

# The Role of Artistic Education in the Reinvention of Identity - The Colombian

## Case: *El Colegio del Cuerpo*

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### ABSTRACT

*El Colegio del Cuerpo* (College of the Body) is a non-governmental organization that since 1997 has provided artistic education in dance to hundreds of displaced child refugees from Colombia's internal war, living around Cartagena De India's urban center. At *El Colegio* children learn how to performatively redefine their cultural identities in order to break the circle of poverty-criminality through iterations of artistic acts. They have gone on to forge the company that best represents Colombian contemporary dance abroad.

The artistic education of child refugees is intended to overcome socioeconomic hardships that would otherwise condition their personalities. A traumatized and violated underclass has become empowered to take responsibility for producing their own cultural image, revealing the political implications of *El Colegio's* artistic education. This initiative shows social reintegration and reconstruction of the social tissue as possible, through strategic education that renders the body an expressive instrument actively breaking the prescription of historical determinisms. Reconstruction of identity through this performative pedagogical model has given these individuals opportunities to overcome the historical underdevelopment predetermined for them. Dance has mended their identities and crafted them to become leaders in the creative conscience of a post-colonial society entering the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Corporeal education has the potential to lead groups of people who have suffered the trauma of war and social violence, to recognize the body's inherent value and find a common ground from which to negotiate peaceful coexistence.

After careful and exhaustive revision of primary sources, combined with field research and interviews, I can infer that this model of artistic education constitutes a strategy for prevention and resolution of conflicts by reinventing the self through art. This model could be reproduced in societies that have not suffered the lashes of an internal war and would prove a relevant pedagogical methodology for any 21<sup>st</sup> century society.

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*El Colegio del Cuerpo* (The College of the Body) has been working since 1997 in Colombia, in the city of Cartagena de Indias, to provide sponsored artistic education in the field of dance to hundreds of youngsters classified as at risk youth. They typically come from economically disfavored sectors of society and in a tourist city such as Cartagena, would normally end up as part of prostitution, drug or criminal rings. Thanks to its labor, El Colegio del Cuerpo (ECdC) has broken the circle of poverty-criminality, giving new opportunities to these youngsters by transforming and developing their creative energy to such a point that the company best represents Colombian contemporary dance abroad.<sup>1</sup>

During the summer of 2008, the chance to experience the environment and spirit of ECdC as well as engage in direct conversations with co-directors Alvaro Restrepo and his pedagogical collaborator and sister-in-arms Marie France Delleuvin, gave me a first-hand perspective of the philosophy, methods, and intentions of this project. Mr. Restrepo's philosophy of art and life has been a cornerstone for his model of artistic education. This paper will concentrate on identifying how the philosophy he proposed for his own individual work (during his early stages as an artist) served as a furnace in which the ideals for running the school were forged.

The importance of this study lies in the fact that by

studying this model of artistic education, a strategy for prevention and resolution of conflicts could be established for a country such as Colombia, which is currently undergoing its 61<sup>st</sup> year of intermittent rural war. In this stage of the armed conflict, many but not all leftist guerrilla members have demobilized or deposed arms. Some right wing paramilitaries are in the process of doing so as well, but the circumstances pertaining to this fratricidal war, where all actors have assassinated, violated and displaced each other's armies and families, have made it impossible to reach a final peace agreement. A third actor in this conflict has been the Colombian state through its military apparatus.

These three actors of war have caused a degradation of the collective subconscious. In Colombia, according to Restrepo, "we see the human body violated on a daily basis, tortured, massacred, mutilated, assassinated."<sup>2</sup> Colombia is today full of displaced families with a strong need for reintegration and reparation initiatives,<sup>3</sup> and the refugees along with the demobilized factions in the conflict add up to a great number of people who need to be retrained in their societal skills in order to be ready for civilian life. Their children constitute what is considered at risk youth and need to be reeducated in ways different from hate or eye-for-an eye logics.<sup>4</sup> The *San Francisco Chronicle* pointed out the niche in which Restrepo's ECdC works, as well as its importance within the field of prevention and resolution of conflicts:

His program is taking on a crisis that stumps governments and nongovernmental organizations around the world: How to rescue children who grow up in bloody conflicts or destitute poverty. Colombia, which has more than 3 million internally displaced people -- the world's second largest displaced population, after Sudan -- is a most troubling case.<sup>5</sup>

The children (and their parents) have benefited from initiatives such as ECdC that have understood the value of artistic education and the power of the body as instrumental in the transformation of reality. My own experience as dance instructor for different contingents has convinced me about trusting the body as an instrument for peace. In Colombia we are searching so hard for elements to create a common social fabric, yet we have not thought about what we share as humans: the body. If counterparts in a conflict could recognize the body's inherent value, there would be a common ground from which to negotiate. The body is instrumental for the consolidation of democracy, and education in and through a corporeal way of experiencing the world should lead us towards peaceful coexistence.<sup>6</sup>

Since ECdC is a relatively new phenomenon, I

searched for information about it through the World Wide Web and various newspaper and magazine websites. I also found valuable reviews and videos from European dance journals in the New York Public Library of the Performing Arts. I am currently in the process of consulting dissertations that address the problem of conflict resolution and prevention based on the Colombian experience in order to provide a better context. The field of conflict resolution and prevention deserves a study by itself, particularly in reference to a country such as Colombia, where enormous efforts have been made in response to the given circumstances of the armed conflict.

Unfortunately the *News Bank Index* is limited and does not contain any Colombian newspapers. This constitutes a serious gap in the way information is collected and preserved for any kind of research. A researcher needing information from Colombian sources, and intending to reach it through that database would go home empty handed. I suppose this is one of the reasons that have prevented a serious historiography of Colombian dance. Hopefully this essay will contribute to give light to that area of knowledge.

It is not my intention to make an assessment of the quality of the artistic production of either Mr. Restrepo or of ECdC dancers. Rather, my most pressing question is: how is this specific type of artistic education aimed to affect students who might benefit from it? Since El Colegio del Cuerpo is Mr. Restrepo's own offspring, this study will necessarily lead into the multiple stages of creation of his particular model of artistic pedagogy.

#### *Alvaro Restrepo as individual artist*

Sources describe Mr. Restrepo's individual work as ritualistic or ceremonial<sup>7</sup> or as a "synthesis of his magical, spiritual dance and contemporary concepts."<sup>8</sup> In his work there is a constant dialogue and tension between traditional and modern expressions. Humans in his pieces appear to have to cope with contemporary life in spite of the undertow of their atavistic elements. At the time it was a common Latin American dance theme, especially from artists seeking artistic development who had migrated to first-world countries. The result was a new wellspring of creativity where inspiration came without repudiating the old but thrusting the art form into the future. It was as if, through migration, artists were seeking a vantage point from which to observe, study, and re-incorporate their own cultural roots. This is wonderful to see with Alvaro Restrepo, who has managed, after training in the USA and with his background in the visual arts, to return and pick up the dialogue with his own culture. Right down to the colours he uses he presents the audience with the landscape of his homeland.<sup>9</sup>

The use of the body as a vehicle of critical analysis of

one's own culture is a constantly recurring observation about Restrepo's work. In 1996 he wrote:

Colombia is a vibrant, convulsed land of contradictions, [...] the problem of cultural identity is both a terrible and passionate chaos of influences and religions. [...] We have never really achieved cultural freedom. [...] The lack of a firmly based perception of what we have and who we are comes out as a –sometimes exaggerated– low estimation of ourselves as a people. The reason for this is, I think, the lack of real education at every level – a considered educational process that would give us a revived and clear vision in the mirror of our self-perception, to help us discover who we actually are so that one day we can take our rightful place among the cultures of the world but which would above give us a starting point to relate to in our own cultural development.<sup>10</sup>

Restrepo believes that the artistic expression of a Colombian dancer must embody its millenary cultural heritage to give it a contemporary form; but he also considers that for this to be possible there are basic educational needs (technical education in dance, intellectual education) that should be met and opportunities that should be offered. In these early accounts of his work we are able to listen to an emerging voice that is already giving us a glimpse of his future pedagogical project.

Not all critics have praised Restrepo's work. Nadine Meisner certainly did not enjoy *The Night of the Ant*, but nevertheless left testimony of themes in the choreographer's work: "The piece evokes the origin and evolution of Colombia, from the creation myths of the Amazonian people to the arrival of African and Spanish cultures and on to the fusion and confusion of today."<sup>11</sup>

After numerous appearances on European stages and having won a 1992 Pegasus Preis in Hamburg Festival of Latin American Dance for his 1986 solo work *Rebis*, he returned to Colombia, and in 1994, with support from the French government, founded Academia Superior de Artes de Bogotá (ASAB), the country's first school of contemporary dance at university level. At this point he was already pairing with his future collaborator in ECdC, Marie France Delleuvin, who accepted his invitation to come to Colombia to give workshops and seminars for teachers and dancers. During her tenure as head of Centre National de Danse Contemporaine (CNDC) in Angers, France, she had invited Restrepo as guest choreographer in 1996 to set a piece for second-year students.<sup>12</sup>

#### *Stages of an Educational Project*

While in residency Restrepo must have been busy taking

note of pedagogical methodologies and structures needed to set up an environment for the study of dance, because in May 1997 he returned to Colombia to set up Proyecto El Puente (The Bridge Project), which in retrospect was really a preliminary phase. One year later we have news of the commencement of a second phase of ECdC as a "place where you not only study and learn but where you can also have time to act and reflect upon specific elements, in this case, the human body."<sup>13</sup>

Restrepo was concerned about talented prospective artists leaving the country, so he decided to offer opportunities for their development within the land. In 1999 the school was referred to as a non-profit organization with a revolutionary mission: "a project for the democratization of culture through the consolidation of the first performing arts high school in the country, with the purpose of educating economically and socially challenged children in the appreciation of the body as an instrument for the future construction of a peaceful nation."<sup>14</sup> The students were then --and are still, mostly-- sons and daughters of refugees of Colombia's internal war who have been displaced to disadvantaged neighborhoods around Cartagena's urban center.<sup>15</sup>

One of the first reviews of the school's performances describe the piece *Piadosos* as a "staged ritual about death, the need for transcendence and sacrality. A poetic meditation about the violence that lashes this country and the need for mourning in order to recover hope and the sacred meaning of life."<sup>16</sup> This theme speaks strongly about the connection between the work of art and the environment in which it was created. It speaks even more about the artists and their need to make of art, a social purpose carried out for their own benefit and that of the audience.

When good seeds are sown on fertile ground they give fruits fast. In the year 2000 John Otis, a dance writer from Houston, brought direct attention to the project by taking into account its uniqueness within the socio-economic conditions of a country where professional training in the arts is often not even available to the higher classes.<sup>17</sup> Some students in ECdC cannot even afford the 40-cent bus ride to go to the studio. The students come from shantytowns on the outskirts of Cartagena, where most of the youth spend their time in gangs. In contrast, in ECdC poor youth receive professional-level instruction in the art of modern dance. Classes are free but students have to commit to a discipline as huge as their talent. Naturally, the project benefits from the numerous influences present in the cultural heritages of its students, such as the African traditions still visibly present in the daily life of a city that was once the largest slave trade port in the Spanish colonies. Understanding the importance of these traditions has elevated the confidence and self-esteem of the young dancers, who perceive themselves as valuable precisely because of their cultural

heritage instead of despising themselves because of it. Restrepo's primary theme, of contemporary humans struggling between atavisms and modernity, continues to be present even through one of the courses offered at school, which covers the origins and forms of domestic violence. They study this phenomenon -- which many know first hand -- in order to empower the students as human beings and foster confidence in their teachers, so that they can fully commit to rehearsals and the discipline needed to forge world-class artists.<sup>18</sup>

In 2002 Restrepo and Delleuvin set up a company with 17 of the best students. Their participation in the international scene is documented in numerous articles from festivals in Peru, Brazil, Germany, France, and England. At this point the institution was widely recognized as "an oasis of hope in a violent sociopolitical scene. [...] In *The Soul of Things*, a dance built around an inventive, shamanic handling of objects, [...] the result felt like a creation of a new tribal myth."<sup>19</sup> The company continued to soar during these years, earning nominations from the national government to represent Colombia in mainstream international cultural events.

Restrepo was appointed director of the International Dance and Theater Festival in Hamburg, Germany for 2005 and 2006. This would mean even greater international exposure and possibilities for the school's company.<sup>20</sup> Numerous articles testify to the importance of the initiative and in 2006 ECdC received amazing news: it had been granted \$950,000 from the Japanese government through the World Bank in recognition of its labor and as a stimulus for future development.<sup>21</sup> In 2007 ECdC received another donation, this time from the Spanish International Cooperation Agency (AECI), with the purpose of constructing a site for the institution in land donated by Cartagena's City Hall. This will allow for several dreams of the school to crystallize, mainly to be able to commence work with children at an earlier age (in third or fourth grade). The company performed in Korea, Japan,<sup>22</sup> Italy and Israel<sup>23</sup> in 2008, and Mr. Restrepo was in residency at the University of Texas at Austin to teach and lecture on "how the arts can be used as a vehicle for exploring issues of human rights and racial justice."<sup>24</sup> This new bridge with the U.S. academic environment corroborates the visibility that the project acquired during a 2007 tour to New York and Washington D.C., and gained the company participation in the 2009 Grand Performances Festival in Los Angeles.<sup>25</sup>

The great number of bookings and tours designates the artistic success of the company, as well as a very efficient handling of sponsors and public relations based on an organized exposure and visibility campaign. ECdC works now "in two separate directions: education *for* dance to form dancers; and education *through* dance

so that youth begins to understand the body as a territory of peace."<sup>26</sup> Through both programs ECdC is educating individuals proud of themselves and their cultural heritage, who realize themselves through their work, and are positive agents in society and instruments of peace for a country long lost in a deep crisis of values. However, we should resist seeing ECdC solely as a social experiment. Instead we should consider these youth as what they are: talented human beings capable of overcoming their harsh reality by becoming prodigious dancers and artists who cannot be disregarded.

So, how does this brand of artistic education work in order to offer an alternative for these at risk youth? How has it made it possible to break the cycle of determinisms that equates poverty with failure? We can infer through a close reading of different articles -- and particularly from the authors' choices for the wording of their headings-- that the spirit of this pedagogical project has to do with reinvention of the self. This project is grounded on a radical stirring of the cultural elements that dwell within a person, put together to render a positive way of abiding in the world and overcoming socioeconomic hardships that would otherwise condition the students' lives.

Just as in Restrepo's earlier solo work, where the individual was split between tradition and renovation, through ECdC we witness a fight against the "loss of cultural memory as origin of the violence, cynicism, and madness we live in." "Restrepo fears the loss of the sacred value of human life"<sup>27</sup> and offers his protégés a method of reinvention of their reality through excellence in art. He believes that in a dance studio socio-economic differences disappear because each apprentice is confronted with their own body and its possibilities. Dance has offered a door to unimagined sensory worlds as well as physical ones through "scholarships, free lunches and the opportunity to travel to 56 children and young adults ranging in age from 10 to 27."<sup>28</sup> The cycle of poverty has been partially broken and the possibility to have upward mobility in the social scale through a redefinition of the students' identities has been set as a precedent.

Eduard Martinez, 19 recalled how shy and clumsy he was when he tried to join the academy years before, earning a quick rejection. But he continued to press Mr. Restrepo, and was finally accepted. Now, he is a force in the academy. 'I am not the same person I was,' he said. 'I discovered a new person inside of me, one that was hiding.'<sup>29</sup>

In another interview this same dancer said:

What is most impressive for me is that the work in contemporary dance helps you to know what you really

want for your life. It helps you to wake up the mind. Here I have been helped to discover who I am and they have taught me to make my own choices, how to listen and how to make others listen to me.<sup>30</sup>

Another dancer declared in 2003:

Arley Pérez, 17 remembers how his life was a complete mess due to domestic problems, particularly with his stepfather. 'I didn't know what to do with my time; I was hanging out in the street or with friends. [...] I looked for any excuse to be out of my house. That's why I tried dance and now I won't change it for nothing. This makes you change, shapes you and even makes your surroundings change.'<sup>31</sup>

For others dance has had therapeutic effects. Like Gina Mendoza, who Alvaro Restrepo recalls, "felt ugly, she had concentration problems and even was an insomniac. Now she has transformed into a *diva*." When interviewed she said, "once you are on stage all your emotions get stirred, tenderness, anger, sorrow. But at the same time you enjoy it!"<sup>32</sup> It could be said that dance cured the physical and spiritual wounds of these individuals. It has mended their identities and given them a purpose, that of the artist as creative conscience of a society. Through artistic education in dance these youngsters have internalized values that have changed their lives; the natural exercise of dance has compelled them to reach for concentration and self-esteem and recognize the advantages of teamwork.

Judith Butler dedicates her book *Gender Trouble* to understanding the means through which identity is defined. It is possible to extrapolate her ideas for the purpose of understanding how identity is reinvented in ECdC. Butler conceives the concept of gender as a reiteration of social acts rather than a mere channeling of determinisms;<sup>33</sup> she speaks about how gender is performatively defined. It might therefore be productive to equate gender identity to the general notion of identity and argue that the cultural identities of these dancers have been -- in this case very literally -- redefined performatively to the point where they have broken the circle of poverty through volitional reiterations of artistic acts. It is possible to equate these two concepts because in both cases the subject's identity has been stigmatized, oppressed, broken or damaged. The oppression of identity (in the context of a post-colonial nation such as Colombia) is analogous to the stigmatization of poverty.

Because individuals from ECdC voluntarily made the most of opportunities offered by Restrepo and Delleuvin, they demonstrate a particular strain of "agency" that coincides with Butler's notion: "The subject is not determined by the rules through which it is generated

[...] it is only within the practices of repetitive signifying that a subversion of identity becomes possible."<sup>34</sup> If, as Butler claims, "the body *is* a historical situation [...] and a manner of doing, dramatizing and *reproducing* a historical situation,"<sup>35</sup> through the body ECdC has found a way to break the reproductivity prescribed by historical convention, by reconstructing it through an education designed to contest and subvert the surrounding *status quo*. In other words, these individuals can no longer be overlooked by a society that despises poverty, precisely because their artistic results are of prime quality. This institution of dance education has understood the logic of a very stratified society and has reversed it. To a society that embraces everything that comes from abroad, ECdC has answered with very favorable reviews from all corners of the world. To a society that despises poverty, ECdC has proven that, given the right opportunities, individuals can overcome the historical underdevelopment predetermined for them.

We could say, in Butler's terms that these newly constituted identities are "neither fatally determined nor fully artificial and arbitrary."<sup>36</sup> These personalities have been reconstituted toward positive objectives and as such pose an example of the political implications of artistic education. The dancers, students and teachers in ECdC have been constantly subverting their given circumstances as they have engaged the purpose of redefining their reality. They have gone as far as to invoke a new definition of wealth based on the body as an instrument for peace and dignity. In this way the division between body and mind is blurred because even in the midst of poverty these children know now that they *are* a body, a being worthy of growth and development who recognizes their own creativity.<sup>37</sup> This project assumes that social reintegration and reconstruction of the social tissue is possible through the recognition of "the other" as equally valuable as the self. The "best dancers soon approach world-class status, but an equally important goal is convincing them that the poor are as good as the rich and that art and spirituality are more important than material wealth. [The directors declared that] Our biggest achievement is to demonstrate [...] that no matter what their background, what our kids need are opportunities."<sup>38</sup>

The directors have christened their proposal "Integral Corporeal Education: a new ethic of the human body."<sup>39</sup> For a young refugee, the body is a locus of shame. The majority have seen murders and many have been raped. In Colombia both left- and right-wing guerrillas control the population through their bodies, through rules of fashion and posture, and the traces of this repression scar the body. In the countryside a proud spine or a flirtatious miniskirt invite death -- especially for girls. Dance liberates the body from these scars. The body becomes a sacred and joyful

place instead of a locus of repression, and pride can again show itself in the neck and spine. The Colegio has discovered that ‘venting’ and therapy do not work half as well as sublimating sadness in the joy of dance. Though it did not intend to work with families, the Colegio has discovered that parents gain as much from the experience as their children. When they see the smiles on the faces of their children, parents forget that they distrusted something as ‘frivolous’ as dance, and they begin to take pride in the successes of their children. Equally important, when the kids dance at a prestigious event, the parents are received with respect, and they learn that they deserve respect.<sup>40</sup>

### *Limitations*

Using dance to improve the lives of impoverished youths means also “tackling daunting problems such as sexual abuse and child prostitution that social workers say are rampant in Cartagena.”<sup>41</sup> In this stage of the study it is impossible to properly address gender issues; it would require another visit to the institution to conduct personal interviews and compile testimonials such as this: Gina Mendoza, 14, described Colombia as a sexist society that pressures women to look like Playboy bunnies. For her, dancing is a more dignified way to display her physical prowess.<sup>42</sup>

Recently, the institution has been affected by a decrease in female participation, and they have encountered difficulty keeping female dancers in the company ranks. I have observed and confirmed that the size of the male population exceeds that of the women. I think the directors have done a good job in maintaining gender balance in the company, but it seems that in spite of ECdC offering a very good life option, not all problems can be solved and not all of reality can be reinvented through artistic education.

In Colombia’s lower social classes, females seem to “face resistance from parents because the traditional role of impoverished girls in Colombia is to do housework and care for siblings,”<sup>43</sup> so they are forced to reach adulthood faster than males, or end up getting pregnant and retiring from ECdC.<sup>44</sup> This seems to be in direct relation to the class origin of children who overcame community and family prejudices for whom dance is a relatively unknown and doubtfully virile activity.<sup>45</sup> In contrast, if the school addressed the wealthy classes, it would not have as much adhesion, particularly from men, as dance is not considered within this social group to be manly enough or to be a serious business.<sup>46</sup>

Restrepo also encountered opposition from some parents because of gender and cultural issues. In Colombia’s macho society, it is culturally acceptable for men to dance at parties, but it’s generally not considered

an appropriate career. “Contemporary dance encourages the development of sensitivity, and boys in this culture are taught they shouldn’t be sensitive,” said May Posse, a teacher at the academy.<sup>47</sup>

I hope to be able to properly complete this study in the future, as well as to undertake the study of other similar projects in Colombia and other regions of the world that have been affected by similar types of armed conflicts.

### *Conclusion*

The forging of individuals’ cultural identity is at the heart of their perception of their own decency and freedom. The educational processes of these dancers have been so coherent that it has been acknowledged domestically and internationally as the political stance that dancers have in order to depict themselves culturally. Members of this institution have been proactive in taking responsibility for producing their own cultural image instead of allowing others to define that image for them. These people have fought to be independent, vigorous and equal members of their society; it is a matter of utmost importance for the Colombian democracy (and for countries undergoing similar conflicts), because the whole of society will reap the benefits of having citizens who have been empowered through an education for the production of culture.

Marginalized groups have been maintained as such mainly because someone else usurps their right to produce their own cultural referent. Scholars write about racial minorities, journalists report on immigrants, statistics account for poverty, and so on. In this case, marginalized individuals have engaged in the process of producing their own cultural image so that no one else draws a distorted one. This has been done through education of the mind, the spirit, heart and body: the whole being. The results of this initiative are not shortsighted but rather will render their fruits when at least a generation has gone through the process of reinventing and therefore owning their culture.

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**Marcelo Rueda, BA, MFA**, between 2004 and 2006 received Fulbright grants to study technique and choreography in New York and was invited for the *Missa Brevis* revival project by José Limón Dance Company. In 2007 he was selected by UNESCO as artist-in-residence to develop his own choreography in India. He has danced in international festivals in Colombia, Mexico, Venezuela, Dominican Republic, Switzerland, India and USA. He has been teaching dance professionally to actors and dancers from universities and high schools since 1998. Ruido completed his MFA at Temple University where he received the Rose Vernick Choreographic Achievement Award and is currently Assistant Professor at Javeriana University in Bogotá, Colombia.

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