complex endeavor that blurs the lines between art and

documentation. It is an act of preserving ephemeral moments of human expression while simultaneously creating a new art form in its own right.

The impetus that once lured me to film dance in a park to heading a screendance festival is a journey I never envisioned just a few years prior. Through this medium, those I have met have woven a mosaic of cultures, traditions, and narratives that transcend borders, languages, and biases. Each interaction, whether with an emerging dancer or an acclaimed filmmaker, has enriched my understanding of this medium's vast potential. It reinforced the belief that dance, when merged with the cinematic lens, can tell intimately personal and universally resonant stories.

As I look ahead, I am filled with anticipation for what the next chapter holds. With a strong foundation and a supportive community, screendance is soaring to remarkable heights, reshaping perceptions and inspiring future generations. As a part of this ever-evolving narrative, I am humbled, honored, and excited to dance alongside it.