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## En Croix: A Choreographic Study of Translation

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**Loyola Marymount University**  
**University Honors**  
**Program**

*En Croix:*  
**A Choreographic Study of Translation**

A thesis submitted in partial satisfaction  
of the requirements of the University Honors Program  
of Loyola Marymount University

by

**Gillian Ebersole**

**May 6, 2020**

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Jill Nunes Jensen, Ph.D.

*En Croix: A Choreography Study of Translation*

## Abstract

This thesis, entitled “*En Croix*,” began in Paris as a choreographic exploration of my struggle to reconcile my feminist and queer identity with my Roman Catholic upbringing. The strictness of my conservative religious background became an entry point to choreography, enabling me to create a solo with movements based on the Sign of the Cross—up, down, side, side. After returning to Los Angeles, I translated the choreography from the first solo into a second, breaking open the precise patterns and structures from solo one, and adding improvisation as a choreographic device; then, I completely abandoned the form of the two solos and generated a third solely through improvisation. While reflecting upon these dances, I began an ensemble piece for seven women. I identified the five most common movements from my three solos and presented those to my dancers as prompts, giving them the freedom to craft movement. What results is a choreographic study of translation, instigated by geography and unpacked through time and body knowledges. “*En Croix*” is situated in exploration and the spaces in which I have found and constructed my identity. The choreography both depends on and breaks free from the limitations I have experienced, the choices I have made, and my questions surrounding how bodies relate. Rooted in the tension between my need for individuality and my own comfort in ideologies that reinforce uniformity and sameness, this thesis renders resistance, solidarity, identification, and belonging through a choreographic process steeped in time, place, and experience.

## I. Personal History

I came to dance rather reluctantly and at the insistence of my mother. Diagnosed with a rare eye condition at 18 months old, I lacked depth perception, and I experienced frequent incidents of double vision and blurred eyesight. Even after receiving my first pair of glasses, I stumbled around my house, running into every piece of furniture. My mother asked my pediatrician what I could do to improve my proprioception and spatial awareness. Since I had little to no hand-eye coordination, I struggled to play sports, so my pediatrician suggested my mother enroll me in ballet classes.

I began my dance training at age three at the Center for Movement Arts in Portland, Oregon. I vividly remember my first ballet class; mostly, because I refused to even enter the studio. My conception of dance was shaped by *The Barbie Nutcracker* and the Angelina Ballerina board game. When I arrived at my first class, I expected to be taught by a dainty ballerina, but instead I found myself looking up at Teacher Tim. His deep voice and tall stature scared me so much I sat on the side, hugging my knees to my chest. After a long and silent drive home, my parents explained to me the importance of trying new things, as well as the value of paying for classes and following through with commitments. The next week, I went back and danced, and I have been dancing ever since.

At the Center for Movement Arts, I took ballet, modern, jazz, and tap under the guidance of Tim and Sherri Ryan for six years. To perform in the recital, dancers had to be at least six years old, and I remember counting down the days until my sixth birthday. That year, I performed in a ballet piece and felt the rush of the stage lights for the first time. My parents took me to my first professional ballet when I was five; we watched the Oregon Ballet Theater's production of *The Nutcracker*. My father fell asleep, but I sat on the edge of my seat during the

whole performance. For weeks after, I danced with the wooden nutcracker my parents bought me, longing to be Clara one day. When I moved to Colorado and left the Center for Movement Arts, Teacher Tim gave me a poster with Gillian Murphy on it – the caption of the poster read “Young Dancer.” I remember deciding then that I wanted to become a dancer, following in the footsteps of my namesake.

In Colorado, I started taking ballet classes at Ballet Nouveau Colorado, which housed a ballet school and a contemporary ballet company under the same name. Under the tutelage of director Julia Wilkinson Manley, I began more intensive ballet training at this studio. I particularly loved taking class from Meredith Strathmeyer, who paid special attention to me because of our shared love for ballet and books. Meredith had studied ballet and English literature at the University of Indiana, and she sparked my interest in the crossover between my love for reading with my love for dance. Even though my love for dance strengthened, I often felt like an outsider at Ballet Nouveau Colorado, as many of my classmates grew up dancing together. The teachers emphasized the pursuit of perfection, and I spent hours trying to smooth out my single pirouettes so I could receive the privilege of even trying for a double turn. Even to this day, I thrive on hard work, so at the time, I did not mind putting in the extra hours.

While I loved my ballet classes, I found new inspiration when I began taking improvisation and contemporary classes. Introduced to contact improvisation by Elizabeth Towles, I fell in love with the sense of community and trust created by improvising with other dancers. The artistic directors of company Ballet Nouveau Colorado, Dawn Fay and Garrett Ammon, played a formative role in my training as a contemporary dancer. For three years, I worked closely with Dawn on a series of site-specific dances performed throughout downtown

Denver. I performed at nursing homes and street fairs, as well as the opening of the first H&M in Denver.

I auditioned for my first production of *The Nutcracker* when I was thirteen. I hoped I could land the role of Clara, one I had dreamed about since before I even started dancing. The audition went well, and when the cast list was posted, I was so horrified to spot my name under the role of “Rat” that I left crying. My parents encouraged me to go back to check the list, and I found I had also received the role of Harlequin Doll, as well as a Chinese Dancer. For my role as Harlequin, I danced under the direction of Garrett Ammon, whose kindness supported me through my first experience of the intense show week period of a professional company. To this day, dancing the role of Harlequin doll remains one of my fondest dance memories. I learned that I might not be cut out for the role of Clara, but that I had other talents I could bring to a character.

After my first performance in *The Nutcracker*, I began to be more explicit about my desire to be a ballerina. I started dancing en pointe, and I spent most weeks of my summer vacation in the studio. Around this time, the leadership at Ballet Nouveau Colorado began to fracture. Julia, the head of the school, split from Dawn and Garrett, who took their company to downtown Denver under the new name Wonderbound. Renamed Colorado Conservatory of Dance, the training became even more intense – I was expected to take ballet six days a week. Most of my fellow dancers switched to homeschooling to manage the extensive schedule, but I was attending a prestigious Catholic high school. I started getting cast less and less, and there was an increasing pressure to lose weight. During my second production of *The Nutcracker*, right before the split between the school and the company, I remember the dancers around me competing to eat as little as possible. I performed in the corps de ballet as a Snowflake and a

Flower. The experience was bittersweet. On the one hand, my dream of become a ballerina had never seemed closer – I was onstage dancing professional roles. On the other hand, I was miserable among the competition of the dancers and the pressure of the school to lose weight. When Dawn and Garrett left their leadership positions, I lost my connection to my mentors, and my confidence plummeted.

My parents noticed the unhealthy attitude of this iteration of the conservatory mindset and pulled me from the studio after the last performance of *The Nutcracker*. I was so discouraged by the cruelty of my fellow dancers I decided I hated dance and my body. Thinking I would never dance again, I made plans to run cross country at my high school. During this time, running became a distraction from dancing, and I enjoyed the exercise because it made me feel strong and powerful, two things that were not celebrated by my former ballet studio. I threw myself into musical theatre when I landed lead roles in my high school's productions of *The Sound of Music* and *Seven Brides for Seven Brothers*. I had given up on becoming a dancer.

But before I could give up my dream altogether, my mother found a small studio near our house offering ballet, modern, and jazz, and I auditioned shortly after my last performance of *The Nutcracker*. I just wanted to keep dance in my life as a pastime, so I transitioned to Premier School of Dance, a family-run competition studio. I was not particularly enthusiastic about this studio. Having been raised and trained in the concert dance world, I did not have a lot of respect for competition dancers, and I thought the smaller studio size would limit my opportunities to take challenging classes and perform on stage. Just as I had listened to my mother when she made me go back and take my first ballet class, I trusted her during this period of my life, and I am so thankful I did.

The teachers at Premier changed my life. Former professional dancer and University of Arizona alumna, Alexandra Fields, taught modern and jazz, and I took ballet from some of the dancers from Wonderbound, who had left Ballet Nouveau Colorado and Colorado Conservatory of Dance to teach at other smaller studios. I had a glimmer of hope for dance for the first time in years. One of my biggest fears in leaving the ballet conservatory was that I had left the way to become a dancer, but I soon learned how narrow-minded my former training had been. At Premier, the teachers celebrated the unique talents of each student. Professional ballet dancers Sean Watson, Colby Foss, and Marian Faustino taught me how strength can be incredibly valuable in ballet. I started taking tap classes again, and I returned to jazz and modern classes, which I had formerly left behind in pursuit of ballet.

My fear of lost opportunities was soon assuaged as well. At Premier, I performed in lead roles in two productions of *The Nutcracker*. I danced the roles of Shepherdess and Angel Soloist, two roles I never thought I would have the opportunity to dance. I performed in winter and spring showcases. For three years, I competed in the Young Artists Alliance, a local competition for performance artists, where I performed classical ballet variations. Through the Dance Arts Choreography Competition, I created my own piece and won two awards, for choreography and performance. During the summer, I taught Cinderella Ballet Camp, and I learned to mend costumes for the shows. To strengthen my jazz skills, I participated in the Boulder Jazz Dance Festival at the University of Colorado. Most of all, I learned to love myself as a dancer, and I felt supported by my peers and teachers for the first time since leaving the Center for Movement Arts. I fell in love with dance again thanks to the patience and love of the community at this studio. I only danced at Premier for two and a half years, but it felt like a lifetime. When I graduated high school, I cried harder leaving behind Premier than anything else.



Drawing on my love for dance and English, I decided I wanted to double major in college. I discovered Loyola Marymount University in my search for collegiate dance programs that also allowed students to double major. When I began the college audition process, I realized how formative the teachers at Premier were in terms of my development as a dancer. They graciously wrote letters of recommendation, gave me tips for auditions, and helped me make an audition video. When I came to Loyola Marymount University for my audition, I knew this was the place I wanted to attend college because I felt the same supportive atmosphere I found at Premier.

## II. Thesis Generation

Although my thesis formally began in the summer before my senior year, the process had been stewing in my subconscious for years prior. During my first two years of college, I struggled to find my place in the Loyola Marymount University Dance Department. I had spent years in rigorous ballet training, and performing in the corps de ballet had engrained in me a need to be identical in movement and body type. I was surprised and overwhelmed by the diversity of movement I encountered in my technique classes. In Composition II with Rosalynde LeBlanc, we played an improvisation game where we would mimic each other's movement. When I took the class, I remember feeling incredibly dejected about my own movement style. I wondered why I could not have had a body that gave me flexibility and suppleness like Monica Williams, precision like Haley Smith, versatility like Tippy Dringman, power like Reagan Ricossa, storytelling like Annalise Gehling, or ingenuity like Kiera Breugh. In the years since I took that class, I reflected often on this exercise and grew to understand the purpose of the exercise was to honor the movement styles we each carry in our bodies and to challenge us to move outside our own movement patterns and histories.

I found pushing myself outside of my own movement comfort zone very difficult, not because I was unwilling, but because I began to encounter the intersection between my own movement history and my cultural history. I grew up in a practicing Roman Catholic family, attended Mass every Sunday for my entire life, sang in church choir, and attended Catholic schools. These social and cultural practices left me with very distinct definitions about what behaviors were and were not acceptable for women. And to a certain degree, my background in ballet validated these ideals. I felt immense pressure to be dainty, small, quiet, and reverent. Even in high school, I knew I was none of those things. However, as a person, I love rules and honor tradition. As a result, I find comfort in the rich history of the Catholic Mass and the repetitive progression of ballet technique. Perhaps unknowingly, I began to struggle to reconcile my religion and my community's expectations of women with my own individuality – that is, my gender identity, sexuality, and the way I want to live out my life as a dance artist. This did not manifest right away for me but developed into a four-year process that would culminate in my thesis.

While I took Laban Movement Analysis, I found myself drawn to the way all movement can be notated, and that notation does not deem any movement as good or bad. Learning about dance notation and theory made me look at my classmate's movement with an analytical eye instead of a critical one. As I honored their differences, I realized I could not do so without abandoning my own self-critic and turning the lense of analysis to my own movement. Loyola Marymount University had offered the opportunity for me to explore myself as a dance artist and person, but I knew I needed to give myself permission to accept this offer, to honor my individuality and freedom of expression. So, I buzzed my hair, donating over twelve inches. At the time, the action held little to know meaning for me; I simply did it because I wanted to.

Looking back, the action was an external response to an ongoing internal struggle. After that haircut, my whole life changed. Professors began to pay me attention because I had accepted and acknowledged that I wanted that attention. I allowed myself to be seen for the first time.

The summer after I cut my hair, I studied abroad in Paris. During my time abroad, I did not go to Mass once. That 6-week hiatus was the longest I had ever gone without attending a service. Though I did not miss going to Mass, I still spent a significant amount of time in churches. Every time I entered a church and tried to pray, I would cry. I did not know what to make of the tears. I spent a good three hours sobbing in Notre Dame one day, and I remember thinking the tourists must have thought I was very devout, but instead, I was in the midst of an intense personal crisis. Even though I was living my dream studying, dancing, and exploring a city I had longed to visit, my time spent in Paris was the saddest and loneliest part of my life. I learned a lot about myself on that trip, especially how my emotions can coexist. On Bastille Day, I wept at the grave of Victor Hugo, filled with disbelief, sadness, loneliness, and regret. And yet, I recall that day as one of my favorites. This new experience of emotional tension manifested in a visceral sense; it poured out of me in tears and in movement. In Paris, I choreographed and performed my first full-length solo, and that solo became the choreographic impetus for my entire thesis.

In Paris, our cohort of dancers came up with an aphorism for those moments when life is out of our control: “We do our best with what we’ve got.” That motto gave me solace throughout the trip and then proceeded to guide me through an incredibly difficult junior year. At the beginning of my junior year, I started identifying as queer and began the process of sharing that identity. As someone who values words and meaning, I struggled for years to find a term that felt like a fitting description of my identity and continue to struggle to share my queerness in a way

that does not feel limiting. The fall semester of my junior year was incredibly difficult. I still could not shake some of the darkness I had experienced in Paris, and I witnessed an overdose while working as a Resident Advisor. Every day felt like survival. During this time, I learned that, for me, dance and life are very much intertwined, so I am sometimes intimidated to make change in my artistic life because it requires that I also make change in my personal life as well. However, I also found this is why I am called to dance and to be an artist. I believe wholeheartedly in the artistic work that I do, so I found I needed to make these changes in my personal life.

One pivotal moment happened on the first class of I Am, Therefore I Dance. Because this class satisfies core requirements for the university, it was the first time I really spoke to non-majors about dance. During that first class, we had to offer our definition of dance. I came up with a carefully calculated definition of dance, drawing on my experience over the past two decades of my life to craft a perfect definition. I was still working on my own definition when someone in the back, whose identity I still do not know, piped up and said, “Dance is celebration.” At first, I admit I was slightly horrified that somebody could consolidate my entire life's work and pursuit down to a three-word sentence. But the sentence stuck in my brain, and I do not even remember what I wrote down as the definition of dance that day. Instead, I contemplated this definition of dance, that of dance as celebration, for my whole junior year. I take dance seriously so seriously because I am pursuing a career as a performing artist. However, listening to my classmate exclaim that dance is celebration reminded me that I have unnecessarily narrowed the definition of dance. I thought of dance in such a one-sided way, and in the process, I lost sight of the reasons why I came to dance in the first place.

I started to consider dance as celebration, even in my own life outside the studio. What happens when we go to ballet class barely awake and so sore, thinking of ballet as celebration? What happens when I dance in line while waiting for food, celebrating that I have the resources to eat and sustain my body? What happens when I approach even my most vigorous and frustrating of dance classes as a celebration of what my body can do and what my body is learning to do? What happens when I dance in art galleries and coffee shops and bookstores, merely to celebrate the joy of dancing? Treating dance as a celebration helped soothe my anxiety about achieving perfection and replaced my former self-consciousness with a full-body gratitude for my ability to dance for my education and for my career. I entered my senior year with this sense of celebration and gratitude, determined to make the most of my last precious year in college.

I began my senior year determined to believe in myself and conquer any remaining self-doubt – a lofty goal for someone who spent the first three years of college hiding in the back row of every class. I encountered a setback when I was not cast in the fall concert. After working so hard to believe in myself and increase my confidence, this seemed like yet another sign that I was not good enough. Rather than settling into despair, as my former self might have, I took it as fuel. I worked hard in the rehearsals for my senior piece and threw myself into the preparation for my thesis. Because I worked ahead on my own choreography, I was able to adjudicate the group portion of my thesis, which gave me an opportunity to receive more feedback from the faculty. In my technique classes, I finally saw improvement after years of hard work. Particularly in ballet and musical theatre, I started getting glimpses of what erasing my self-doubt could do: a triple pirouette en pointe, a song sung with vulnerability, the bravery of standing in the front of any class.

### III. Process

From this place of burgeoning confidence, I began to tackle my thesis. I had a great deal of solo work and a rough outline of a group piece, but I still could not put my finger on what this choreography meant for me, only that it was painful and important. While reflecting, I remembered a specific composition class in my first year, when LeBlanc talked about how dance begins in the moment when we run out of words to explain something, so we gesture excitedly or gasp or perform some other nonverbal expression. She said, “Where language fails, dance speaks.” The rediscovery of this quote rocketed me back to the first solo I choreographed in Paris. At the time, I did not have the words to explain the internal turmoil I experienced, so I made a dance about it.

Inspired by the churches I was visiting and my own frustration with my Catholic upbringing, I notated the Sign of the Cross using Labanotation. Read from bottom to top, the notation marks these four motions ingrained in my body memory - up, down, left, right (see figure A). Starting with the traditional hand movement, I augmented the motion and then transposed the movement to other body parts throughout the solo. Every motion in the dance was accounted for and fit into this pattern. As I shaped the dance, I created a spatial restriction by having the choreography take place in a U-shape, following the path of a communion line and the architecture of the churches I was visiting. As the solo developed and matured, I juxtaposed these religious motions of my background (the sign of the cross, standing, and kneeling) with more sensual motions (touching my face and hair, mimicking taking off a shirt, and using wide-legged positions). I performed the work, titled *This is My Body*, on a rainy day at the end of my time in Paris at a small theater called Le Regard du Cygne.

When I returned to the United States and to Los Angeles, I began to grapple with the deeper implications of my movement. My original solo was set to Keith Jarrett's piano version of "I'm Through with Love." In Paris, this song felt rebellious and sly, with its improvisational notes and wandering melody. I was through with the Catholic Church, and it felt like a breakup to me, a tortured love affair gone horribly wrong. As I revisited the solo, I found the music did not encompass the complexity of my struggle. I adjudicated the solo and multiple professors told me the music did not fit the gravitas of the piece. Additionally, I received feedback that my movement was too structured and limited. LeBlanc described the choreography as "dancing about something," rather than actually "dancing through something." She encouraged me to put on the religious music of my childhood and video myself improvising. In those improvisational studio sessions, I could barely dance without crying. The religious music, which I still sang every Sunday as I continued to go to church, haunted me.

Through this process of listening to religious music, improvising, and crying, I began to feel very angry. I grew to love improvisation in Paris, as many of our dance assignments were short improvisational videos made throughout the city, and now, improvisation did nothing but frustrate me. In the process of making my first solo, dancing became an entry point for me to connect words to my lived experience, but during the revision process, I seemed to be moving farther and farther away from intellectual clarity and from embodied peace. Additionally, improvisation felt like a betrayal of my carefully structured first solo, which resonated with me more, though it had received more negative than positive feedback after not passing the first adjudication for the Student Concert. On top of my personal struggles, I worried that my choreography was not strong enough to convey the deeper meaning I grappled with, and I still could not quite discern what that meaning held for me.

To move away from this place of emotion, I turned back to dance theory, this time to Rudolf Laban's effort qualities, which describe the way something is danced and how it appears. The movement from my first solo was very bound and light (see figure B for notation). It was controlled and placed, while also being soft. This is a comfortable place for me, given my cultural background in Catholicism and also my movement background in ballet. During the creation of this solo, I was writing a research paper on gendered movement, specifically unpacking societal associations between masculinity and movement. Drawing on Judith Butler's gender theory, which argues that gender is a performance, I began to look at dance as a performance of gender. This research process made me feel acknowledged in many ways, as I learned about the social construction of gender and how it affects the way society allows people to move. I wondered how I could break away from the ways I had been socialized into the performance of gender. Through improvisation and coaching, I worked on creating the opposite effort qualities, free and strong (see figure C for notation). This challenged me to break through those cultural and movement histories in my body, allowing myself to be weighty, grounded, and free to move. I abandoned the editing process of my first solo and began a second one by combing through the videos of my improvisation and then superimposing movements from the first with these improvised moments of increased struggle. I performed this second solo, *Catcalls from God*, in the 2019 production of Impulse.

To this day, I do not like this second solo. As music, I chose the Latin chant "Veni Sancte Spiritus," as sung by the Taizé Choir. During my first year of college, I travelled to the Taizé monastery, an ecumenical monastery in rural France which hosts thousands of pilgrims of all Christian denominations. My time in Taizé was gentle and kind, and I thought using this music would bring me back to that space of religiosity. Instead, I was just angry. The movement came



from a place of anger – at abandoning my first solo which I loved so much, at being unable to understand faculty feedback, at failing to find a way to connect my religious and queer identities. To me, the anger was valid, but the movement that emerged from it felt immature and not fully formed. I adjudicated this solo as well, and it was not selected for the student concert, which furthered my frustration with my choreography. At this point, I had two solos and more than a year's worth of movement research that felt unfinished.

Dr. Teresa Heiland had been a close mentor and guide throughout the process of my first two solos; she taught Styles and Forms in Paris where I developed my first and helped me analyze my improvisations with Laban Movement Analysis as I created my second. As part of the Summer Undergraduate Research Program, I served as Dr. Heiland's research assistant, and while completing motif notation research, she suggested I create a third solo in response to the existing ones. We talked about what movement qualities I wanted to carry with me from those solos and which ones I felt I could leave behind (see figure D). In particular, our conversation kept circling back to free flow and weight sensing, which became an important part of my process. During that summer, I also took an English course on power structures in language in which I read "on self-recovery" by bell hooks. In the essay, she says "Language is also a place of struggle." She discusses how it is difficult for people who have been dominated (i.e. queer people, people of color, women) to use language to express their domination, because language itself is created by the people who dominate.

Suddenly, my first solo from Paris made so much sense to me. I could not verbalize my queerness and its relationship to my religious upbringing at the time because I simply did not have the words to explain the complexity. In dance, I found a way to begin to tackle my internal struggle to reconcile my queer and feminist identity with my Catholic upbringing. But even

dance has structures of domination. I have researched and written extensively on the way gender affects dance, from the spectrum of movement viewed as socially acceptable for dancers to the hierarchy of male domination in dance leadership. Dance is as imperfect and hegemonic as language. Dance is also a place of struggle. I began a third solo with this tension in mind, that of my desire for freedom from the structures of my upbringing while also depending on these structures to construct (and deconstruct) my identity. At this point, I recognized that the medium I had chosen, being dance, was also part of this tension.

My final solo built on the use of improvisation as a choreographic device. In the studio, I created short phrases inspired by the first two solos and then abandoned them, integrating more bodily and spatial freedom. I did not set this solo to music; rather, I would play with a different song every time I entered the studio. This allowed me to keep a sense of exploration as I continued to work on improvisational quality and developing motifs. At this point, the process became less about my identity and more about grappling with these overarching hegemonic and patriarchal structures that prevent people from having the words, or movement, to express who they are.

This change in the impetus of my project inspired me to turn my internal struggle into a conversation, one that involved both word and movement. I began to plan for a group piece to be the second half of my thesis, a response to the isolation of my three solos. Looking back at my solo choreography, I identified the five most common movements: touching the face, touching hair, reaching upward, breaking open, falling to the ground. I notated these five movements using motif notation and was surprised to find the deconstructed notation for movements of the Sign of the Cross (see figure E). This gave me a sense of purpose, that even two years and many

solo drafts removed from that original score and solo, I was still working through the struggle from my original solo. I began to see my journey as one of perseverance and resilience.

In my first few group workshops, I gave the five motions to my dancers as a prompt, and they each created a five-movement phrase. I built the ensemble work from the individual phrases crafted by each dancer. The opening of the piece features the dancers doing their individual phrases across the space. As the work develops, they also take on each other's phrases, learning and embodying one another's lived experience through choreography. I also taught three phrases, one from each solo, translating my choreography to new bodies and interpretations. During the shaping of the piece, I incorporated structured improvisation as a transitional element to honor the group dynamic between my dancers. The casting and size of the piece ebbed and flowed throughout the process, eventually settling on seven women. This number is held in high regard by the Catholic Church, representative of the Holy Spirit, as well as completion and perfection. Since I did not set out to have a specific number of dancers, the emergence of my seven final dancers connected with the religious and spiritual meaning of my work. Every person involved in the process brought something to the movement and to my research. Creating a group piece forced me to speak about and share my story through choreography, teaching, and coaching. My dancers showed me love, grace, and generosity. We shared our own spiritualities and identities through the process of creating a dance rooted in community and belonging.

The final influence on my thesis was the process of music selection. I had already decided I wanted the group portion to be set to Aretha Franklin's rendition of "Bridge over Troubled Water." I sang this song during high school choir, and it continues to hold meaning for me. The song's lyrics speak to a sense of strength in friendship despite the troubled waters. Franklin's version employs the gospel-style technique that speaks to my own religious history,

though I took great care to find a song that was not overtly religious. Instead, “Bridge over Troubled Water” became a spiritual anthem for this process and for the community I had found in the many stages of this work.

I agonized over what to do with the three solos I had created. Originally, I wanted to incorporate some of my writing into the sound score of my thesis. I had a specific poem in mind I wanted to function as the prelude (see figure F). Working with David Karagianis, I played with pairing my poetry and short pieces of music. However, much of my poetry about my queer, feminist, and Catholic identities comes from a place of anger and frustration. I did not want that to be the overarching message of my work. Additionally, I wanted to leave my solos open to interpretation. I did not want this to be labeled a “coming out project,” which I feared would reduce the thorough research I spent years constructing. Eventually, Karagianis suggested “Psalom,” a work of minimalist religious music by composer Arvo Pärt. The solemn and heavy nature of this song, coupled with its moments of silence throughout, complemented the triumphant sounds of Aretha Franklin that would play during the second half. I adapted my three solos to fit this music, stringing the movements of each together into one longer work. With the help of Dr. Jill Nunes-Jensen, I titled the entire work *En Croix*, paying homage to its origin in my ballet training and my time in Paris.

#### IV. Dissemination

Given the precarious and fragile nature of our world right now, there is no performance of my thesis, but the journey has been the most fruitful part after all. During a particularly difficult moment last semester, I despaired over creating a thesis that was so intimate and vulnerable. In the span of a few days, I told a good friend I wished I had done something fun and lighthearted, and I cried in Dr. Kristen Smiarowski’s office because I just wanted to give up.

Now, I am so grateful I went through this process of self-discovery and research because I will carry this embodied knowledge with me. The loss of my thesis performance does not mark an end to my questioning. Although I believe I will continue to wrestle with these ideas for the rest of my life, my ability to rest in the complexity of my identity has grown throughout this journey. What began from a place of tension and internalized struggle took me on a choreographic journey that allowed resistance and solidarity to become expansive and comforting. The work is narrative, geographic, and choreographic because it has been influenced and mapped by time, place, and experience. This thesis is intensely personal and yet took the effort of a community. My work is a testimony to that community.

Despite the unexpected end to my thesis, I am thankful that I have rehearsal footage of both the solo and group sections in their entirety. In addition, I submitted my thesis to the Undergraduate Research Symposium, where I was able to virtually present on my process. This experience was both very difficult and rewarding. I had a hard time distilling all my work down to a short abstract, and I again felt the fear of my work being reduced to a “coming out project.” With the help of Dr. Jill Nunes-Jensen and Dr. Kristen Smiarowski, I learned how to talk about my work in terms of choreographic devices and research processes, focusing on the dance theory I employed rather than on my narrative. This mental shift allowed me to present my research without fear of my personal narrative being criticized. Rather than emphasizing my narrative, I drew from the extensive theories I used, from gender theory to Laban Movement Analysis. Writing about my project became less painful because it is easier to edit theories and research than personal narratives.

Preparing a choreographic research presentation takes many layers of adaptation and preparation, as well as vulnerability and emotional investment. The committee that selected my

thesis as a presentation asked me to include more personal information in my abstract. They wanted to know more about my story and the narrative background of my work. After having just worked so hard to edit and hone my research process, I was frustrated they asked me to divulge more of my own story. I do not think that a scientist or historian would ever be asked to give a personal background to their work. However, the line between art and artist is often blurry in a way that other fields do not experience. Additionally, after the entire semester transitioned online, the Undergraduate Research Symposium seemed like it might be a one-dimensional reflection of my research process. I recorded a video of myself using Zoom to present a PowerPoint version of my thesis. The videos of my choreography were big files, so they came through jumpy and unclear. I was nervous to present this version of my work virtually.

The virtual Undergraduate Research Symposium ended up being a rewarding experience. Presenting on my thesis, though partial and unfinished, gave me a sense of closure on these years of work I had put into the process. So many of my peers virtually attended to support me, and I appreciated having the space to give my thesis its moment. In the week after the symposium, the outpouring of love and support from my dance community was so validating and important for me to experience. Lisa Gillespie forwarded me an email reflection from one of her students who resonated with my presentation and wanted me to know. The student's reflection on my work affirmed the importance of this process and made all the internal turmoil worth it.

When I left Los Angeles because of the pandemic, there was still work to be done on my thesis. I was constantly playing with the timing and dynamics of my solo work, putting increased movement in the silence of the music, and slowing down as the music swelled. In addition, I had significant edits I wanted to make to the group piece. After receiving feedback shortly before spring break, I revisited Alvin Ailey's Revelations, in particular the "Wade in the Water"

section. Inspired by the dynamic quality of Ailey's work, I took extensive notes on a series of edits I wanted to work into my remaining rehearsals before my thesis performance. I wanted to play with timing, dynamics, and phrasing. Dr. Smiarowski and I talked a lot about generating a feeling of water throughout the piece, noting the difference between calm and troubled water. This would have required working with breath and effort to create moments of struggle. I had just drafted the final section of the piece, sketching out a series of group lifts. I planned to return to it to develop internal struggle, creating choreography that would evoke the dunking and cleansing of baptism. The whole group piece was a bit frontal, and I planned to turn many of the facings in toward each other, to point toward the community we had developed within the process. Additionally, the solo choreography each of my dancers created continued to be vulnerable and richly textured, and I was going to shorten a floor section to allow more time for these solo structures to be realized and manifested within the work. Ultimately, I hoped a sense of reverence would emerge between the dancers; despite the troubled waters, they came together and fought for each other.

After leaving Los Angeles, I read *The Poisonwood Bible* by Barbara Kingsolver, a novel that had been mentioned by multiple faculty members after watching the group portion of my thesis. This book follows a missionary family who move to Africa in the mid-1900s. Narrated by the wife and four daughters of the missionary, *The Poisonwood Bible* displays a lewd view of evangelical Christianity, rooted in patriarchal and racist hierarchies. The women end up breaking away from their religious tradition, each in their own way. After reading the book, I was inspired to listen to other people's narratives surrounding religion and identity. I spent so much time uncovering my own story, and I now sought to hear other people's accounts of their lived experience.

I set up interviews with each of my dancers, as well as with some of my queer friends who are religious or spiritual. In each interview, I asked a series of questions, taking the opportunity to listen to other people's narratives (see figure G). This was a moving experience, as everyone I invited into conversation readily committed and had so much to share. I wish I had done this sooner in my process. It made me realize my struggle with my identity is not an isolated one, though it felt like that for years. Talking to others also provided a nuanced view of how spirituality and religiosity manifest on an individual level, and I learned about the spectrum of personal experience in relation to the intersection of religion and identity.

In the interviews with my dancers, I discovered they all grew up in religious contexts, whether at home or through attending Catholic schools. Eve Robinson and Kennedy Schuelke attended public school but were very active in their youth groups at Presbyterian and United Methodist churches. Both emphasized about the importance of faith being their choice; their communities supported them, but the decision was ultimately their own. Stephanie Morikawa and Marlene Jensen grew up active in their local Catholic parishes, but both identified how they had never experienced a faith community like the one at Loyola Marymount University. For Stephanie, participating in her Catholic community through altar serving, being a lector, and singing in choir became a ritual of faith and spirituality that is important to her. Marlene echoed this idea, with the reservation that she experiences imposter syndrome in her religious identity. She struggles to detach historical religious beliefs from what the practice of Catholicism is today, noting that she personally differentiates between "participating fully" in her faith versus adhering to all Church teachings. Marlene longs for more representation in terms of women and people of color in the Catholic Church, and she connects this back to her imposter syndrome.



Both Victoria Capobianco and Gwyn Tanner attended Catholic schools while growing up and then later found their own paths to spirituality. During the process of confirmation preparation, Victoria realized what she wanted to take from her religious background and what she wanted to leave behind. Now, she reflects often on her personal values by journaling and spending time in nature. Gwyn struggled with freedom of artistic expression in Catholic schools, particularly with the requirement of a uniform and lack of dance education. She says she now finds fulfilment in activism and “artivism.” Her personal belief is “The best way to be a feminist is to try to understand what other people are going through without assuming what they are going through.” While she attended Catholic school, Victoria Shaw struggled because the school centered around specific ideas, and she felt that disagreeing with any single idea went against the whole school. She now finds exploration to be a fundamental aspect of her spirituality. She researches other faiths and finds practices that bring her peace.

Exploration emerged as a key word in my interviews with my queer friends who identify as religious and/or spiritual. My high school friend Ali Alderman and I share a similar upbringing, and we both came out as queer around the same time years later in college. Ali often speaks about how “love, in any form, is holy,” and she constantly researches and explores ways to expand her conception of her Catholic faith and upbringing. During the interview, we had a long conversation about redefining prayer as action, specifically as “posturing” oneself toward God or goodness. I often joke that I am bad at prayer, and Ali challenged me to look at my choreography and writing as a form of prayer. In her eyes, my whole thesis has been a long prayer, one in which I wrestled with the tenets of my faith and sought answers through artistry. This made me reach out to my friend Rachael Moreno, who frequently offers to pray for people or write love letters on Instagram. She practices her Catholic faith by finding little ways to

brighten people's day and asks the question, "How can you help people without physically being with them?"

Fati Beck echoes this loving sense of faith and spirituality. Raised with Muslim and Catholic mentors, Fati's current spiritual journey involves embracing the tensions of their queer, nonbinary, black femme identity and expanding stale religious definitions. Fati describes this process as a "queering" of religion and spirituality. Bri Ortiz spoke about the complexity of her identification with her "Latinidad," her queerness, and her Catholic upbringing. For Ortiz, her Latinidad and faith are culturally intertwined, and she struggles to connect her queerness to these identities. She recognizes how she finds solace in isolating her faith to just God and her; when all the outside influences are stripped away, it is easier to see how her identities are intertwined, accepted, and welcomed. Colton Kugler identifies his struggle with his faith as a grey space, a zone of existence where identities overlap and intertwine. For him, he finds valuing relationship over religion brings him peace as he navigates his identity as Christian and gay. Speaking with each of these people taught me so much about relationship and human connection. I recognized how I found so much meaning in the process and community that accompanied the development of my thesis, and these steps I take toward further research and development have given me hope during this period of isolation for the future of my work.

#### V. Looking Forward

So many of my plans have been overturned by the pandemic. Although this has been a disheartening end to my time at Loyola Marymount University, I am even more grateful to be an artist. Amidst the grief and mourning, I see resilience in myself and my community. Artists are always at the forefront of change, and I know that my work from the past for years has equipped me to adapt to the world to come. My personal mission statement is to reclaim, empower, and

sustain education through dance and through the pursuit of equity. These are the guiding tenets with which I want to shape my future.

In the next year, I am planning to live at my home in Colorado until the pandemic subsides. During this time of isolation, I am working on my website, editing my dance reel and resumes, and bolstering my online portfolio of writing. I am applying for a residency at a Denver art gallery Redline that is looking for artists who value community outreach. I reached out to them and although they have never worked with a dancer before, they are interested, given my background in dance education through the National Dance Education Organization and Movement Exchange. Once the area around me begins to open, I will apply for jobs in the dance community here. There are a few local contemporary companies I know well, and I can teach dance at local studios. I hope to return to Loyola Marymount University in the spring to restage the group portion of my thesis in the Student Concert. I have a few other choreography projects I would like to tackle – videoing my solo work from my thesis in a church, revisiting some other works to continue developing the ideas, making a series of improvisation videos in small spaces.

I received a position working for Jacob's Pillow this summer as a Public Relations Intern, and although the festival was cancelled this year, I want to return next summer. After, I will make the transition to New York City, where I hope to teach dance, choreograph, audition for Broadway, and continue writing dance reviews. Dancing for Gibney is my dream, and I would love to work for them in any capacity because I believe in their mission to make space for dance. Given my own love for ballet and my extensive research in queer theory, I am fascinated by the work of Ballez as well, in particular Katy Pyle's effort to queer ballet. I also want to stay involved with the Dance Education Laboratory and teach dance in New York City high schools. I hope to write for *The New York Times* as a dance critic. Working toward that goal, I want to

establish more writing connections by reaching out to dance publications like *LA Dance Chronicle* and *Dance Magazine*. I also hope to start publishing more of my poetry in journals and contests. Because so much of the next year is unclear, I am going to take this time to save money and to continue making relationships with people I care about and value.

In five years, I will be working in New York City as a dancer and choreographer. I will teach in public high schools and have my own class at Gibney. I will publish a poetry book and write for well-known dance publications. I know that when I turn 26, I will no longer be able to receive healthcare through my parents. Unless I have a job that provides health insurance, I will apply for graduate school. I want to pursue my MFA in Dance in order to become a professor. Currently, I like the MFA in Modern Dance program University of Utah, which provides fully funded Teaching Assistantships to offset the cost of tuition. Other schools I am investigating include New York University's Tisch School of the Arts, Hunter College, University of California at Irvine, University of Oregon, and St. Mary's College of California. Financial security is important to me, especially at this stage of my life, so I want to attend a university will not put me in debt.

In ten years, I hope to live on the West Coast, specifically in Portland or Seattle. I will be a professor at a university and working as a choreographer and activist in the local community. Providing equitable access to dance education is one of my personal beliefs, and I hope to work to develop consistent dance education in public schools. At Loyola Marymount University, I was able to begin the process of merging dance and equity through my writing and research, my teaching opportunities, and through my thesis. This has set me on a path that is artistically and personally fulfilling. Although I never considered becoming a teacher prior to my own college education – I came to college hoping to become a professional dancer and nothing else – I am so

drawn to the path of education. In part, it is because I want to pass on the gifts I have received from professors at Loyola Marymount University – gifts of consistency, confidence, acceptance, activism, and community. Creating a choreographic thesis ushered me into a research process rich in intellectualism and artistry, but richer in community. In the end, when everything is closed and we are dancing in our bedrooms, it is that community that matters after all.

Figure A

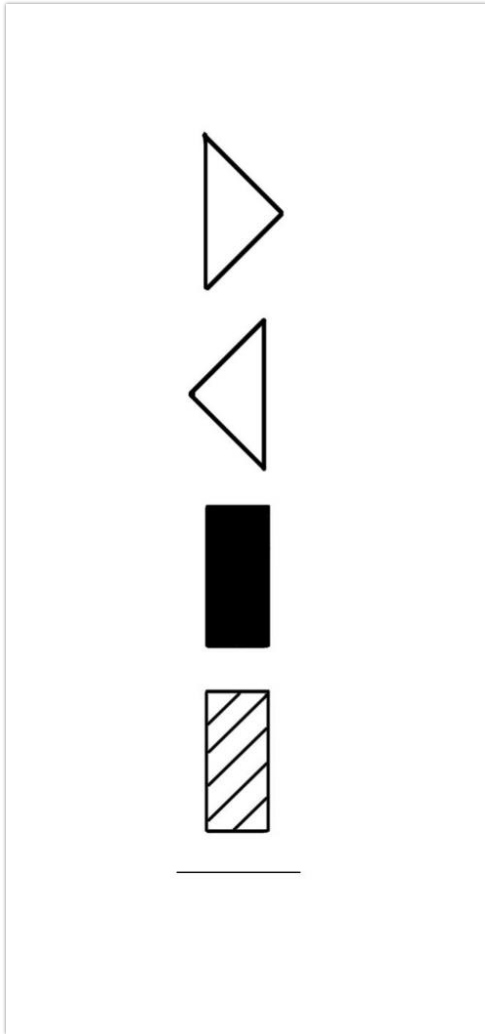


Figure B

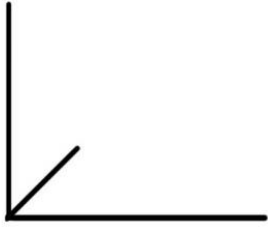


Figure C

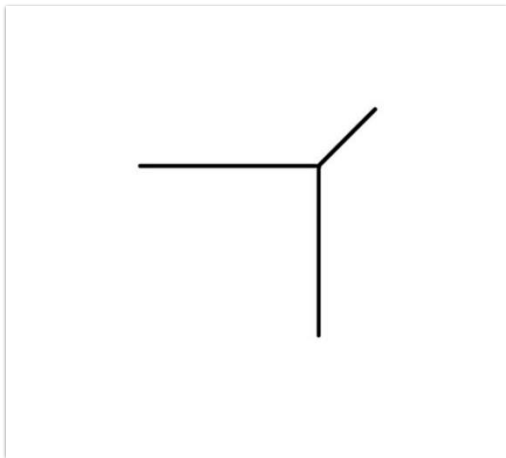


Figure D

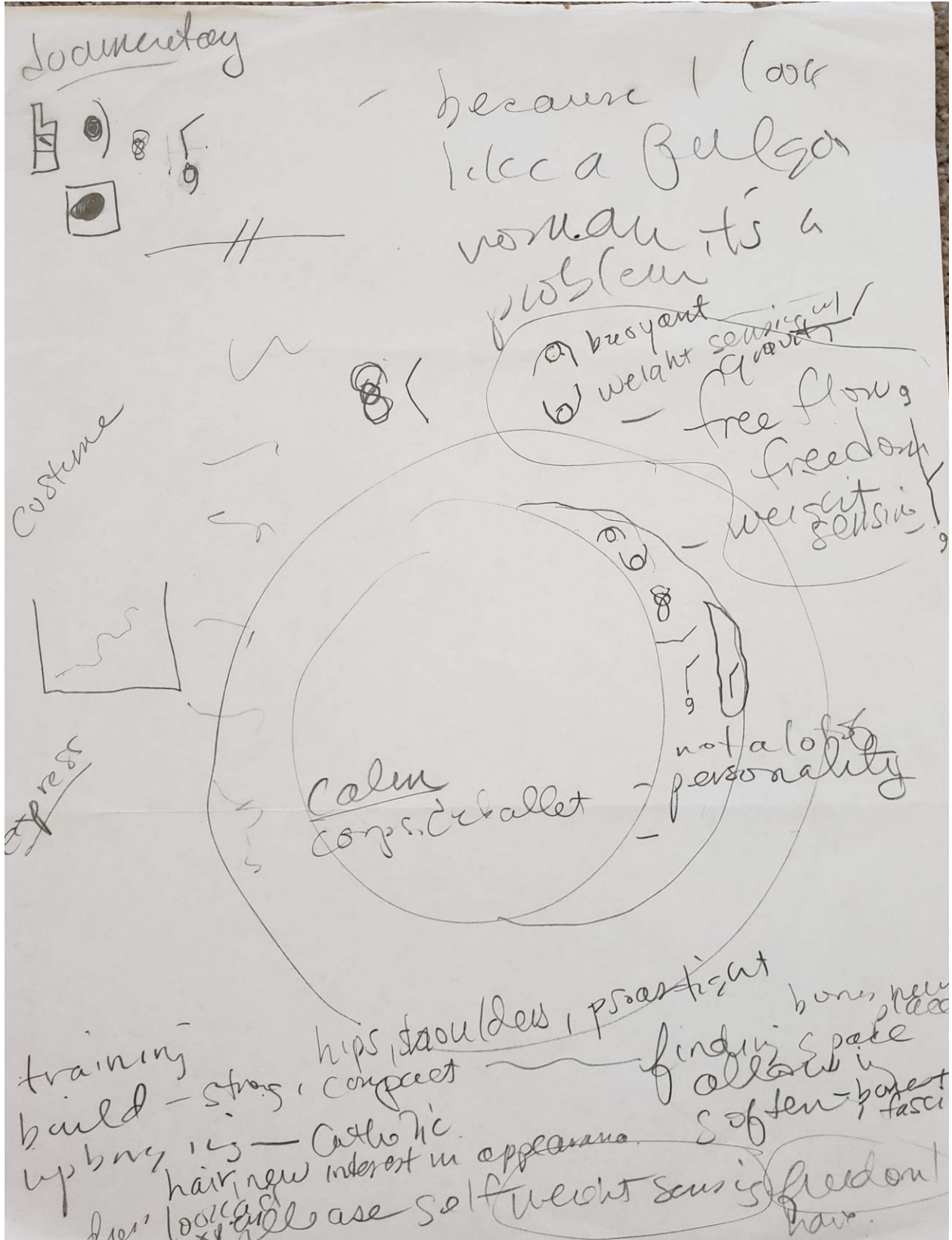




Figure E

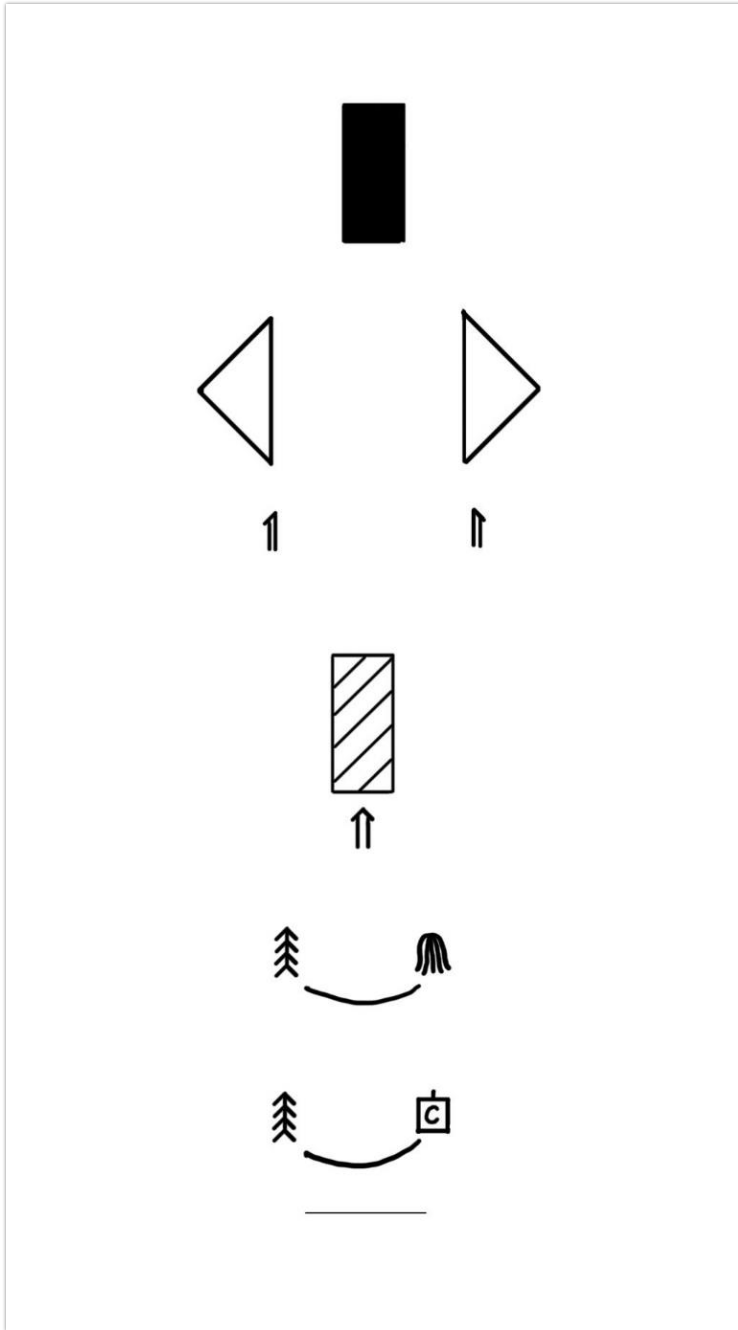


Figure F

**Exit Wounds** by Gillian Ebersole

I left the Church  
with half of my hope; a decent  
singing voice, a closet full  
of dowdy dresses, twelve  
plastic rosaries, a confirmation  
saint to watch over me, and an unhealthy  
sense of guilt, given to me by a priest  
who asked if I'd participated in any  
inappropriate touching.

At the time, I cried.  
Now, I grow nauseous  
at the irony of his accusation.

God must have a sick sense of humor  
giving humans a responsibility so fragile  
yet we're children with buttered hands –  
dishes slip from our grasp in the kitchen.

It scares me to think I'll feel this much  
pain my whole life  
which is, perhaps, an explanation  
for my appearance in the pews every Sunday.

Figure G

For Dancers:

1. Do you consider yourself to be religious/spiritual?
2. If yes, tell me about your faith background.
  - a. How has your relationship to your faith changed over time?
  - b. Do you practice your faith in any way through prayer/going to services/etc.?
  - c. Have you ever struggled to express yourself within your religious/spiritual community due to any part of your identity (gender, race, ethnicity, sexuality, etc.)?
3. If no, do you mind sharing your thoughts on religion/spirituality?
  - a. Do you have any practices or routines that are important for your mental/spiritual health?
4. What are things that are bringing you joy during this time?

For Non-Dancers:

Share about myself and the project.

1. Tell me about your faith/spiritual background.
2. How has your relationship to your faith changed over time?
3. Do you practice your faith in any way through prayer/going to services/etc.?
4. How does your identity and/or queerness affect your faith and vice versa? Do you see them as related/opposing/intertwined/separate, etc.?