

## Teaching Philosophy | Kiri Avelar

As a Chicana bicultural, *fronteriza* from the US/Mexico borderlands of El Paso, TX and Ciudad Juárez, Chihuahua, Mexico, my identity has proved central in motivating my curiosity as a learner and educator. The movement between my cultures in the borderlands, and time lived away from the area, has shaped my interest in accessible, inclusive dance practices anchored in Chicana/Latina feminist epistemology and border theory. My teaching philosophy employs an intersection of teaching practices through a Latinx inquiry of translanguaging, *sentipensante* (sensing/thinking), and critical dance pedagogies, centering Chicana/Latina feminist methodologies and pedagogies of *testimonio*, *plática*, and *convivencia*. *Testimonio*, *plática*, and *convivencia* are vehicles for deep diversity, equity and belonging, as they center each individual's cultural knowledge and stories as valid modes for understanding and instructing. *Testimonio*, as a social justice methodology, centers the individual experience as valid in the learning process. From the perspective of Critical Pedagogy theory, *plática* frames the focus on cohorts as a collective group of leaders committed to social change, holding space for knowledge to be shared, discussed, reflected upon, and acted on as a community. My teaching and artistry rely on my composition of a culturally relevant and responsive learning space where inquiry and reflection are honored. I utilize an autoethnographic approach in discussing personal identities, a commitment to examination of how identities are visibilized/invisibilized in my dance artistry, and pedagogical choice-making to unearth ways in which identities can be shared and expanded in classroom, studio and performance spaces.

As a dance educator of 25 years, my work in myriad environments and my learning from distinct, diverse communities have also shaped my philosophy. While teaching at an orphanage in Ciudad Juárez, Chihuahua, Mexico, over a ten-year span, an early experience with teenage students in my ballet class notably changed how I perceived classroom management and command-style instruction. We were dancing a set adagio together, working specifically on the fluidity of port de bras. In the middle of our focused work, a student asked when they could have fun music and use some of their own dance moves in the studio. Other students nodded in agreement. I recognized from this conversation that the students were needing agency in their dance experience with me, and I worked to find important moments throughout my classes for their choice-making, including guided improvisation in our combinations, collaboratively developed music playlists, and more time for dance-making sessions in the school year. This pedagogical shift was validated when I saw the contributions from students that filled the space I had created, and their agency and identity were evidenced in the students' dance composition.

These lessons learned in the orphanage stayed with me as I navigated rural and urban public schools in the U.S./Mexico borderlands and in New York City's five boroughs; dance studios, conservatories, and post-secondary settings in the Southwestern U.S. and the East Coast; and my own teaching identity in relation to each of them. I drew parallels as I instructed in the distinct genres in which I was trained: Classical Spanish, Mexican folklórico, flamenco, jazz, ballet and modern. This divergent training, and the masterful mentorship of teachers in these spaces, has given me a place to cross-reference and hybridize my style of instruction.

My teaching practice also intersects with my research, straddling the spaces of Dance Studies, Dance History, Ethnic Studies, Border Theory, and Chicana/Latina feminist epistemology. I believe it is critical to pull from transnational and transdisciplinary domain knowledge and their contexts across fields of study to inform the dance classroom. As dance has been shaped by geo-political agendas and socio-cultural dynamics, I believe it important that our teaching weaves in central themes of their indigenous and

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contemporary practices, including but not limited to migration, transnational movements, colonialism, language, and assimilation. Over the past few years my teaching has developed in this direction, ensuring students' learning becomes more holistic and contextualized. I have developed a rigor in dance education, research, and advocacy through my work in graduate school, as a creative research fellow for a performing arts library, and as an arts administrative leader in a cultural organization. These journeys have further contoured nuances in my teaching artistry, encouraging me to directly question colonial methods of instruction, pedagogies, curriculum, and research practices, and to challenge systems of oppression still prevalent in our fields of study.

In the classroom, one of the ways I have responded is through building a multilingual ecology, striving towards an environment that is inclusive, equitable, and accessible. While my bicultural identity has encouraged me to make space for duo-lingual, translation, and translanguaging experiences consistently, I have to consciously make a concerted effort to be mindful of the complex and diverse identities of the students present in my class. The areas I am challenged to consider include my instructional practices, teaching materials, student-teacher relationship, classroom culture, and self-awareness. This is implemented through a check-in with students at the start of each lesson, freedom for students to express how they are experiencing the class, sharing of goals students have for their learning, and discussions of how we can work in partnership with the overall semester or year-long trajectory of the class. Developing a rubric in tandem with the students has been a more recent change I have made in my teaching, as a response to the feedback I have received from my students. It is now a regular practice for us to sit together--no matter the age or skill level of the student-- and for each of us to add content areas for assessment in our rubrics.

I have learned the value of flexibility in addressing individual needs and in nimbly responding to class community dynamics. This was modeled for me by a teacher who saw I was uncomfortable with floor movement due to my limited range of motion post-injury. I found their intuitive spirit and quick action in responding to me very respectful; while not letting the class flow falter, they shifted goals of the exercises so I could still be included. Because of this experience, I regularly carve out time to reflect on our performance in the classroom, so we can address these areas for teacher, students, and the class as an ensemble. I implement written, visual, and kinesthetic modes of feedback to promote the practice of reflection, including dedicated writing time in journals to support goal setting, utilization of visual aids to bring a new lens to a dance history narrative we are investigating, and foregrounding kinesthetic senses through props, which allow a physical interaction/sensation to illuminate a movement principle we are exploring (e.g., a bouncy ball for fall and rebound, or a slinky for fall and recovery.) These intentional reflective moments enable my students and I to become agents of transformational learning, with the student as a centrifugal force, and the moments build upon pedagogue Paulo Freire's call for reflection and action as interdependent.

Within my culturally responsive and reflective classrooms, I find it important to keep the physical training a rigorous component of the class structure. I model a solid work ethic and maintain high standards for my students and expect the same from them in return. I promote risk taking, a pushing of boundaries both technically and artistically. The field is ever-evolving and requires discipline in our daily practice to meet levels of achievement that further elevate and ground the art form. With this, I also believe it imperative to bring my authentic self to the class, so that students think, and see and feel that it is

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possible to bring theirs. I must ask as much of myself as I ask of my students, to show that we are in the process of learning together, and consider “who does the accommodating in the classroom?”, as Dr. Sonia Nieto asks so brilliantly.

As a lifelong learner, I am invested in the evolution of my philosophy and refinement of my practices, methods, assessment tools and curricular directions as I move through my career. Taking classes, attending workshops, creating dance films or choreography, reading current scholarship, writing reflectively, and asking my students and colleagues to survey my work motivate me in this direction. In turn, I see a possibility for my pedagogical contributions to continuously develop in ways that will give back to the communities that have built me. My co-founded initiative, the [Latinx Dance Educators Alliance](#) (LXDEA), is a direct response to a need I faced growing up in the field, and as I headed into a professional performing and teaching career, for more representation through resources centered around the Latinx diasporic experience in dance. I have seen this same need mirrored back to me through my own students at different institutions. LXDEA was founded to address this very gap felt across generations of dancers in our dance landscape. Demonstrating for my students creative solutions that address inequities, such as LXDEA, has been a rewarding part of my reflective practice and a tangible outcome of deepening my pedagogy.

I have seen my pedagogy validated as I observe my students in classes with guest instructors; it is also evidenced in feedback from colleagues who have substituted in my absence, recognizing that there is buy-in to the process and contributions offered from my cohorts of students. And for me, this is the very idea, that future learning is guided by what has been imprinted in their time in my class, that they will take to their next dance space. The learning goes beyond me, as a singular experience in their dance journey. I recognize that as many environments and social contexts, and challenging and engaging teachers have brought me to my place as a teacher, I in return am only one of many experiences my students will have in life. It is my greatest hope that while they are in my classes, my students will feel empowered to raise their voices, believe that what they have to say is valid, and see that their contributions matter, that they are central to the learning and the art, and that these values are embodied beyond our classroom.