

Corporeal Histories: An Interview with Myra Beltran on *Itim Asu: 1719-2011*

Patrick F. Campos

University of the Philippines Diliman

Governor General of the Philippines from 1717 to 1719, Fernando Manuel de Bustillo Bustamante y Rueda, was assassinated at the Palacio del Gobernador on October 1719 by a mob of religious fanatics (Blair & Robertson, 1906). Until today, exactly who killed Bustamante is contested, although Felix Resurreccion Hidalgo's *The Assassination of Governor Bustamante* (undated) depicts the fall of Bustamante in the hands of Dominican priests.¹ Did priests kill Bustamante? It is uncertain, although the power of magnificent art has perpetuated a devastating viewpoint.

This historical moment, however, has not been the only narrative of this juncture shrouded in uncertainty. Before World War II, a novel, *La Loba Negra*, first attributed to Jose Burgos, was “discovered” (Burgos, 1970; cf. Schumacher, 1991). It depicted a mysterious she-wolf, the widow of the Governor General, who goes out into the night murdering the friars who have killed her husband.

Who is this she-wolf? In the late 1960s, poet and playwright Virginia Moreno wrote a play about this femme fatale, which mixes myth and history. *Itim Asu* (a.k.a. *Onyx Wolf*) won in a literary contest organized by the Cultural Center of the Philippines (CCP) in 1970, at the time of the rule of the Marcoses (cf. Moreno, 1971). It was subsequently adapted for ballet by Alice Reyes and set to stage in 1973, during Martial Law. Eventually, the authenticity of *La Loba Negra*, the source-text of Moreno, as a novel by Burgos, has been called into question and concluded to be a hoax perpetrated by Jose E. Marco (cf. Lim, 1970; Schumacher, 1991).²

In this interview with dancer-choreographer Myra Beltran, conducted in March and May of 2012, she discusses how she adapted *Itim Asu* for dance in 2009 and 2011 and how her choreographic process corporeally and metahistorically problematized questions on historical narrative and historiography.

Last 2012, Beltran celebrated her 21st year as an independent dance artist and the 15th year of her studio, Dance Forum. She and her Dance Forum have come to pioneer independent contemporary dance, which is a movement away from the strictures of theater and ballet, in favor of more

intimate performances in alternative spaces. Beltran has also led the World Dance Alliance-Philippines Choreographers' Network and has come up with the groundbreaking "Contemporary Dance Map Series" (2005), paving the way for the establishment of the annual independent contemporary dance festival, "Wifi Body," held at the Cultural Center of the Philippines. For her efforts, she has received the National Commission for Culture and the Arts' "Gawad ng Alab ng Haraya," and her Dance Forum was hailed as the best dance group at the Aliw Awards in 2001.

Figure 1. Myra Beltran.

Photo courtesy of Ruelo Lozendo. Used with permission.



PATRICK F. CAMPOS (PFC): Why Virginia R. Moreno's *Itim Asu*? What is with this theatrical work that you would say is compatible with your own work as a dancer-choreographer?

MYRA BELTRAN (MB): My so-called experimental choreographic work was borne out of material circumstances, from my questions as to what dance meant in Philippine society and as to how a dance artist could continue her practice while living in the Philippines.

This kind of questioning gave rise to my creative practice that deals with only a minimal number of dancers or, in many cases, with more solo work centered on my own body. Pursuit of the questions gave rise to a minimalist aesthetic, one that was not dependent on the theater machinery but an aesthetic

that was suited to studio-theaters and alternative performing spaces. My practice has been, thus, a rejection of the rules or codes of the proscenium stage and its expectations. My work progressively became intimate pieces, embodying the feminist maxim: “The personal is political.”

The practice of contemporary independent dance in this country, more or less, grows out of such material circumstances. My colleagues – whose works I have been producing through our contemporary dance festivals and other initiatives by my studio – have evolved the same aesthetics. Choreographies have concentrated on the personal, and, soon after, our work has been labeled as “indulgent,” for focusing on personal experiences, as if our dance were not dealing with more “serious” stuff.

But at a certain point in my career, when my body was strong enough, I wanted to embrace what I had previously somewhat rejected. In my own version of *Itim Asu*, I have purposefully invoked the modernist frame used by Alice Reyes, at the same time as I worked out my own views on contemporary dance. With *Itim Asu*, I wanted to do everything – I wanted to do a work that was historical (as opposed to only personal), engage the vocabulary of contemporary dance in a dialogue with modern dance, and test my knowledge of the formal proscenium stage, combined with my insights on choreographing movements for intimate and alternative spaces.

I wanted to make the audience aware of what contemporary dance is and what it is capable of. For me, contemporary dance is not just a style of moving; it is a way of viewing things. Moreno’s drama was startling in that it was so capable of being “modernist;” at the same time, for us now, it could actually be more “postmodern.” How to render this had been my task and the main attraction for making my own version.

Figure 2. The ensemble consisted of performers from the U.P. Dance Company. Photo courtesy of Fatima M. Centeno. Used with permission.



PFC: Describe the circumstances that led to your decision to adapt the material for dance.

MB: Around 2003, women artists convened to discuss the celebrations for the Women's Centennial. Senator Leticia Shahani wanted to restage *Itim Asu*, but there was no budget for it. At that time I adapted for dance Virginia Moreno's poem, "Order for Masks." It was a precious work for me, which a lot of people, including the poet herself, loved.

In 2005, Denisa Reyes, the sister of Alice [Reyes], who had seen my adaptation of "Order for Masks", gave me the published version of *Itim Asu*, which Alice herself had bequeathed to her sister. Denisa said, "You should do this." It seemed that it was fated, since, when I told Tita Virgie [Moreno] my thoughts on doing the play, she said, "Finally." Soon after, I wrote a critical paper on *Itim Asu* and, subsequently, on Moreno's "Indio Spoliarium." I knew, at that point, that I was ready to adapt *Itim Asu* into dance.

PFC: The original *Itim Asu* by Moreno is a historical play. How does your own work anchor on or depart from the original work? Why did you decide to frame your version metahistorically, problematizing historiography itself?

MB: I found Ms. Moreno's play so contemporary – a play on frames, a play on fiction that blurs the reality in the play, a play within a play. I knew that the material's play on framing which conceptualized a view of history could also help me frame the version of Reyes, thereby giving my work its own unique place. The material allowed me to meditate on the history of the versions of the dance, which means I could also touch on dance history. Thus, I mimicked Moreno's approach to framing history, which frames my own work within dance history.

My adaptation is about history *and* about dance history, at the same time. In this way, I hoped to "insert" myself and my dancers and the entire contemporary dance community of my generation in the work, as a living, current, and corporeal history. The title of my adaptation [when it was first performed] became *Itim Asu: 1719-2009*, emphasizing the reality of temporal history in the dance. This not only distinguishes my work from that of Reyes, but it also comments on Moreno's epic timeline of 1719-1902 in her *Itim Asu*, a performance which made history in the 1970s. I purposefully stretched my own timeline.

In my recent restaging, it was again retitled *Itim Asu: 1719-2011*. Each time we restage it, I always tell my dancers that it is up to them to make the work current, by incorporating their own personal histories, summoning everything about who they are up to that point and creating history each time. That is dance, isn't it? My dancers and I, our bodies, are the storytellers of history. The performance is told from the dancers' onstage point-of-view. They look out to history. In the end, they look back at the audience, who are looking in on history. All of us, dancers and spectators, at that moment, are participants of history.

In my version, I acknowledge the controversies present in the text – that *La Loba Negra*, which is the basis for Moreno's *Itim Asu*, is a hoax. I historicize Moreno further by acknowledging the forgery in my work. Apparently, Tita Virgie and I share the same view on history and myth and how we make sense of our history as a people. In my work, I make apparent that the audience is participating in the performance and that, therefore, they themselves are complicit in the making of the work. This means that though I acknowledge the controversies surrounding the text, what I am foregrounding is the body's performance of history, unfolding before an audience at a given moment. This is what I share with the performative aspect of Moreno's work vis-à-vis historiography.

PFC: Dance is a sensual art. The body and motion are at the center of dance's essence. How do these ideas distinguish your version from Moreno's literary and theatrical play?

MB: In my critical writing on the history of the material, I realized that, instead of the radical play by Moreno, most people remember *Itim Asu* as a dance performance, choreographed by Reyes and performed during martial rule at the Cultural Center of the Philippines, by the Ballet Philippines Repertoire (then the CCP Dance Company).

So a rather subversive element was slipping away within the halls of power under martial rule. What interests me is that dance is radical and subversive and subtly political. Dance is so much like the character and historical figure, Itim Asu, a Foucauldian “indecent body,” lying at the edge of discourse, looming over the surface, and reconfiguring the terms of the discourse on power and history. This is for me precisely the potential of dance. Dance is radical – and this is why it is marginal. And this aspect of dance was what I sought to put back in my choreography.

PFC: There is a scene which begins with the voice-over that relates the story of Itim Asu, the reference to the spurious *La Loba Negra* of Burgos, and, finally, to Jose Rizal's *El Filibusterismo*. Then we become privy to Rizal's thoughts, as expressed in his letter, about *Noli me Tangere* and about writing *El Filibusterismo*. The thought process of Rizal was "physicalized" by these somewhat twin dancers – or Rizal who is of two minds, whose body is struggling with himself.

MB: This is the shift in perspective of Scene Three. In this particular scene, I was venturing to textualize my own reading of Moreno's play. In this scene, I am shifting points of view: from the present – and the debate about the spuriousness of *La Loba Negra* – to the 1800s of Rizal. I am contextualizing Moreno's work and my particular version of it. For me, the important thing about Moreno's drama is how she strings together events, from Rajah Sulaiman, to the 1719 of Bustamante, to Rizal, to Huseng Batute in the early 1900s. Her drama was, meanwhile, evocative of the period of the First Quarter Storm of the 1970s. This is its great time arc.

In the particular dance you are referring to, the text announces that *La Loba Negra* is spurious, but, at the same time, that it was generated at a particular historical time. In the 1970s, this question of forgery did not yet exist. So, now, in my rereading and choreographing of *Itim Asu*, I inevitably took my own position regarding the forgery – and my view is that there are too many erasures in Philippine history. More importantly, for Moreno and for me, even if *La Loba Negra* was forged, what does it matter? What is important to convey is how we view history, how we have made sense of history at present. Art enables us to have this kind of discourse. As an artist, this is what I have hoped to achieve by creating this work.

In her foreword to the published *Itim Asu*, Moreno writes, "The race needs mute women for the long wail." I take this to mean that, for her, Philippine history is one of struggle, of "mutedness," because of the erasures. Her "long wail" is her play. She is part of that history. I wanted to be part of that history myself, thus, I did this work.

This idea of an energy erupting at important points in history, of energy lodged in artists (Burgos as writer, Rizal, Luna, Hidalgo, Huseng Batute), who channel it at various historical moments, is particularly attractive to me as a contemporary dance artist, living and working in the Philippines – this idea of self-struggle in an art-form that is mute and, therefore, marginal. The dancers are also marginalized, yet, also, revolutionary, because dance, as an art form, can be a most potent carrier of energy. Its subversiveness and, for me, its meaningfulness, lie here – all the more because it is shared, directly and bodily, by the dancers and their audience.

Therefore, this is my humble contribution. The process is the contribution. The process is my visibility and my “mute wail.”

PFC: Before Bustamante gets assassinated, we see him and his wife in a kind of domestic bliss. Later, after he gets killed, we witness this very sad “last dance,” the woman haunted by the deep sadness in the bodily form of Bustamante. Itim Asu here seems ghostly as well, however, like she is haunting her dead husband.

MB: In conceptualizing my version, I was attracted to Moreno’s blurring of fiction and reality.

I had to be very clear who was bodily narrating what, from whose point of view, with whose voice. This is a narratological frame of mind that I use to enter choreography.

First of all, the duets are narrated from the point of view of Itim Asu. She is the one telling her story. It is she who initiates the movement, and Bustamante is relatively passive. In the first “blissful” duet, Bustamante has his back turned to the audience. She intrudes into his busy life. The political forces remain outside of their relationship. This aspect of romance is not in Moreno, but is an allusion to Reyes’ adaptation of Moreno. I invoke this aspect of romance, because, as a choreographer, as a dancer, and as a woman, it makes history more personal.

Figure 3. The start of *Itim Asu: 1719-2011* intimates a gaze within a gaze.

Projected images by Sherad Sanchez.

Photo courtesy of Fatima M. Centeno. Used with permission.



The second duet, in which Itim Asu and Bustamante are joined by other lovers, is also initiated by Itim Asu. This time, the duet contextualizes the tragedy of historical erasure, signified by the text projected onscreen at the end, which reads: “The murder of Gov. Gen. Bustamante ‘lapsed into the perpetual silence of the archives of the Royal Audiencia of Manila.’” This is partly a quote from Ninotchka Rosca. There is now more historical distance and more self-reflexivity in the second duet, but, at the same time, this is Itim Asu’s own act of remembering.

In terms of movement, she is always seemingly falling, but the male figure, Bustamante, as some sort of shadow or presence, always catches her. They do not look into each other, since they are now worlds apart. There is only sensation, contact, contact with a lot of care, and very carefully timed. It is a tactile conversation between the two, full of sorrow and romance.

The second duet ends with other people coming in pairs to dance their own duets. I entitled this part “Martyrs and Lovers,” because these relationships are always in history. Notice that the other dancers come in contemporary clothing. In a way, you might call this a “filmic” strategy, used choreographically.

I allude to Reyes’ “romantic” choreography in these two duets, but, while she uses the romance to delve into Itim Asu’s psychology, I use it to articulate memory in history, without necessarily suggesting that it is an ongoing reality happening onstage. I think this notion of romantic love, of lovers, and of love for one’s country always intersect. The idea of martyrs and their lovers (or great loves) are like roses strewn all over history.

Figure 4. The ensemble represents today’s generation, looking back to the past, the first frame in the frame-within-the-frames. Photo courtesy of Fatima M. Centeno. Used with permission.



PFC: The closing of the dance is your spatialization, physicalization, of time, of history. The voice-over first situates us in the narrative of Rizal. And then the sound design by Teresa Barrozo leads us through different junctures in Philippine history, while the film in the rear by Sherad Sanchez contrapuntally situates us at the center of things mundane. Eventually, bodies begin to fall, pulled down by gravity. How did you conceive this long scene?

MB: The last scene is the episode of Paulita's wedding from *El Filibusterismo*, which in Moreno's *Itim Asu* is the final play-within-the-play. It is in this scene where Moreno makes her statement about history – the blurring of fiction and reality, the long arc of time in her conceptualization of history, her attempt to transgress the boundaries of art and reality, even as her own play violates its own boundaries – all of these are doubles, boxes within boxes, boundaries crossed.

This scene, for me, is the final film-within-the-dance. In Scene 2, the dancers are shown watching a film production; there is a clapper that signifies it's 1719. Initially, I was thinking of rewinding the projected images onscreen, like the shot had gone wrong. But this relationship of the screen to the dance was not consistent with the piece. I had to find another way to render this idea theatrically as a choreographer and not to rely on the background video. So we see instead Paulita's wedding rendered rather absurdly – everyone is sitting down; there is excess.

This performance, in other words, could have been a film shoot all along. The screen shows three camera takes, signifying the blurring of fiction and reality: Bustamante has become Rizal, and *Itim Asu* now makes her appearance. Soon after, there is chaos as *Itim Asu* wields her power, and friars/mannequins start falling all over the place. We are now back to our present – we are constructing this view of history, and the artists and the audience are complicit, together they are constructing this piece. This is our collective “looking-back.”

The sound design of this scene, which uses the radio address of Col. Wainwright, as the American troops pull out of the Philippines to acquiesce to Japanese military authority, is important. When I heard the clip from the audio selections included in Dr. Elizabeth Enriquez's book [2008, *Appropriation of Colonial Broadcasting*], I cried because it felt lonely – this announcement of Col. Wainwright to the Filipino people that the Americans were bailing out. The sound clip suggested that our country needed to fend for itself on its own. The last sound clip is sobering, self-reflexive, and does not pretend to be a comfortable ending.

The last dance was a synthesis, a bringing-together of a lot of the thematic movements to give the entire piece, movement-wise, a kind of structure, of recall, and then of closure.

Choreographing endings are always revelations to me of my own choreographic process – of what stands out of the movement-phrases I have crafted, while the whole process of choreography continually evolves and we try to flesh out the piece movement by movement. I think it is also liberating for the dancers, for them to close the piece bodily. I included the meaningful movements that the dancers were making. The last dance, therefore, is a summation of the dancers' energies offered to me, composed in a certain way. Some of the parts in the earlier scenes were their own dance improvisations; I included those, since I wanted the work to be theirs too – they are part of the history we were creating together, after all. So whenever they perform this piece, you can see that it means something different to them each time. And this is the magic of dance – when the dancers have owned the work and made it theirs. It is not mine anymore. When this happens, it is magical.

End Notes

¹ Ninotchka Rosca (1978) chronicles the events surrounding the assassination of the Governor General in “Gothic Death of a Governor,” in which she concludes that Bustamante was “an odd footnote in the colonial history of the Philippines. A tragic figure in colonial politics and religion” (p. 1242). She adds, however, that the death was redeemed by two works of art based on the assassination: the painting of Hidalgo, which she describes as “the most chilling scene of murder in art (p. 1242), and the novel, *La Loba Negra*, attributed to Jose Burgos.

² The authenticity of the novel, initially circulated in 1938, was already cast in doubt by the accompanying notes of historian Teodoro A. Agoncillo to the 1970 English translation of the same novel by Hilario A. Lim. Lim, in his preface to this translation, remarks, “...if [Jose Marco] concocted the work and passed it off as Burgos’ then he was more liberal and perceptive than Burgos and Rizal” (p. v). Historian John Schumacher, in an essay in *Philippine Studies* 18, from the same year, also set out to demonstrate that *La Loba Negra*, among others, was a forgery. His essay was revised and published as “The Authenticity of the Writings Attributed to Father Jose Burgos” in his book, *The Making of a Nation*.

References

- Blair, E.H., & Robertson, J.A. (Eds.). (1906). The government and death of Bustamante. In *The Philippine Islands, 1493-1898: Vol. 44. 1700-1736* (pp. 148-195). (CD-ROM, 2000 edition produced by the Bank of the Philippine Islands.)
- Burgos, J.A. (1970). In T. Agoncillo (Ed.), *Jose A. Burgos, La Loba Negra (The Black She-wolf)*, (pp. iv-v). (H.A. Lim, Trans.). Quezon City: Malaya Books.
- Enriquez, E.L. (2008). *Appropriation of colonial broadcasting: A history of early radio in the Philippines, 1922-1946*. Quezon City: University of the Philippines Press.
- Lim, H.A. (1970). Preface. In T. Agoncillo (Ed.), *Jose A. Burgos, La Loba Negra (The Black She-Wolf)*, (pp. iv-v). (H.A. Lim, Trans.). Quezon City: Malaya Books.
- Moreno, V. R. (1971). *Itim Asu: Isang dulang Tagalog na may tatlong yugto*. Quezon City: Sentro ng Pagtuturo ng Agham, Pamantasan ng Pilipinas.
- Rosca, N. (1978). Gothic death of a governor. In A.R. Roces (Editor-in-chief), *Filipino heritage: The making of a nation: Vol. 5: The Spanish colonial period (17th/ 18th centuries) Bajo las campanas* (pp. 1240-1242). Manila: Lahing Pilipino Publishing.
- Schumacher, J.N. (1991). The authenticity of the writings attributed to Father Jose Burgos. In *The making of a nation: Essays on nineteenth-century Filipino nationalism* (pp. 44-70). Quezon City: Ateneo de Manila University Press.

Patrick F. Campos <patrick.campos@gmail.com> is a film and literary scholar and a faculty member of the University of the Philippines Film Institute. He is currently the Director of the Office of Extension and External Relations of the U.P. College of Mass Communication.