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Of Identity and Other Mere Feelings: An Interview with Josefina Báez

Translated from Spanish by **Madeline Nelson**

Josefina Báez is a contemporary performer, founder and director of the Ay Ombe Theatre. She is the author of several texts, the most recognized of which are *Dominicanish* (2000) and her latest, *Comrade, Bliss Ain't Playing* (2008). Báez's works accentuate the diasporic condition of Dominicans in the United States. Known as a Dominicanyork artist, she addresses issues of hybridity through performance texts that explore the particularities of her Dominicanness, race and creativity. Through her artistic methodology, *The Anthology of Performance,* the autobiographical is not just a personal reference, it becomes a process, a technique, that mixes popular culture, literature, theatre, music, spirituality and the socioeconomic reality of the actor or actress that exerts it. The following conversation is an edited transcription of a recorded interview Báez completed on October 26, 2012, while attending the International Conference on *Diasporas and Race* at Wake Forest University, North Carolina, USA.

KB: Josefina, this interview, for me, is an opportunity to get to know you better, and in the process of getting to know you, learn a little more about myself.

JB: hmmm

KB: Sometimes working in places where one has no interaction with his or her own people can be very solitary. And one's own cultural conversation… it's as if it were to shut down. So one turns to books, to different mediums in order to try to keep it current and alive. I am therefore going to ask you questions in order to get to know you and your work… also to be able to expand, a bit more, my own intellectual world which is my work.

KB: Ok, let's start with the first question. Tell me about your life in the Dominican Republic.

JB: Do you want it in Spanish or English?

KB: We'll do it in Spanish and English, if it doesn't matter to you. I believe I'll flow better in Spanglish.

JB: In Spanglish, perfect.

KB: As I said, tell me a little bit more about your life in the Dominican Republic, your pre-diasporic life, your childhood in La Romana.

JB: I was born in La Romana. I believe that I was raised in a *Romana conscience* at all times. So, I came in 1972, I was twelve years old. I was a typical little Dominican girl, working class, mother a widow, and my father died when I was one. A typical picture of the working class. Being the last, I had the opportunity to go to very good schools. That… is very important for the working class – you know? To give their children a good education. So I arrived in New York in 1972, and there wasn't a huge transition because for a little girl what is important is that you are with your family. It's not that there was a New York and a Dominican Republic. I was with my family here and I was with my family there. So I didn't see it as a big deal, being in *another country*, or anything like that. Although, of course, we cooked the same as in La Romana, but that type of thing tasted different. But in truth, talking about this from the perspective of a diasporic childhood – would be like pulling teeth. But, yes, I believe that what gives you security at that age is family, my mother, my brothers. Then that's what I had.

KB: When you arrived here, where did you live?

JB: In Manhattan, at 109th and 107th street, Central Park.

KB: How was your introduction to the education system in the United States? Did you go to a school where you took bilingual classes?

JB: Bilingual classes for a very short time and, afterward, immersion. I went back to the Dominican Republic to finish eighth grade, because according to my mom and my family, it was important… to solidify my Spanish, and eighth grade was very important there. They told me they were going to teach me very well there, and it was true.

KB: Oh yes, very good.

JB: Yes. So…at that time I already had more of an awareness of… not the literature, but the grammar. That experience was very, very important for me.

KB: Did you always communicate in Spanish at home?

JB: At home, yes. With my brothers no, but… yes, in my house I had to speak Spanish.

KB: When did you arrive in the United States? Tell me, how was that transition of leaving the Dominican Republic and arriving in the United States. How did you

see it from your point of a view as a little girl, this new reality? Very different from Santo Domingo?

JB: In my house we lived as if we were in La Romana. In school I lived the little moments that I experienced outside… so I lived this other thing. And I saw that the little girls, they all looked like me. And I told myself, look how strangely they speak, they speak their English. But they all looked like me, and I did not see much of a difference. I remember vividly… we arrived in November and my brother, Gogy, took me to Central Park and said to me, "Breathe." So he says to me, "You're smoking so young!" And I, *Me? No! I'm not smoking!* It was only because it was so cold. That for me was like *wow*. Those little every day things, you know? At that time it snowed a lot, so I went to school with snow up to my knees, with long socks, with hair buns… I don't know. My mom didn't accept things like pajama parties, sleepovers…. So I was a very odd kid in the school, in the group, but there were other girls who were going through the same thing. Recently we have found each other and we laugh a lot about those times.

KB: Perfect. When did you begin to write? Why and for whom?

JB: I've been writing since La Romana. I wrote stories, because at the school I went to… it had a good program that did not focus specifically on literature, but it gave me quite a good base. So, yes, I wrote stories, I liked to write unusual stories… stories where I imagined the priest or the nun, I don't know, doing everything. A little disorganized, no? Or the teacher that bothered me, well, I imagined her in the bathroom, you know? It was games like these. So there were a few contests at school for the day of Duarte… and that type of thing I liked. I wrote a lot of bad poetry, and now I have seen it and oh, how horrible. I had a period when I believed I had to write the *Mio Cid*. It was… as if I looked to write an epic poem…. Now I've found…those shoeboxes where I put my texts and… I have laughed a lot… about those beginnings… with things that are valid.

KB: Of course, of course.

JB: I always wrote… like all young girls, you know? Like a secret journal, writing things that one believes no one else thinks… before I came here I passed by the first library I went to in New York, on 100th street, in my Judy Bloom era and all of that type of thing that… I read as a little girl. At that time, I had people that invited me to read... more than write. And that was very, very beautiful.

KB: Great.

JB: It wasn't like I thought of being a writer, or anything like that. I went along with it. It is interesting that now writing is my way of life. It's not something separate.

KB: Sure, a continuation of your being.

JB: Yes. Exactly, of everything. It flows… my being flows.

KB: Which of the Dominican diasporic writers attracts you more? And why?

JB: That's very difficult, you know? Because last night[1] I started to talk about what we have… different leagues, in which everyone works. So…I don't know if someone who I like considers him or herself part of a diaspora. I don't know, like, Norberto James.

KB: Well, what is diaspora for you?

JB: For me, Norberto James' work is formative and he lives here in the United States… . I don't know if he considers himself part of a diaspora, but for me he is vital. Vital vital vital. I like the word *diaspora*. I like it because many people criticize it. I like it because it isn't accepted. I like it because… it is what one wants to call him or herself, like immigrant.

KB: What do you see the people criticizing about the diaspora? How do you see people understanding diaspora versus what you understand?

JB: I was in the Dominican Republic and… they were interviewing me… someone… said to me, "You are using the wrong word". And she began to look for the definition of the word *diaspora*. You can find me all the dictionaries. What I want to call myself depends on me. Whether it is accepted or not, in the canon of the Royal Academy. In other words, what I want to call myself. It's my name.

KB: The words are alive. They evolve…

JB: Exactly, exactly. So yes I like it, I like it… I belong to the diaspora… that has to do with a league. The people that create it are from a working class. I belong to the people that come from there, and so my league, quote unquote, is small. It has to do with a limited resource… with a community. The people that are from my class are not going to see my things. Possibly because… they prefer… an expression that comes more from the Dominican Republic. This is what… is always done… and is normal. The comedians come from the Dominican Republic, the musicians come, and the writers come from the Dominican Republic. So that is a league. It is very interesting that my class, the one I belong to here and there… here it is closely linked to the literary work of the Dominican Republic. And they write mainly in Spanish, so… what writer excites me… attracts me… there are many layers. I read a lot of poetry. I like the genre a lot! Of course… what comes from the Dominicans… I am going to read it… because of solidarity… and because I

[1] Báez read and acted out her long poem, *Comrade, Bliss ain't playing,* as part of a plenary session for the international conference on *Diasporas and 'Race'* at Wake Forest University (25-27 October, 2012).

learn a lot about how we all weave the same topic. I don't know, the case of Junot is vital for me. It's vital because I like how he weaves. I like the use of his… topics. How he addresses it, his form of organizing his thoughts… to me it seems brilliant. So… it is another league. You know I have the great blessing of him having taken his time to read my text, and I know that he does not have the time and that in that league there are other requirements, you know?

KB: James. Why James? Why does this author attract you so much?

JB: It's that he's similar to me; he is one of the first poets that I read in the Dominican Republic. I believe that his poem, "The Immigrant", is the poem that breaks me and shapes me the most. Look, saying it… it makes me like this… [pointing at goosebumps on her skin]. It breaks me, it breaks me. I don't believe that I've said it to him sufficiently, how important it is. I had the great joy of reading with him at the same table in England… and I was behaving like a total groupee. At a table of Dominicans, this man, Nestor and I. And when James reads his poem I start to cry, and then it's my turn, and the people look at me as if I'm doing something wrong, you know? And I was like… no, let me cry, it's my turn, I am going to read, but let me cry, don't control me. And I heard him say, "That's my wingman". For me it is formative, his work is formative and it continues being very vital.

KB: How, from your point of view, do the Dominican readers receive him and his work?

JB: Oh I don't know… I have no idea, no idea. No, I can't talk much about anything or anyone. I spend a lot of time in tiny things, if I get involved in that… mmm… I don't have a lot of time to do a lot of things, and it would also be injust. I have no idea.

KB: Let's see…

JB: I believe I missed something in the question you asked me.

KB: I think you answered it. Are you referring to which diasporic authors you read? We are going to return to this because these questions keep resurfacing. As readers, we know what Josefina Báez says about her characters. Right? What would the character "La Kay" highlight about Josefina Báez if she were the writer?

JB: Well, precisely, that character has a blog, and in that blog, she talks about me. So I am called the biologist of the keyboard; she has a piece of the biology, and wow! When the keyboard biologist, I, am traveling and I am in remote places where I can't access the blog… "La Kay" complains and says: "Ahh because she is an artist, the biologist…". We always have some problems and I, [referring to

what she says to "La Kay"] *Please stop being a Levente*[2] [laughs]. This character, who we made a blog for before publishing the book, has continued because she has to continue her life instead of being confined to the same book.

[2] A person who can be lazy, witty, and bold.

KB: And a lot of people read the blog?

JB: We have more than twenty thousand people that read the blog.

KB: Interesting!

JB: Yes, it is interesting how the people react because the character, "La Kay," doesn't filter. She says something, it has a stimulus and she reacts, reacts, reacts. So that has been quite interesting to work with that. "La Kay" has within the piece the different forms of thinking about the people that I know, my people. Let's say, for example, the topic of the economy, politics, the Dominican-Haitian topic, there are people that disagree, but everyone lives in "El Nie"[3], and that part has rooted me and has taught me to work more with differences. [Laughs]. "La Kay" is some "character" [Laughs].

[3] The perineum.

KB: This language that you expose, the colloquial, daily life, is in itself an artistic medium. Spanglish is a clear element of that reality. Is this only an instrument of your work or does it have another importance for you?

JB: Oral history. I come from a family, I imagine that all of the working class families are like this, where orality is very strong, here there is literature that isn't written down, where it is learned and communicated with different layers, because of that orality. So for me, perhaps in my work that's the base, but every job of mine exudes it in a different form. *Bliss* has that also, but it is exuding beauty or is working in silence, but it comes from that base because that base is I, I am that base of oral history, I am that base of the working class.

KB: So that working class, already being here in the United States, is transformed into a reality of transition in which these two languages balance themselves, English and Spanish, right?

JB: It is enriched, but it continues being the working class. Other things are added to it, the worker, the immigrant, the conception of color from this point of view, from this experience that is different, that becomes more complex – not better or worse, but more complex.

KB: Yes, I'm asking you this question because, for example, in a conference that took place last week, here at Wake Forest University, they asked if Julia Alvarez was truly a Dominican writer, how much of her work was Dominican literature

when it is written in English and mixed a little with Spanish. So here, what there is, is a perception that identity is formed from a specific language, and you, for example, are *the queen*… of entering and leaving from a language. So, you represent a problem for the people that think that identity is formed from language. So, what do you answer to the people that bring up a thing like this?

JB: That they write from their purity, that they work in that, that they don't lose their time with me, with what doesn't interest them… I am not a little piece of golden money. Mine is a very personal investigation, and for me this is a reality, it enriches me to know the syntax, the grammar of these languages, and break it. And to play and create another nonsensical syntax, or another line that has to do with space. Or to play with the structures of the Vedic chants. Life, the world, the literary world, the literary culture of the world [referring to what interests her]. So it is my journey as an artist, it is my journey being human. So this, to me, makes me a better person. But the people can say what they want, because they are saying it from their experience. That is very true. I remember when I wrote *Bliss,* the people that accept Spanglish would say… "But now what do I do with you, because now this text is only in English!" Now all of my theory about Josefina Báez, it has gone away. Every job is different. Every job demands something from you. I always work three jobs at the same time, that are in different levels of… of… of its process. There is one that is recently beginning and another that is in editing and another that is in investigation. So, to me, it supports me, because I am hyperactive and I get bored with things, and because I dedicate a lot of hours a day to this. So, it's all a structure to keep me focused. So it is a system that I created, for me, because it's what I need in order to work. But this large conversation about… about what is Dominicanness? What is Dominican literature about? It is a definition of every Dominican writer. And the critic is going to critique from his theoretical framework and is going to enter and leave, but not very often, writers are asked, like it is customary to do now: "And you, what do you think about this?" Because at the end of the day, you are the one making this thing of yours. There is a dialogue. So, the same here and there. In Spain, there is a young person that is making a dialogue, presenting a work about "La Levente", and she had to quote in English. And someone stopped it and said to her that she had to translate that because that isn't good Dominican literature and well… This woman writes like this. First I have to cite… the… the...

KB: The text…

JB: The text as it is, after I have the translation, well you have put up with it because that's the way it is. So, the reference that comes from this picture, this framework, of how I should be. What that allows me to say is that we are very far from being a humanity that can work in dialogue with differences. More than the definition, my constant question in all of my work, when I teach in my school, is always, what do

you do with differences? My movement… what do you do with that? You reject it, I am saying that what you do is neither good nor bad. The only thing I am saying is… what do you do? Because it is what teaches me. What I do with differences, what I do when I see a person of another color that isn't mine. A person that doesn't talk like that, that doesn't eat what I eat. What do I do with that? What does it produce in me? So perhaps that is the question; that will be the summary of my guidance.

KB: Very good. Your work is about a very complicated subject, and we have already talked a little bit about that, identity. A subject, not only tricky and changing, but also dangerous, because for some, identity is a sacred thing that they defend, even as far as violence, if it is precise or necessary. How do you understand identity? Why is it such a recurring theme in your work?

JB: Hmm. What you say, changing, is the word as well as… it… fits me, it fits me. In *Bliss,* there is, in that journey of investigation, in the creative process, a result that identity is a mere feeling. And I remember reading it in the university, to a specialist in African literature, a theater specialist that got annoyed, "It can't be, it can't be…" He said. Well, did I just put your work in a questionable spot? [Laughs] So, well, that I like. [Laughs].

KB: Breaking norms.

JB: I don't do this work saying that I am going to break norms; it is my process. And what I have to do is be authentic for Josefina. I have to be satisfied, I have to do this because my audience is the only one that demands that I am honest; they don't demand that I'm good. That's why I don't think about my public before writing. Whoever wants to buy me buys me. Whoever wants to see me goes to my theater. I can't be… my audience, I respect them so much… I trust their light. They are going to like it or they aren't going to like it, but that isn't personal. And if it is personal, look, it is not going to take my life away either. So, for me, that is very important. I know that in writing schools, creative writing, it is an important thing. Who is this text written for? A creative text! And I remember that they have invited me to teach, to co-teach and this… so all of the norms that the students are being taught, and Josefina arrives with *authenticity, being genuine, your truth*, and my friends are looking at me like this… If you write for a market, yes. I don't write for a market, I work a very tiny thing. It's like a sort of tiny batey[4]. I decided that this is what I want. My life, my world is incomplete and constant. I chose that. I chose that.

[4] A poor neighborhood adjacent to a sugar cane field.

KB: Perhaps because you escape through the fingers of criticism.

JB: No, I have excellent critics. I have had the great blessing of working for many years with some investigators… scholars that have followed my work and… that taught me so much, to see my work in another form. To have a dialogue with my work. Uh…

what bothers them? What do they find? Now with *Bliss*… this girl that translated it to Portuguese. When you began, it reminded me a lot of that, because she said that translating *Bliss* was translating herself. And she began to work the theory of delicateness with the text, with the beauty. Also, we, the blacks and Dominicans, we have that. I am nothing more than Bachata[5], I am nothing more than Merengue[6], or my Merengue also includes that *Bliss.* So… uh… for me, my most revolutionary text is *Bliss,* because it bothers the academics a lot. God… but… "Where's the free Josefina?" And the people also like, "I dare you, you know, to write in English, just in English, you know". So I have a fascination with this text because it reflects who I am now at fifty-something years old. This journey has a lot to do with the text and, now, learning to put it on stage is the great schooling of mine. So that's what my journey is about.

[5] A popular genre of Dominican music often characterized by a romantic or nostalgic tone.

[6] A form of Dominican music and dance with an accelerated

KB: I don't like to utilize the word *consolidate,* but it sounds like *Bliss* has consolidated that space of yours. It isn't easy, it isn't easy in the sense that you are searching beyond what is a unique Josefina. You are looking for what are the different Josefinas. Because of questions they asked you in your performance yesterday, I realized that although we give ourselves to the work of investigating what is different, marginal…

JB: Yeah, right…

KB:… changing, eh… we don't accept each other. We take the definition of things a lot more seriously.

JB: Yes, the theory can trap marginality. In a way, it has trapped it in many, many instances and it has trapped writers. And… I have a friend that told me… and he said it in public and it is recorded, that he writes texts, some texts for academia. So he already knows what scholars want, so he writes it and they leave him alone, and he does his thing. And I… *But how, how is it possible that you are going to do that to me!* And he tells me, "Yes, that's what you're missing. You are always genuine and in your journey. No. No. That's why no one publishes you", and he's right. But I publish my own work and there isn't a problem. But it's true, although that can't be my problem. To each his own. My job has to be that, every day, being myself. Because I have made myself a better person doing this. I am getting to know myself better, I am getting to know what I am, what all of those layers are. So that's what it's about, at least my journey.

KB: I am going to ask you a question a little from the position of the people that would criticize your approach. Does Josefina Báez exoticize the cultures with which she has a dialogue? For example, Hindu or Asiatic.

JB: I don't know. It depends on who sees it. I didn't approach the Asiatic culture in order to dedicate myself to that culture. I arrived, at least to the dance, to learn a little thing, I was doing a party for my guru. I have a spiritual teacher. So I went for

some very personal reasons that didn't have to do with my literature or my dance. At that time my guru died. I continued working more because of that. In my work I have a theory and an approach, that dance from *Dominicanish* has a lot to do with the biomechanics of theater in the form of what uses energy. So from the outside they can see an exoticism, but I know what is happening in terms of energy, of the quality of the energy that is another thing and is my investigation as a dramatist. So they are always going to say that. It's not important. But they can ask me, and I'm going to tell them why. One of the examples in the biomechanics of theater is going up and going down. If your action goes forward… your strength has to go in the opposite direction. That dance from India is the same. So, I make a dialogue with two techniques. Regardless of where they come from. They are techniques that I dedicated a lot of time to. They are techniques that I still study today. I know what I got myself into. And I know how rude I am and I can say, *I paid for that*, in order to bother people. I paid for it, I paid for that. If you don't want to sell your things, don't sell them. But what happens is that, if Halle Berry goes, who is black, they aren't going to say anything to her even if she is exoticizing. But if it is a little Dominican girl from La Romana, poor, well there is a problem. So that's the thing, that's why I am so rude. And I leave it halfway. And I leave it halfway. But if they follow me… I say something in order to provoke. I say you guys sold and I bought it. If there is someone that has common sense, beginning to tell me, "Well, explain yourself…" So I explain and I say that it has to do with class and where I come from. Because I know people that don't dedicate the time. There went *some professor from Europe* and they are allowed to, but Josefina Báez, no. They criminalized me in the eighties. Criminalized! I did *Dominicanish* because I dedicated that to my guru, and I had to do that for me. But, please, please. So, the people are going to say what they want and you know that? I do what I want. I don't have a problem. Doing what I do how I do it, I have a lot of limitations. Because I don't go to all the things they invite me to. I am not going to dance for an alcoholic thing, my country is alcoholized, I am not going be a part of that. I have some political decisions that I have carried all of my life. So I do very small things… I do… I have done very small things… very small things… in truth, I do nothing more than what I want and believe. And I work every day.

KB: That's very important, what you just finished saying; it reveals a lot. You write in a time of large mobilizations of immigration. Transnationalism is the normality of many. Yes. As well as marginality. How does your work pick up on what's marginal, from your point of view? And I know that you have talked already about what a cultural marginalization is, a marginalization of class. Yesterday, for example, you were speaking about this object, what is it called? Please.

JB: The Cantina or Marmita[7] in Brazil.

KB: To me, that Cantina reminds me of Santo Domingo. The women use it for bringing food to their husbands.

beat.

[7] A metal food container.

JB: For me, that's it.

KB: And yesterday when you were speaking about what you brought, from I don't know what place, from India obviously. Did that object remind you of that? Did it connect you with that working class…?

JB: Of all of the countries, that's why it's there. It's a dance. I'm going to say, in India, there is a two-minute dance that… is danced with this object. And I danced it in an international school, like a high school there. And the owner, a millionaire, was insulted because I, the actress from New York, not from the Dominican Republic, from New York! I was there with that thing of the poor people in India.

KB: This was in India? Interesting.

JB: Because it has to do with class. To me it reconfirmed that that was the element I needed.

KB: So, this object that you utilize in your performance. It's a symbol of class.

JB: Of course.

KB: And there this… [interruption]

JB: For me it has great beauty. Furthermore, my food, what nourishes me as a poet. There is an installation of this in the text *Bliss,* in *Bliss* it talks a lot about this food of love that I was talking about yesterday [referring to her performance in the conference]. So all of my work isn't very illustrative when I can say…I can be dancing I don't know, la Bachata *Bliss,* that little piece of Bachata ay ay ay ay is a Bachata from the fifties in the Dominican Republic. And connecting a phrase about the Bachata with a word in English like *I, I am, to the* ay ay ay ay… So then I'm… there I am weaving mine, my Bachata *Bliss.* So… I am very slow, it takes me a lot of time to do things. Because I enjoy it too much. So [laughs]. Now I am seeing videos from the seventies and eighties of the Dominican Merengue, I don't know. Looking for elements of physical work, you know? So, every morning that's what I do from four to ten… video and doing my notes… extremely tiring until I begin watching the videos, you know? So the mornings are like this, fabulous. This is for *Bliss.* So… the marginality… I don't know, a yunyunyun you know, a slushy of somekind, so it's my call, it's my call on it. And that transnationality is the essence of the world. Now they call it those names but, since when has that not happened?

KB: Of course.

JB: The Arawaks didn't go over there to Venezuela in small canoes and I don't know? But it's okay.

KB: How does Josefina Báez see or define the collective Dominican identity?

JB: If it has to do with the collective, I don't go there. That is of the collective, as I always say, no one represents me, and I don't represent anyone either. I can talk about my identity. Truthfully. It's difficult because in the same family you find everything about the Dominican Republic. So, if identity is homogenizing, it can't be defined. When I hear the great experts about the Dominicans, I say, "So ah, that's what I am? Oh yes! You don't say. Oh, ah let me take note because that is what I am." Because they're promoting a little equation that I have never seen, I haven't lived it, I don't know it, what you're telling me. I believe, I am not sure, that we are the same around the world. So, they demonize us or endorse us, exoticize us. My work is to deliver my work, do my work, do my work. Let's continue.

KB: So national for you, what does national mean?

JB: It's that… nation… with all of the complexity that can be… in all of the countries. There is the official 'national' of the government, so I am always going to say down with the government. Whoever is there, beneath the government, because yes, yes, because I am a rebel. This, the… what "La Kay" would say… the united town, a government without political parties. "La Kay" the professor. So… that job of what's national, yes, we are a nation. What everyone defines as that… it's true, there is a group, and I, yes, I say my people, I am a big time Dominican.

KB: Okay.

JB: You said it all.

KB: *Dominicanish,* is a work read internationally. It is a fusion between the Dominican way and the South Indian culture. What does that fusion mean for you? Can we call it fusion? From your point of view, how did your compatriots, the ones from here, those from there, receive this work?

JB: Look, *Dominicanish* has… well there is the text. The people that would see the presentation, there they realize more… about my relation with India. The people that would read… there is something… there are elements of India that are universal… or that many people have worked… eh… fusion is like a form of life… it's that which… when they talk to me about the word Dominican, for me it includes that, fusing. We are the kings of sancocho[8], what do I tell you? Locrio[9], what do I tell you? We are born being fused, eating fusion. So, what is it that you eat? What do you dance?

[8] A traditional stew of the Dominican Republic often used as a metaphor for a melting pot.

[9] A mixing of rice with different ingredients.

KB: And what can that fusion represent for the future of a Dominican society? For the future of a Dominican community? That fusion for you, how do you project it toward the future?

JB: I am not good as a prophet, but I am going to throw myself in there.

KB: Throw yourself, throw yourself [laughs].

JB: That future is very connected to the future of the entire world. You see? In whatever place in the Dominican Republic they make a call for you to China, in whatever batey there is someone on the Internet. So, more than fusion, it is this moment in time. It is not demanding something of you, no, it already is this. So of course, the Dominican society of today and of the future is going to go like the societies of the entire world with what is happening in the world… depending on the levels of corruption, all of the craziness and all of that, but, but… there we go… so no it isn't more or less than another [referring here to the Dominican society in relation to other societies in the world].

KB: So tell me about your anthology of performance and of the importance of what's autobiographical.

JB: The anthology is already a creative system where I was able to organize, not only what I did, but also what I was able to teach and systematize. Not putting all of what I've learned, but putting what has been effective for me. I have been doing this for a long time, but do you use all that? It's like taking this entire burden, this overdose of information and staying pristine with the information. So that's what it's all about, that is what I teach. Very basic [referring to her teaching], because it is a system of work that functions as a base so that other people can do their own thing and create their own anthology. So this is what is taught, this is a school, a school that has the structure of a retreat that is open to everyone. So there is another layer that is uniting the audience and the performer, the actor, where some dialogues about existence take place. Sometimes they are very intellectual, but these things take place by getting up at three in the morning, meditating at four, being in silence, training, Josefina putting on Julito Deschamps' music. I work a lot with Julito Deschamps [referring to his music]. I like going walking, in all of the places I go, in Helsinki, New Zealand, they know about Cuco Valoy and about those two specifically. It is already a system of work, and from that system I have directed works, where the person that wanted to work with me, we put them there as actresses. We began an investigation process about what is it that they like the most, what is it that they like the least… what is pain, what is happiness. One of those was a movie actress in Chile whose first daughter died, and so she talked to me about that and I told her: *What do you mean you are going to be doing a classic! That is what you should be talking about* [referring to the experience of that actress]. And her

saying "Oh! This Dominican, she's so blunt…" And so an investigation was done where we took texts from universal literature, texts from the letters of her husband about the girl, a very beautiful thing, it took us, three, four years… I'm telling you I'm slow. So the piece was completed and it traveled internationally.

KB: How beautiful.

JB: Very beautiful. So there is another girl that worked with distance. That complete piece is on YouTube. It's called, "A Kiss is a Kiss is a Kiss." They can see it. And so… or there is another that's called "Today I am who I am." It is a Chilean-Mexican girl, an excellent actress. Wow! And she was investigating about her relation with her mom and dad, and her relation with her and her mom is very interesting. So now she also has her creative piece. And the one that we are working on right now, I did the playwright. It is called, "I, Claudia of the community." And it is a girl who's the first that I've worked with in Chile. She is from my same social class. And with an impressive history that I hadn't seen… that in her house in the 1990s, the electric light was installed. So it has fascinated me so much, her life, her work.

KB: Her history, how interesting.

JB: And she is married to a musician, a composer, she has two girls. Her name is Paz, yes those are my creative grandchildren, you know? And Diego, the little boy. Yes, they take everything from me [referring to the emotions that the children cause her to feel]. And so now we are in the investigation to prepare the piece. And [returing here to her text] *Bliss* is the text with which I created the anthology of performance. That was what accompanied me. And now putting *Bliss* on stage is putting into practice the exercise that I have made for the process of creation… for creative life and for reality. And so the base is autobiographical [referring to the starting point of her creation], but after it goes in different directions, I present *Dominicanish* in a load of places. And no one realized that that has to do with Josefina Báez, and it's nobody's business. The people are going to see theatrical work. The people are going to read a text, where it comes from isn't important. What it takes is that it is effective as you are presenting it. Effective like you make braids, as I call it.

KB: Yesterday in your interaction with your public, you talked about the precision of dance, your techniques of how to act, about how all of this helps you to center yourself in your work. What is precision for you, inside of your Dominican cultural world? What does precision represent for you?

JB: In Dominicanness? Joy is precise. Happiness is precise. Difference is precise. There are very precise things in my Dominicanness. It's precise in that I go to all of these places and I do the same thing, washing my panties like it says in *Dominicanish*. For me that is Dominicanness. There is precision in family, you can be… if

you are good, it doesn't matter, but if there's something bad, there they are. This is precision for me, in my Dominican world. In my world I am too messy [referring to her disorganization]. On stage, I am very precise. And my students: "No, teacher, I'm coming to clean the apartment" and me? No. Leave my disorder like that. Let me work like that. "No no, I don't want them to say that my teacher is disorganized." Don't leave my book there, I want it over there.

KB: I understand myself in my own mess.

JB: Exactly. Sometimes when I have found an already-clipped piece of text, and I put it there [referring to her space], and these women that clean… it doesn't stop [suggesting the cleanliness is the reason she loses her things]. And so on stage, they always ask me about this, precision. And I tell them no, not everything in my life is precise. It isn't precise… no, my life isn't like that. My life is complementary enough. I am completely dyslexic. But on stage yes, I know all of the cardinal points because there is… that's my expertise. I'm trained.

KB: Interesting. I… have had conversations and discussions with other intellectuals, friends, Dominican artists. And there is a tendency to look at or find precision in the exterior of our own home. And I ask myself, is it time that we as Dominicans begin to specify what is ours.

JB: I believe that it is precise. Perhaps the word isn't what is used, but we continue being a community. It's like now, our young people who have left to go to Harvard, and I don't know how many return to tell the community what they have to do and how to do it. So one sees it and says yes, yes, yes, the same as what one did with their parents. They have all of this theory, please, stop already, you know. So precision as a Dominican, we are talking from those terms but it is being lived. It's possible that… I don't know, but I'm living it. What do you want from me? This is it. Like the theorists, this, I don't know, this is like… the repetitive issue about Dominicans… we have problems with the black identity. It's repetitive, and before it bothered me a lot… now I don't pay much attention to it and they say [referring to the theorists about black identity in the United States] that one has to know what black is from their definitions, but we are living this black identity. Living. You don't… [referring to those that can talk from a black identity, but not necessarily from others] that's why perhaps… that if the light or dark Indian, those euphemisims, and all of that… yes. And? [referring to the classifications Dominicans use to define themselves and for which they are criticized]. But how do you dance, how you do move your body, how do you work in silence? There's something else about Africa… that hasn't become a part of the discourse… of the dialogue about black identity, and that is the most important thing about Africa, the philosophy of life. The philosophy of life, beyond… And so I remember an… African teacher that… that told me, "No, no, no, no, no. The fact is that you are so convoluted,

you are truly Africa. You are Africa." And if I said, *I am not going wear that*, [referring to ideas that she was not going to adopt] they all told me what I was not going to do. No, no, what I am is Dominican, don't screw with me, and they truly told me, "What you are is Africa, Africa, you are Africa because look how convoluted you are." And Africans told me in conversation, "Continue, continue like that."

KB: And continue telling me about this complexity. A student asked you if there is or isn't a conflict in what is black in the Dominican Republic, and you obviously don't share that. You say that it is a choice…

JB: It's a choice. Like it is for everyone. You know, because I see that it is the same people that are telling me that I have an identity crisis, because my people are straightening their hair, those same people already have their hair straightened. When a person from Honduras does it, that person, as La Kay says, is "reinventing herself." When a Dominican does it, she has no clue that she is black. So that double standard, I stick it where the sun don't shine… [laughs]. So that type of thing… is going to always be something related to how you [referring to people in general] want to see me, that's why I cannot fight you, because I don't have time for that. Are some people always going to see me from there? Yes. Alright. But I am also going to tell you what I think from here.

KB: And from the social point of view that has to do with laws, all that constitutes a social system for educative benefit, the development of a community in which the black Dominicans in the Dominican Republic are marginalized…

JB: And where aren't they, where aren't they?

KB: And so we come to our problem. How do we resolve that? Is it resolved in part by the identification of that, yes, there is a black community, or is it resolved in trying to see ourselves, all of us as we are, a mixture?

JB: For me that doesn't come from a collective. There is a group that is the only group to which I pertain, we call ourselves *we*, we don't call ourselves Afro-Dominicans, Dominicans of I don't know what… Afro descent, we call ourselves *We-period-the Other*. And there are people from every class, all kinds of black, everything. We are trying to investigate and do things. I'm interested in the health of the human being, health, mental health, physical health – that interests me. You want to be or not be black, you want this or that, I could care less… What is important is that you, from your conscience, possibly very different from mine, you are healthy, that you don't damage someone else, that you don't damage me. If a damn black wants to say that she is blonde, there's her problem. You can't tell me how I should live my Dominicanness or my blackness either. Nobody can, you can but I won't give a fuck. I think that from the academia, it has been said to the black North Ameri-

cans that they are called African-Americans. In Harlem I haven't heard anyone call himself an African-American, anyone! I don't know anyone… none of my friends call themselves that… that aren't in academia. Everyone is black.

KB: Interesting, call it what it is.

JB: Yes, this is a large construction… and there are documentaries, and all of these things… and one is left thinking, "Oh really now, the in-thing is Afro-Latina, Afro-Dominican, Afro-whatever, great." If it works for you, it works, but you know that it is a way people earn a living, let's be clear. You are looking for what's yours, you are taking out your money from there, so don't come to me trying to pass off your money-making theory, your work, what pays you… as my crisis – "I have a crisis? Really? You don't say!" There is another reality and I am always going to say, ok, I as a marginal self, what interests me is that we have a conscience and that consciously you know who wants to screw with you, who is screwing with you, who is believing that they can define what's yours – what's bad or good is your definition. I am not deciding for anyone. I am not telling anyone from any country anything, So don't come to screw with mine [referring to her own definition of herself]. So, there is a beautiful dialogue that takes place, so as you know, that's why they don't invite me to many places anymore [laughs]. Furthermore, with my face, with my color, I should be dancing Gaga. "And I should be doing that? Ah, you don't say, ah yes, and what if I don't know that myself? Do you know what I should do on my journey?" Fuck, you have some drums [referring to nerve] that not even Tito Puente has. So to me it seems like a great arrogance. It is a choice. I want them to go to Africa [referring to those that criticize her], to go to Africa so they see how the women straighten their hair and put all kinds of things on them… Maybe then they will no longer say things to Dominican women. They should go! And they will see how so many put on lots of cream to make themselves whiter! They should go! Go to the source!! Don't talk to me… They are talking a lot, but there they… That is the way they earn a living, that is their work, and you are working, it is your job and you want to mess with my life, those are two very big things. So there is a big difference, that's why I cannot be a politician, the best thing life did was put me on a spiritual and creative journey, because the street would have been extremely dangerous, I would have been a menace… My path is one of passion.

KB: Let's finish with that, with passion?

JB: Yes, passion… the greatest devotion, the devotion to do things. I return to the same thing, to the same thing, to understand or, more than understanding, to play with that, to see, to see. I liked it a lot, what you said about consolidating that space that is not a space.

KB: *Doing* fascinated me as a part of the construction of life, it's simply doing, without any categorizations, thank you a lot Josefina.

JB: Thank you, thank you. Very moved.

KB: This has been a journey for me. Thank you.