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Stories from Home: Yvonne Montoya and Shannon Parrales in Conversation

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Cover Page Footnote

Shannon Parrales is a graduate from the University of New Mexico with a Bachelor of Arts in Contemporary Dance. She is from the Pueblo of Pojoaque located in Northern New Mexico. Shannon began dancing in 2014 at Dance Space Santa Fe, where she first discovered her passion for dance. Shannon has performed in over 10 dance productions including styles in jazz, modern and musical theater. In 2018 and 2019 Shannon was selected to join the University of New Mexico's contemporary dance repertoire, where she has worked with choreographers such as Francesca Harper, Miguel Gutierrez, Amanda Hamp, Donna Jewell and more. Yvonne Montoya is a mother, dancemaker, bi-national artist, thought leader, writer, speaker, and the founding director of Safos Dance Theatre. Based in Tucson, A.Z. and originally from Albuquerque, N.M., her work is grounded in and inspired by the landscapes, languages, cultures, and aesthetics of the U.S. Southwest. Montoya is a process-based dancemaker who creates low-tech, site-specific and site-adaptive pieces for nontraditional dance spaces. Though most well-known in the U.S. Southwest, her choreography has been staged across the United States and in Guatemala and her dance films screened at Queens University of Charlotte, N.C. and the University of Exeter (U.K.). In addition to being the founding director, Montoya is the lead choreographer for Safos Dance Theatre; under her direction, the company won the Tucson Pima Arts Council's Lumie Award for Emerging Organization (2015). From 2017-2018 Montoya was a Post-Graduate Fellow in Dance at Arizona State University, where she founded and organized the inaugural Dance in the Desert: A Gathering of Latinx Dancemakers. Montoya is a 2019-2020 Kennedy Center Citizen Artist Fellow, a member of the 2019-2020 Dance/USA Fellowships to Artists pilot program, and recipient of the 2019 National Association of Latino Arts and Cultures (NALAC) POD grant and the 2020 MAP Fund. She continues to work as a thought leader and collaborator on Dance in the Desert. For more information visit yvonnemontoya.co/

Stories from Home

by Yvonne Montoya and Shannon Parrales, in conversation

In this conversation, New Mexican contemporary dance artists, Yvonne Montoya and Shannon Parrales, discuss their dance journeys and their work on Montoya's current projects: "Stories from Home" and "Stories from Home: COVID-19 Addendum."

"Stories from Home" is a series of dances embodying the oral traditions of the Southwest. Choreographer Yvonne Montoya draws upon personal histories, as well as ancestral knowledge, including stories from her great-grandmother, grandmother, great-aunts, and father. "Stories from Home" was originally scheduled to premiere on stage and in person on Kennedy Center's Millennium Stage in September 2020; this engagement was postponed and will be rescheduled for the 2021 season because of the pandemic. Facing the realities of COVID-19 and its impact on the performing arts industry, along with postponed performances and residencies, Montoya developed the presentation of the work. She also identified ideological parallels with her 2016 piece, "Motherhood and the Performing Arts," a solo work that explored the joys and challenges of balancing parenthood and a performing arts career—as her work as an artist was suddenly combined with new responsibilities as a homeschool educator. These ideas and circumstances were the catalyst for the online "Stories from Home: COVID-19 Addendum."

Yvonne Montoya: Who are you and where are you from?

Shannon Parrales: Hi, well, I'm Shannon Parrales. I'm from the Pueblo of Pojoaque in Northern New Mexico. Who are you and where are you from?

Yvonne Montoya: I am Yvonne Montoya. I grew up on the westside of Albuquerque and went to high school in the North Valley. My dad is from Santa Fe and my mom is from El Rancho in the Pojoaque Valley.

Shannon Parrales: Yeah, my mom is from Santa Fe but my dad is from Ecuador. My mom went on a church mission to South America and they met, and she came back and a year later, he came to the United States. Then, they had me and I've been here since.

Yvonne Montoya: What is your dance origin story? How did you come to dance and do contemporary dance, in particular?

Shannon Parrales: My mom actually did a lot of modern dance as I was growing up and I always got to watch her. And, towards the end of high school, I didn't really know what I wanted to do in college and something just kept telling me that I wanted to dance. I had never done it before so at the age of 20, I decided that I wanted to find somewhere to start to dance, which was actually really hard being from a small pueblo—that is not really a thing. Even in Santa Fe, there were some places, but a lot of them didn't want to take me because I had no prior experience in dance. So, I got lucky and I found this little place in Santa Fe called Dance Space Santa Fe and I started dancing there. We did

lyrical, ballet, a little bit of everything, and jazz. That's where I really started to dance, and I loved it. Then, from there I knew I wanted to go to college for a degree in dance. That's when Santa Fe University of Art and Design was out there. So I started going there, then the program was cut. I was left with nowhere to go so then my last option, because I really knew I wanted to finish my degree in dance, was going to the University of New Mexico. So I went there. They have contemporary and flamenco dance, and I went with contemporary.

Yvonne Montoya: When you were younger did you do other types of dance?

Shannon Parrales: I didn't. The only other dance I've ever done was Native American Feast day dances. I've been to a few summer camps where we did hip hop but that was about it. So, when did you begin to dance and when did you decide that that is what you wanted to do?

Yvonne Montoya: I have danced on and off my whole life. I danced at a handful of different dance studios growing up, but I did not have consistent technical dance training. I am one of four children and I was only able to dance in studios when my family could afford it, so there were some years when I didn't dance. As a child, I hated ballet and I loved tap. My first experience in modern dance was at a studio in Albuquerque where a UNM student taught us for a few months. I thought modern was very weird. I am older than you, so I attended high school when the dance team thing was a big deal. I did the dance team thing in high school and really enjoyed it. I remember you asked me why I left New Mexico. One of the reasons was because I wanted to take my dance practice out of the half-time show and into an artistic realm. At 18, I felt that my dance trajectory was predetermined. I auditioned for Chaparrals (the UNM dance team) and made it along with a lot of my dancer friends from high school. I saw what was before me and I thought that my dance career was on a trajectory that I didn't want to be on. I wanted to explore dance as an artist, as a choreographer. I wanted to do contemporary dance, so I left. My 18-year-old self didn't feel that it was possible to explore my artistry and take artistic risks in New Mexico in a way that I could elsewhere.

After moving to Arizona, I also broke up with dance a few times. The first time was after my undergraduate program. I had bad experiences in my college dance program because I didn't have consistent or strong technical training, specifically ballet training, as a child. Some of the faculty didn't like me because I didn't have "classical lines" and of course, I am short with a big booty, so my body didn't fit in with the ideal ballet type. The program left me super burnt out, so I quit. Well, that lasted a year. I came back to dance in graduate school, auditing classes with my modern professors and dancing in a handful of Tucson-based modern dance companies. I was generally the only person of color in dance companies and I experienced a lot of microaggressions. After a bad experience as a choreographer working for one of these companies, I quit again. I had my child and when my son was 9 months old, I started my company, *Safos* Dance Theater. When my son was four, I quit my day job teaching at the university and started doing dance full-time. Dance is my first love and my true love.

Shannon Parrales: Wow, that's cool. I didn't know that. How did *Safos* start?

Yvonne Montoya: *Safos* started out of frustration. In 2006, I made my choreographic debut with a Tucson-based modern dance company. I created a dance to English/Spanish bilingual spoken word that incorporated a lot of social dance and the dance was NOT well-received by the company to say the least! Because I incorporated social dance and Spanish, the work was seen as less than or as “low” art. There was a dancer in the company who I danced with at the University of Arizona who said, “my family didn’t pay money to see a Mexican lady scream on stage” to the directors behind my back. That was one of the moments when I quit because I felt like there was no place for me in the field. After some time of thinking it over and with the full support of my partner, I decided to start my own thing. I thought to myself, “my work might be different, but I know I can do this, and I can do it well.” That was my logic back then.

Shannon Parrales: Oh, wow! That’s great. That’s awesome.

Yvonne Montoya: How did we meet Shannon?

Shannon Parrales: We met through my professor, Dr. Brianna Figueroa. She was my professor at the University of New Mexico when I was an undergrad there in the contemporary dance program. She had mentioned that a lady in Arizona was holding auditions for Latinx dancers and she mentioned it to me and one other dancer, because we were the only Latinx dancers in the UNM contemporary dance repertoire. It’s pretty crazy. So, we went to Arizona and that’s when I met you.

Yvonne Montoya: I’m so happy to have met you! It’s crazy, we have only met in person once and we’ve been working remotely, since. Specifically, for “Stories from Home,” I wanted to cast New Mexican and Latinx contemporary dancers, but there are so few of us.

Shannon Parrales: Yeah, that’s also why I stick to dance. I want to bring more dance here or even onto my Pueblo because I think they are almost intimidated like, “I can’t dance. I don’t know how to dance.” But you don’t even know what it is yet. Just try it. We need people who, you know, aren’t white.

Yvonne Montoya: Yes!! And we do dance! We dance at family parties. We have traditional dances like the *matachines*. And, there was a big dance team scene when I was younger, many years ago. I am curious about the way dance is being packaged because it is there also, just not in this contemporary concert dance form. We do dance. And I’m grateful to be working with you.

Shannon Parrales: Why did you decide to create “Stories from Home” and why 2 acts? What does each act mean to you? Also, was creating “Stories from Home” hard and what layers did it consist of?

Yvonne Montoya: Well, now there are two parts of “Stories from Home.” First, there is the original version that we will premiere at Kennedy Center Millennium Stage and the second is the “Stories from Home: COVID-19 Addendum.” I will start with the original version of “Stories from Home.”

That was inspired by the passing of my dad Juan ‘Johnny’ Montoya Sena. He died in 2015 of cancer. He worked at the Los Alamos National Labs in the late 1970s before I was born, and he was exposed to something at that time and got cancer as a result. The feds paid for his treatment, but he ultimately passed. My son is not being raised in New Mexico with all of the traditions. My son doesn’t know the smell of roasting chile in the fall, he has never been to a *matanza*, he has never been to any *fiestas*, he doesn’t know what a snow day is, and only once I took him to see the *matachines* dance. He isn’t experiencing the things that are very New Mexican. I had these ideas of my dad taking my son fishing and hunting, and teaching him these very New Mexican things because my partner is from Mexico, which is a different cultural background. After my dad passed, I was saddened because I wondered, who is going to teach my son these things? Also, my dad liked to talk and he told all these crazy stories of grandfathers, great-uncles, cousins –stories that really give a sense of belonging. With my dad gone and my son being raised in diaspora, I realized it was my responsibility to share these stories and traditions with my child, so I decided to share this with him in the form I know best, which is dance. I want my child to know who he is. The people from New Mexico have deep roots and they know who their ancestors are, and that’s a really unique thing. I want my son to know that, too.

The other inspiration is that as a *Nuevomexicana*, nobody in the national dance world understands me or knows what to do with me. Especially because narratives of Latinx diaspora dominate the national dance scene. It is like, “oh, you are a Latina, what country did you and your family immigrate from? I didn’t. I am from New Mexico.” People don’t understand the complexities of the histories in the Southwest, and the histories of the Southwest tend to be erased. It’s as if Manifest Destiny *sigue siendo*, because it is like anything prior to 1848 didn’t exist. I am sharing these stories, my family stories to shed light on this. I want to contribute to these stories, so it is not always a Latinx diaspora story on contemporary dance stages and in contemporary dance spaces. Also, in my experience, most of the contemporary dance artists who are creating work in New Mexico, and who share stories about New Mexico aren’t from New Mexico. Some of these contemporary dance artists are appropriating *acequias* and *luminarias/farolitos* in their dance-making practices. When I saw my cultural practices being used as a tool for the exotic, because you know, Santa Fe is sexy or whatever, I realized I need to share my stories or someone else will appropriate my culture and history and share it for me, representing it, erroneously.

Regarding the “Stories from Home: COVID-19 Addendum,” I wanted to find a way to pay you and the cast over the summer. I recognize that you and your dancer colleagues were all expecting pay checks from the residencies, right? I was struggling, thinking about how I was going to pay the dancers who committed so much time to a project that was no longer happening. The project also served as a way to examine what’s happening in our bodies during this time. And, it was a way to highlight all of the dancers. I thought this was a great opportunity to have your stories contribute to this body of work, because up until this point, “Stories from Home” focused solely on my family’s stories. I am really happy you all had a chance to contribute your stories.

With the two acts, honestly, it was created that way due to time constraints. I knew I wanted to create one act with my son, because I was struggling to integrate him and our “Motherhood and Performing Arts” project into the original “Stories from Home.” I thought it was important for him to be included in this story of his family, and have his work in conversation with the story of my great grandmas. But, I couldn’t quite make it work. The addendum provided the perfect opportunity to fold him into the work. So, I scheduled the acts around his school schedule. It was logistics and a timeline that determined the two acts.

What does “Stories from Home” mean to you? And, what was your experience creating your story from home for the addendum?

Shannon Parrales: “Stories from Home,” specifically the COVID-19 addendum, means a lot to me because I had just joined the cast and then, it was just cut. And, I kinda just thought, well that’s it. I didn’t know what was going on, honestly, with anything. Seeing you and everything you did with your son and all of the work that went into it, and creating each piece and you being able to let us do that, really allowed me to still be creative during this time and interact and get closer to what “Stories from Home” means...just a lot of layers. If I hadn’t been included, I don’t think I would be doing anything dance-related, at all. This is the only dance-related thing I’m involved in right now. It, kind of, almost made me dance but I’m glad it did because I paint and stuff but it’s not the same as when you dance. So, you definitely pushed me to be creative during this time and work. It really meant a lot to me.

What are the biggest differences you felt creating dance works at home with your son, compared to the stage?

Yvonne Montoya: I prefer to create dance work outside of a theater, so I felt very at home. To me, theaters are not interesting. I think that theatres limit creativity. I almost feel like dancing in a theater is like dancing in a hospital, it’s sterile. And, I think about where dance is traditionally done in New Mexico, it is outside, it is in people’s homes –it isn’t in a theater. I came out of retirement for the addendum. I retired from dance in 2017 because of an ongoing knee injury. When I first started working on Act 1 of the addendum, I was very grumpy for a few days. I was bemoaning the fact that I couldn’t work with you, and the cast, directly because I thought the dances would have looked so much better if done by you or Steve or Ruby. But that wouldn’t have made sense since the work is about motherhood and experiencing the pandemic. Then, I felt limited by my injury. My body couldn’t do what I wanted it to do, and what it used to do in the past. I had to get over that and move forward, doing what I can.

All that said, I am excited for the concert dance theater version of the original “Stories from Home” coming to the stage because it will be more of a collaboration with the design team. Clint will be doing the lights, Kelsey costumes, Erica is a phenomenal stage manager. There is so much more that will be added to the work because of the collaboration. And, because I do prefer not to dance in a theater, all of the dances in the original “Stories from Home” can be performed outside of a theater

space and some, like *Braceros*, have been. I think it would be much more interesting to see dances like *Tecolote* performed in the *bosque* or the dance *Mestiza Mulata de Analco* to be performed in Santa Fe, in Analco, rather than just in a theater.

Shannon Parrales: Is there a difference in the dance world today between New Mexico and Arizona?

Yvonne Montoya: I don't think I've spent enough time as a working dance artist in New Mexico to say. Phoenix is much bigger than Albuquerque so there's probably just a lot more happening in Phoenix, just because of size. Albuquerque has that very robust *flamenco* scene and I don't know if *flamenco* exists in the same capacity in Arizona. But, I think, overall, we need more of our people dancing. I would love to spend more time in the New Mexico contemporary dance scene, and I will move home one day, it's only a matter of time.

Shannon Parrales: *Flamenco* is big in Albuquerque, which is great, but in the contemporary, there isn't a lot of diversity. So, it feels new or like it's a new experience for me as a Latinx person and as a Native American in the dance world and scene. I also think about having to work with people who don't know about your cultural background and finding ways to integrate your cultural background into your dancing. It is also hard being the only one who knows how to figure that out in such a specific dance community.

Yvonne Montoya: When you said diversity, did you mean diversity in dance form or racial/ethnic diversity?

Shannon Parrales: I think a bit of both but specifically, I was talking ethnically.

Yvonne Montoya: Yeah, I hear you. It's the same thing in Arizona, which is why I created "Dance in the Desert: A Gathering of Latinx Dancemakers." I always intended to expand "Dance in the Desert" to New Mexico. "Stories from Home" supports building a community of practice of contemporary dance artists across geography, and the hope is that you and the cast continue to work together until we can be in person again. The "Stories from Home" cast live all over the Southwest. I hope that this project can be a springboard for more work to be created by you and the cast, so that more dancers like us have the space to create contemporary dance that is meaningful to us and our communities.

Shannon Parrales: That's what I really enjoyed at the audition, this might sound weird but, seeing other dancing brown bodies. I don't see it as much as I would like to. Being able to dance with people who you can relate with more. That was really cool.

Yvonne Montoya is a mother, dancemaker, bi-national artist, thought leader, writer, speaker, and the founding director of *Safos* Dance Theater. Based in Tucson, Arizona, and originally from Albuquerque, New Mexico, her work is grounded in and inspired by the landscapes, languages, cultures, and aesthetics of the U.S. Southwest. Montoya is a process-based dancemaker who creates

low-tech, site-specific, and site-adaptive pieces for nontraditional dance spaces. Though most well-known in the U.S. Southwest, her choreography has been staged across the United States and in Guatemala and her dance films screened at Queens University of Charlotte, North Carolina, and the University of Exeter, United Kingdom. In addition to being the founding director, Montoya is the lead choreographer for *Safos* Dance Theater; under her direction, the company won the Tucson Pima Arts Council's Lumie Award for Emerging Organization (2015). From 2017–2018, Montoya was a Post-Graduate Fellow in Dance at Arizona State University, where she founded and organized the inaugural "Dance in the Desert: A Gathering of Latinx Dancemakers." Montoya is a 2019–2020 Kennedy Center Citizen Artist Fellow, a member of the 2019–2020 Dance/USA Fellowships to Artists pilot program, and recipient of the 2019 National Association of Latino Arts and Cultures (NALAC) POD grant and the 2020 MAP Fund. She continues to work on "Dance in the Desert." For more information visit yvonnemontoya.co/

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