

Artist Statement for “Negotiating Boundaries: This Land is ____ Land”

I dance to connect—my body to my surroundings, my thoughts to my emotions, my self to the world I inhabit and the other people in it. Kimerer LaMothe (2015) writes that movement gives people “a knowledge that they cannot secure any other way” (8). For me, this knowledge arises from the integration of body and spirit that occurs when I motivate movement into dance. My technique is grounded in classical ballet vocabulary, and the legato quality often associated with ballet transcribes this idea of connectedness onto the space. I’ve also always thought of ballet as stretching, drawing the ends of a line out as far as they can go and then just a little more. This is my way of challenging my own notions of what is possible, not just in terms of how my body can move but also how I can know, how I can love, how I can be and change for the better.

My dance is also story, but it isn’t entirely linear. Taking lived, human experience as text, I meditate on it by speaking and moving it. The process of creating a dance by generating movement material, writing text, and weaving the two together allows me to engage both bodily and intellectually with my subject matter and come to a deeper understanding of it. The interplay creates layers of meaning, leaving room for ambiguity that invites an audience to read their own understanding into the spaces. A performance that has to be interpreted becomes a nexus where a multiplicity of stories come together, creating a fuller picture of a human experience than can be voiced or embodied by one person alone.

This piece takes the movement-text interface into the realm of site-specific dance, treating the text, an oral narrative, as site to which I draw the audience’s attention so that they may know it and value it. Stories about home, about hope, about miracles of grace are part of our social fabric, yet they may have become so familiar that we receive them callously rather than permitting them to make us feel and to shape our political and social actions. Seeing dance on a known site often gives

an audience deepened connections and new discoveries about the site (Stein 2015, 147). This fresh perspective is the gift I offer my audience by presenting a familiar narrative through dance.

This particular story belongs not to me but to a friend, so I've learned about my site by building relationship with her and listening to many iterations of the tale, hearing how her father came to the US, how the experience altered his worldview, and how knowing the story of her own belonging shapes the way she thinks about God, about people, and about homeland. On the surface, the story appears to be driven by chance: the random confluence of day, time, and place where a gardener stood in line to apply for his visa. But if we choose to look for it, we see not absurdity but a power beyond that of hegemony who rule the land with a tight fist, a power that operates on the principle of grace, that calls those who have much to give much, that invites the one who owns nothing to dwell in a land of plenty. The story reveals a parallel between our relationship to the land and our relationships to each other. If we think we own the land, we create a native-foreigner hierarchy that justifies mistreatment of the stranger, but if we remember that the land is God's, we might see life within instead of profit; we might be inclined to let go of personal gain in order to reign by compassion.

In the genre of movement and broad subject matter this piece is similar to my previous work, but I'm exploring territory that is new to me in the use of visual and audio media. I'm presenting certain sections of the piece through video rather than live performance because I want to trouble the audience's ideas of what is real or natural. Douglas Rosenberg (2015) writes that a dancing body in video space is "an 'impossible body'...that is not encumbered by temporal or physical restraints" like our natural bodies (148). The story being told in this piece is also an impossible story—impossible, at least, if tethered to the logic of laws and nation-states. The possibilities open to a digitally reconstructed body released from the laws of nature parallel the possibilities grace offers if we can be released from self-interested human nature.

In obtaining audio to use for this piece, I chose not to coach or edit my friend's storytelling because I intend for this piece to create space for her own voice, which is so often suppressed by the culture she lives in that does not claim her, to be heard unmediated by my dominant-culture lens of what content or form was "fitting" or "palatable." In that vein, it's important that the audience consider the lens through which they filter the audio and interpret the tone in which my friend relays her story. Sometimes when we tell stories that are meaningful to us, the memory animates our voices and gestures as we bring it back to life, yet other times the weight of a narrative that is core to our sense of self might bring deeper stillness to the retelling. It can be challenging to tell such stories because it makes us vulnerable, therefore it is all the more important to listen carefully and give value to the words that shape and frame not just an event but also a person.

Ultimately, that is my aim with this piece: to humanize the teller of the tale by helping the audience make connections through the layers of movement, text, and subtext, hopefully discovering a moment when they themselves are implicated in the story and found responsible for the lives—the people—around them, because it's only when we realize our culpability in the injustices we see that we may begin to set them right.

Kaya Prasad, THD 310 Final Project
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References

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