

Paradise Park:

Investigating the Human Place in Nature through Durational Dance Performance and Interactivity

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I. Abstract

I am investigating the intersection of choreographic methodology, improvisation, and immersive technology to create a dance that addresses ecological crisis. Through my coursework, I learned that dance is inherently political and can address social and political topics without sacrificing the integrity or the aesthetic of movement. By combining the usage of media technologies and dance, my project aims to bring attention to the natural world in a way that encourages people to rethink how they interact with the Earth. The driving question in the research is around the cultural construction of words like nature and wilderness, and what that means for the ways in which human beings see and understand themselves within the natural world. This research culminated in an installational solo, Paradise Park, in which I used artificial materials to construct a simulated outdoor park. By placing my own dancing body in the middle of this falsely expansive paradise, I hoped to encourage audiences to rethink their definitions of nature in order to inspire more balanced and sustainable choice-making.

II. Introduction

The impetus for this research project came from a childhood fascination with the outdoors, an appreciation for conservation efforts, and a developing desire to contribute to the sustainability efforts that I began to see around me. In the earlier years of my dance career, I struggled with the social and political alienation of ballet training. While it showed me the value of unwavering commitment to a goal, I was troubled by my own lack of active engagement in communities outside the realm of dance. One of the primary reasons I enrolled as a student in the

Department of Dance at The Ohio State University was because I was inspired by the level of activism and engaged citizenship that I saw in the students' research projects. Through my coursework at OSU, I learned that dance is inherently political and can address social and political topics without sacrificing the integrity or aesthetic of movement. During my junior year in the Department, I was one of twelve dancers cast in a cultural exchange program and performance tour of Salvador, Brazil. I had the great privilege of choreographing a solo on myself for our tour, and I got to use the opportunity as an attempt to locate the intersection of dance and conservation efforts. It was a preliminary dive into making abstract movement using nature imagery. The dance repertory that we brought to Brazil was a thoughtful showcase of American dance and culture; my solo drew upon the romanticization of territory in the American west in order to encourage conservation efforts to the land we lay claim to, though often mistreat. This project served as an exploratory introduction into using dance as a vehicle to address ecological crisis, and it laid the groundwork for my next project.

My advisor, Norah Zuniga-Shaw, recommended various texts to begin with during the initial stages of research. These included, but are not limited to, *The Poetics of Space* by Gaston Bachelard, *Uncommon Ground: Rethinking the Human Place in Nature* by William Cronon, and *Art, Performance, and Media: 31 Interviews* edited by Nicholas Zurbrugg. These books and the conversations they contained inspired the installational, mixed-media nature of my performance. Cronon's collection of essays on environmental theory sparked an entirely new way of perceiving conservation and wilderness protection efforts. In his book, Cronon draws the reader's attention to the fact that our perception of what is natural is culturally and socially constructed. I was also inspired by the work of visual artist Alex Da Corte, whose work, *Free*

Roses, I saw on display at MassMoca in North Adams, Massachusetts. His use of intense color and texture got me thinking about shaping an immersive environment as a way of controlling an audience member's consumption and experience of the art.

III. What is Natural?

In the initial stages of this project, I discovered that my ambitions to contribute to land conservation efforts were culturally embedded and that my desire to protect what I thought of as the natural world was part of a larger, anthropocentric narrative. The first step in the project became clear very quickly; if public perception and idealization of the outdoors is constructed by the surrounding culture and social climate, then my actual intention was to illuminate and deconstruct the associations around perceived naturalness. If we, as a culture, are static in our understanding of what is natural, and our interactions with natural resources are contributing to the declining livelihood of our planet and the other species that inhabit it, then perhaps a reinvestigation of what nature actually is would allow people to make more sustainable choices in their daily lives.

There is tension in human relationship to nonhuman nature (nonhuman nature is the term that Cronon uses when referring to all biological entities other than human beings). All at once there is a romanticization brought forth by cultural ideals and associations, a compulsion to capitalize on available resources, and a maternal but also guilt-induced desire to protect and conserve the land and species whose livelihoods we have inadvertently worsened. And there is still a divide between our human bodies, our interactions, and what we perceive as natural. This sort of hierarchical thinking of one entity as more natural or ideal than another is present among

varying communities of humans in our country and in countries all over the world. This discourse is not to discount the gravity of global warming and looming ecological crisis, but rather to reconstruct our habitual interactions with the resources around us in order to reestablish an equal sense of respect and honor for ourselves, for others, and for our planet. If we continue to prioritize one part of the natural world over the other, we will continue to destruct the livelihood of our planet and our ability to coexist with all the living species that inhabit it.

The part of theory that influenced both my creative process and the choreography of *Paradise Park* was the idea that human beings are not part of the natural world, but that our presence in untouched nature ultimately corrupts and tarnishes the purity of that landscape. Generally, I think that at the mention of words like nature or wilderness, grandiose mountains and forests come to mind, like those found in Yosemite National Park. Parks like Yosemite have become a token of ideal, beautiful nature. The issue with this is the failure to acknowledge the human interference and intention to both protect, tame, and manage the land. Yosemite was put aside by congress in 1864 in an act of anthropocentrism; its preservation was prioritized because of its potential for human recreation. The park was then specifically designed by Frederick Law Olmstead to be both preserved and enjoyed by human visitors (Cronon 92). And if Yosemite is an American emblem for wilderness and natural beauty, then is human curation of nonhuman nature a natural act? When is it not? Our interactions with nonhuman nature are intermingled in a way that isn't always explicit. And as biological beings, humans are inherently part of nature. My question is where we draw the line between what we can classify as natural and what we cannot, and how that definition influences our interactions with natural resources. If human beings accept their bodies as part of nature, thereby accepting their own power and potential as

human beings, might they be more apt to act thoughtfully and live sustainably within their environment?

IV. Creating an Audio Landscape

For this specific project, the design of the dance was initiated by the composition of a soundscape. In the fall semester of 2016, I took a Sound Design class taught by Elijah Palnik, where I learned how to create music and soundscapes on LogicPro X, a computer program used by professional musicians and sound technicians. I used various pieces of music and sounds to reference what I read about in Cronon's *Uncommon Ground* in order to create an abstract but linear soundscape for the installation. This soundscore was an integral part of my choreographic process; it contributed to the immersivity of the installation, gave the audience members some loose context about the piece, and connected me, as a dancer, to the material that inspired my movement.

Each part of the music I created referenced a different part of my research and a different implication of why nature and wilderness might be perceived and consumed by Americans the way that they are. The piece began with very simple forest noises, breezes, and chirping birds. Slowly, it fades into Rachmaninov's "All Night Vigil (Vespers) Op.37", which is an a capella choral composition that consists of texts taken from the Russian Orthodox All-Night Vigil ceremony. When I first listened to this piece of music, I heard overwhelmingly magnificent voices and the power that they created, which made me think of the authority and influence of religious institutions. Different cultures depict nature differently in their respective stories about the origins of man. For the Penobscot Indians, "it begins with the state of nature as drought and

famine. Nature is a desert, a poor place for human existence” (Cronon 132). What fascinates me in the Bible is the idea of the Garden of Eden. In Genesis chapter 3, the Garden of Eden is a place where Adam and Eve lived in concordance with nonhuman nature, until their eventual Fall from the Garden, whereby they were banished from entry after eating from a forbidden tree. Genesis 3 seems to separate man from the natural world, subsequently deeming man as a sinner and nonhuman nature as having been wronged by man. In Genesis 1 and 2, this relationship is illustrated in a different way altogether.

But beginning in the seventeenth century and proceeding to the present, New World colonists have undertaken a massive effort to reinvent the whole Earth in the image of the Garden of Eden. Aided by the Christian doctrine of redemption and the inventions of science, technology, and capitalism... the long-term goal of the recovery project has been to turn the earth itself into a vast cultivated garden. The strong interventionist version in Genesis 1 legitimates recovery through domination, while the softer Genesis 2 version advocates dressing and keeping the garden through human management (stewardship). Human labor would redeem the souls of men and women, while cultivation and domestication would redeem the earthly wildness. The End Drama envisions a reunification... in which the redeemed earthly garden merges into a higher heavenly paradise (Cronon 134).

This objective of striving toward an ideal paradise reflects U.S. conservation efforts in the United States; humans cultivate and protect land in order to get it back to a more pure state and in doing so, they redeem themselves from the sins of their ancestors. And while I think that land

preservation is undeniably essential, it's impossible to deny that these endeavors are tied to religious morals and cultural ethics.

After the Rachmaninov hymn, I phased into a very ambient melody that I created using the software instruments on Logic. I wanted to create my own music to include in the soundscape because of the fact that we, as humans, are shaping our environment both through our culture and the footprint of our physical actions. After that loosely structured melody phased back into the sounds of chirping birds and whistling breezes, an old folk song rises to the surface. This song is called "The Mule Skinner Blues" and was written by Jimmie Rodgers, who was an American country singer in the early 20th century. In the song, written in the 1930s, Rodgers sings about a day of work. His yodeling and the bluesy tone of his voice sound American and very specific to the time in which Rogers lived. I feel that this song references the idealization and nostalgia of the American West, while also demanding audience members to accept the fact that human beings are interwoven into how we conceptualize nature.

Lastly, I recorded some of my friends singing a simple humming score. I got the idea during a dance class at Dance Exchange in Washington D.C., which I was able to attend due in part to my Undergraduate Research Scholarship. Dance Exchange is a multi-generational dance company that works to engage with other communities of people across disciplines. I was eager to study there because I wanted to learn the best, most ethical ways to enter new communities in an effort to make political dance. In class one morning, all of the participants and I found a spot on the floor, and we lied flat on our backs with our eyes fixated on the ceiling. Our teacher asked us to audibly count down from 5. We held each note, each number, as long as our lungs could possibly allow, which meant that we sang the numbers on our own timing. And the resulting

sound was a sweeping, eerie melody that transformed the entire space. The way I had to really test and exhaust my lungs reminded me of the vastness of human potential. And the way in which my most valiant effort was different than those of the people surrounding me, reminded me of diversity and acceptance. I wanted to include this kind of human beauty in the soundscape as well.

V. Set Design

I also designed the layout of the gallery space in a very specific way in order to contribute to the overall immersivity of the installation. As previously mentioned, I was influenced by the work of Philadelphia-based visual artist Alex Da Corte. When I first walked into *Free Roses*, the work I saw on display at MassMoca in the summer of 2016, I was instantaneously overwhelmed by the saturation of color and texture. As a receiver of the artwork, any thoughts or feelings that I carried with me on that specific day were immediately overpowered by the strength and consistency of Da Corte's careful aesthetic. He forced me to live presently in his realm.

For *Paradise Park*, I knew I wanted to craft an artificial, simulated outdoor space that would elicit the same kind of feeling as either sitting outside in a gorgeous park or walking into an immersive installation. I fastened a large square of artificial turf in the middle of the gallery space and projected videos on the two walls surrounding it. The videos were rotating reels of 30 second clips of nature scenes, which I made on the computer program, Isadora, with the help of Oded Huberman and Robin Ediger-Seto. They were simple images and idealistically unsullied in their colors and content. I also lined the turf with green LED lights, which mixed with the videos,

formed a green cast all over the space. With the clear aesthetic of the set design, I felt that I captured the audience's attention and gave them something to look at and occupy themselves with.

VI. Interactivity

I specifically chose to present this work at Urban Arts Space, a multidisciplinary gallery, instead of on a stage because I was attempting to create an immersive, durational experience, and I wanted audience members to feel as essential to the space as I was. In the fall semester of 2016, I took an Intermedia class with Norah Zuniga-Shaw. In this class, we spoke a lot about the power dynamics between the maker of a work and the audience that experiences it. In making interactive art, there are a lot of choices to make in regards to how much direction and context you give to the people who receive the work. In my own process, I had to think about how much of my research I wanted to share with the audience. My other advisor, Ann Sofie Clemmensen, helped facilitate a skype call with Chase Angier, who is an interdisciplinary artist based in choreography. In our interview together, Angier spoke about durational performances and the range of often unpredictable audience participation. Our discussion was fruitful in that it primed me not to have too many expectations for how audience members might choose to engage with the work.

In order to convey the idea that the physical and cultural presence of human beings shapes the environment in which we live, I decided to add a participatory element to *Paradise Park*. I hung posters with handwritten questions around the room asking things like "What's your favorite part of nature?" and "What's natural in this room?". I left post-it notes and pencils

underneath the questions, and asked people to answer the tasks in any way that made sense to them. After responding, they were asked to stick their post-its anywhere in the gallery space. By the end of the weekend of performances, there was an extensive collection of thoughts, musings, and answers. Some participants even commented on other people's responses, which spawned anonymous and opinionated dialogues. I believe these prompts gave the audience a lens through which to watch the dance, but also exposed them to different ways of thinking and understanding the cultural construction of nature. And at the end of the weekend, the set design, once sparse and minimalist, was eventually littered with these conscious, calculated little post-it notes.

VII. Physical Practice

The most omnipresent question that came up in my physical dance rehearsals for *Paradise Park* was whether or not dance is relevant or useful in this discourse. How can the addition of a moving body in the middle of this space help other people feel more integrated inside themselves and in the space around them? When someone watches dance or movement, they experience kinesthetic empathy, meaning that they subconsciously empathize with the performer through their mirror neurons. And as humans, we also read body language and recognizable postures and expressions. I wanted to execute a broad assortment of movement, ranging from restful and pedestrian to animalistic and bizarre. If I could get audiences to feel that range inside their own bodies, then maybe I could get them to equate the human body with the enormous scale of nonhuman nature.

In addition, all of the reading and research that I did informed the dance that I made because that information subconsciously fed the material. In one way or another, the theory that I

read informed choreographic process. For example, when I thought about redefining the concept of wilderness and reevaluating the impetus behind conservation, I felt inclined to deconstruct my personal movement style as well. What are my dance habits and when are they actually useful to me? I played with these questions in my rehearsal.

The other challenge was holding back larger choreographic desires. It felt essential to leave a lot of space within the choreography in order to give people time to look around the gallery and interact, or to be still with their thoughts. If I was executing a lot of virtuosic movement throughout the entirety of the piece, the attention would have been on me the entire time, and I was hoping to create an environment with equally supportive parts. It felt more appropriate to mold an improvisational score where I could react to audience members or technological glitches in an honestly responsive and flexible way. I didn't want the dance to become too performative because I was hesitant to contribute to the boundary between myself and the audience members like the way in which proscenium stage performances often do. And if audience members chose to be stationary observers as opposed to engaging with the written prompts on the walls, then perhaps their consumption of me as a performer would reflect the ways in which they consume other parts of nature. Generating a lot of structured movement is something I'm familiar with as a choreographer and performer, but I ended up scrapping a lot of the material I made in an effort to focus on only a few, thoroughly fleshed-out ideas.

The improvisational score, which is like a structured mental map that a performer references as they make their way through a dance, began with the task of sitting on the edge of the turf and watching the projections as they subtly moved and shifted on the walls. This acted as an invitation for audience members to do the same. Next, I tried to move into this seemingly

impossible, alien-looking position, where I balanced on my coccyx and crossed my legs, while holding onto an ankle and weaving my arms through one another. I balanced here for numerous minutes, while reacting to my body's weight shifts, taking in everything around me, and trying not to hide my quivers as I attempted to maintain a gravity-defying position. In this part of the score, I tried to emulate the profundity of nature. The movement developed a bit from there, and as I rose up off the floor, I went through a phrase of dance that was inspired by the concept of sustainability. What does an unsustainable action look like? How long can I attempt a movement until I am thrown off balance and involuntarily collapse onto the floor? I thought that by using a widely recognizable term like sustainability in my choreographic process, audiences might find easier access into the piece.

The other element of the score that was a theme throughout the entirety of the piece was the idea of presence. There were moments in the piece where I felt completely at ease, merely lying in the grass, watching the simulated clouds roll by, looking around at the people in Paradise Park with me. I looked them in the eyes, and I looked at their clothing, smiling when I felt compelled to do so. But this piece was a performance, and audience members came to Urban Arts Space in order to watch dance. As a performer inside the piece, the experience was very meditative and I was very aware of the fact that I was being watched by people just beyond the turf. My improvisational score was flexible enough where I felt like I could respond to what else was happening in the room. This sort of easy reactivity felt the most appropriate in terms of making art about nature, especially as I sit here writing in my backyard, watching a patch of little green and lavender flowers sway gently in the breeze; They can't help but react to the environment around them, even though I am sitting here watching every bit of their motion.

VIII. Conclusions and Further Work

My research culminated in the production and performance of a durational, immersive, and interactive installation at Urban Arts Space. I created a simulated outdoor park made entirely of artifice, such as the projected images of the landscape videos I made, an electronically composed soundscape, and a giant piece of artificial turf. I chose to perform indoors surrounded by simulated nonhuman nature because I wanted to highlight the fact that our human bodies were the most “natural” things in the room. By placing my own body in the middle of this falsely expansive park, I hoped to draw attention to the cultural narratives that influence our definition of nature. This project exposed audiences to different ways of thinking about the natural world. Paradise Park raised awareness and initiated discussion around the deconstruction of cultural hierarchies that oppress both human and nonhuman nature.

Dance is inherently political because of the context of our contemporary climate and the history that precedes it. Dance places the diversity of the performers’ bodies in plain sight. And unless intentionally crafted otherwise, there is a leveling out that occurs when dancers perform in the same space. Choreographers and performers have the autonomy to place bodies in juxtaposition with one another to communicate ideas about hierarchical thinking. The power in this, something that I believe is unique to dance as an art form, lies in the kinesthetic response that the audience feels upon their reception of the work. As a choreographer and performer, I can control the way in which I present my body to an audience, but I cannot control the lens of history and experience through which someone will watch me. I can construct and design the intricacy of my movement, costume, and of the space in which I’m performing, but control is

relinquished at the place where an audience member's personal context shapes their reception of my dance. And this opens the door for honest, open discussion, and hopefully increases our ability to understand one another.

Going forward with this research, I'm hoping to continue to produce and perform installations that wrestle with notions of natural and artificial. I want to keep investigating how dance and performance art can be used to reconstruct cultural hierarchies that prevent the balance and equality of all biological entities. Currently, I'm interested in the communal experience of dance and how it works to empower participants inside the facility of their own bodies. I think I could be an advocate for healthy living and sustainable choice-making by facilitating movement workshops outdoors. This would not only allow me to keep pressing toward the integration of all natural entities, but would also serve as an opportunity to share the power, pleasure, and autonomy of the human body with larger communities of people.

Works Cited

Cronon, William. *Uncommon Ground: Rethinking the Human Place in Nature*. New York, NY:
Norton, 1996. Print.