

## Products of a Defective System

This interactive dance installation is filled with five allegorical representations of imperialism and a narrator representing capitalist imperialism that catalyzes each journey. The collaborative project spanned two years of intense academic and physical research. The intent of this work is to show the intersectionality of various oppressive systems and how they have been consistently active in the United States. The narrator is a personified version of the Capitoline wolf. She is painted in gold, wears gold armor and has two skulls on her breasts held in place by gold ribbon. She welcomes the audience and begins by welcoming the audience and recites her story,

*“Gather Round!  
I have a story to tell,  
About little boys Romulus and Remus.  
Lost little ones who found themselves in a forest.  
The story is usually told,  
that a very kind, sweet wolf,  
had mercy on these baby boys and gave them her milk.  
But I was not so innocent.  
I knew what I was doing.  
I knew who they would become.  
I made them that way.  
I knew Romulus would slay his brother,  
and he would come to found Rome!  
It’s a dog eat dog world, ya know?  
What a mama’s boy.  
He listened to everything I said.  
As Romulus grew stronger, so did I,  
and through him I consumed the world!  
But don’t think of me as a relic,  
just because they’re skeletons.  
I’m still burning flesh and blood.  
Would you like to meet some of my new children?  
I think they’re my best creations yet.”*

While she is telling the story, the five characters enter the space. The floor the audience and performers share has a shredded american flag scattered throughout. It is important to note here

that each of the characters detailed below were created entirely by the people embodying them. I will go into detail later about the process and pedagogy used to allow these characters to emerge. My role in this process was that of a facilitator and director, not a choreographer. The descriptions of each character are based on the casts' discussion, my perception and the individual's focus.

The first is a woman in underwear and a tank top carrying Cosmopolitan Magazine, as she crosses the space she is intently flipping through the pages. Once she finds her spot on the floor she sits on a pile of black fabric and picks up the mirror placed there. Her sound score is of various body modification commercials. The narrator interacts with her by telling her she isn't good enough and heavily critiques her body and actions. This character is of women's colonized bodies and the pressure of women's worth being equated to their physical appearance. As this character develops she covers her body in black fabric and peels off the skin on her face while crying her apologies to the audience.

The second character is a black male in african print pants with slash marks on his torso. He begins his movement in west african dance, but is blinded by the narrator and forcibly relocated to a different location in the space. His sound score informs the audience of the government's involvement in pushing crack cocaine through low income neighborhoods. As his character progresses the narrator tapes an IV bag filled with drugs to his arm, linking his character to the side effects of capitalism that leaves others, deliberately, in poverty. From then on his movement resembles various stages of addiction and loss. His narrative begins retelling a story known well; he begins in african roots and is forced to relocate, mimicking the transatlantic slave trade. The narrative continues in a contemporary context, commenting and living inside various structures that enforce slavery of people of color. This includes, but is not

limited to the government involved drug trade and housing and job discrimination that perpetuates crime in low income areas.

Continuing around the circle of characters, the third is a figure with a painted doll's face, pope hat, gold legs and a large red full body cape, poofed with red crinoline. Embroidered on the cape is a gold cross and gold embellishments. Her sound is sped up church bells. This character interacts mostly with the audience, trading rosaries for gold coins; if the audience gives up a coin the figure laughs trillingly, if denied the figure hisses. This character also preaches from higher ledges offering the kingdom of heaven for a donation of one thousand dollars. The character's movement resembles that of a hyper energetic marionette. Televangelists were the main inspiration for this critique of institutionalized religion, and how it has been used continuously as a means to gain capital. This figure continues to grow throughout the piece, becoming louder and louder, and eventually interacting with the women's oppression character. This interaction presents issues around the Catholic church's use of guilt and shame, especially around women's bodies. Presenting the christian ideas of skin and body being "dirty" and "bad." This character is unique because the narrator doesn't directly catalyze the figure's oppression, they seem to work together to further their agenda. The figure is basically a puppet to the narrator.

The next character is a mixed woman in lingerie. Half the lingerie is virginal, white and lacey. The other half is black leather with a dog collar, invoking S&M culture and violence. She plays through various sexual positions, lightly touching the audience and asking for their approval. Her character's intersectionality is the blending of sexual pressure placed on women and how this pressure is dependent on race. Black women are exoticized and often depicted with animalistic qualities. They are also shown as being sexually aggressive or able to handle more

violence. On the opposite end of the spectrum, white women are infantilized, usually shown as virgins waiting to be rescued. Inspiration and research for this image came from pornography. Most of the pornography of black women were of full bodied, curvy women; whereas white women were skinny, with small breasts and hips. As the piece develops she also shows how domestic violence and female comparison and animosity play roles in physical and sexual pressures.

The fourth character is a black male aggressively embodying the stereotypes he faces. He begins in a large white tee and baggy blue jeans. His hair is pulled out in multiple directions and he has grill in his mouth. He moves like gorilla and challenges the audience in his stance and demeanour. As the piece moves forward he begins to shed his clothing revealing snake skin on his body and pieces of reflective material. This is symbolic; he is reflecting the stereotype back on the audience, showing that it is born in the audience's own mind and projection. His movement begins to become more fluid and snake like, using the imagery of the snake as a powerful evil force. The underlying tone of this character is "If you are going to see me in this way, I am going to own it and throw it back at you." Towards the end of the piece he is working with the narrator, intimidating the audience, and violently interacting with the sexualized woman and the enslaved black male. He strongly depicts the stereotype placed on black males in the United States.

The final character is the only place of resistance towards the narrator and imperialistic pressure. It is a lower class black male, plainly dressed in a blue janitor suit, slowly sweeping up the pieces of the American flag scattered throughout the space. He continues this action throughout most of the piece, actively watching what is happening around him. His shift in character occurs when the narrator confronts him about his status as a blue collar worker. She

says “I gave you that” (referring to the broom) and “I made you” to which he replies, “You don’t know me” and continues to state “I’ll make my own country.” The narrator’s only response is, “I want to see you try.” He then encounters the enslaved black male and physically strives to raise him up with himself, but fails. He then sits on the floor with his pile of american flag pieces and begins to puzzle piece them together in a mismatch form, a new type of flag, while continuing to witness the chaos around him. In the midst of the chaos his character acts as a hopeful anchor for the audience. This character has a level of insight and confident stability to see and understand what is happening around him. He also has pride in the blue collar worker, rather than attempting to climb the capitalist ladder, he chooses himself and those around him to create something better. He defies the stereotype.

The process for this piece began when I returned from study in New Zealand, where I was heavily involved in an embodied political practice. The dancers at The University of Auckland worked with various Maori dance artists that created techniques and choreographies that focus on reclaiming Maori culture and land. When I returned to the states I was inspired to continue working and thinking in a political manner, but focusing on the United States’ own problematic political systems. I began studying a variety of academic sources about race, borders and the United States’ political land. The sources I landed upon were Jacqueline Shea Murphy’s, The People Have Never Stopped Dancing: Native American Modern Dance Histories, Anne Tucker’s Crime and Splendors: The Desert Cantos of Richard Misrach (especially Rebecca Solnit’s essay “Scapelands”) and Guillermo Gomez Pena and Laura Levine’s Conversations across Borders: A Performance Artist Converses with Theorists, Activists and Fellow Artists. From this intense academic study I began working with like minded artists in a physical and theoretical practice. We would attempt to develop various ways our physical body could

represent, remake or invoke the literal and emotional histories of the United States. In a way we were trying to re-write the history of america we had learned with new narratives to provide a more complete story.

This, of course, is tricky and confusing when our own bodies haven't directly lived the narratives we were reading and discussing. Everything we did pulled the project vertically and horizontally creating multiple pathways we could follow. The project was exploring sensitive subjects that are interconnected and distant. At the end of this phase of the project I created a book that organized all the notes, poetry, painting and rehearsal sketches from the past 6 months. This provided clarity of the specific topics. I titled the five topics we were researching *Time and Space*, *Who Writes History?*, *Bible Bodies*, *The Romanticized History of the American West*, and *Cowboy/Dominatrix*.

*Time and Space* began from looking at Native American history and how a part of their colonization was to force them into a different time construct. Rather than approaching and interacting with the world with the natural cycles that we see and experience, colonizers forced a linear time construct based on productivity. These conflicting notions of time revealed themselves, especially in native dance history. Most native ceremonies and dances were illegal by the 1800s because it wasn't a "productive" way to spend time and endangered the colonizers' assimilation efforts. We used this knowledge to critically analyze the words we use in reference to time in our everyday life. Words like lost, gained, wasted, chasing, enough, and precious came up for us. All of the words connoted time as linear and pushing, a standard that we are then are controlled by. Our view of time as colonized people is limited to a capitalistic approach to our bodies and the world.

This brings me to another topic, *Who Writes History?*. This question arose directly from my academic research. Who am I reading? What is their history and lens they are writing through? Do I agree? and What other stories aren't written or represented? Especially when I was looking at Native American histories, most of the narratives I was reading were not from the voice of the people being spoken about. We began to look at what we learned as "the History of the United States" revealing that what we learned history through the lens of white western men. A professor once told me, "History is written by the side of the victor." This couldn't be more true. This topic provided an awareness we needed to move forward. It became important that the project told some of the stories that aren't usually told.

*Bible Bodies* is looking at America's historical and current colonization of bodies linked to the Christian faith. The American colonizers came here to be able to practice their faith freely, and in the process imprisoned the people who lived here before or came after. The Christian view of the body as sin pervades how we culturally relate to touch and sex. We researched this by having each member talk about their personal history with religion. The witnesses in the room wrote notes about their body language and videoed them. We discovered that, even for those who didn't identify with a religion, there was a subconscious bow of the head when they said "god." Other discoveries were keeping legs crossed or retracting into the body when talking about religion; basically making oneself smaller. For the women in the research group, there was a deeply embedded shame or confusion around sex. The pressure to be clean, pure and virginal is a christianized colonized view of the body that still presents itself in contemporary culture.

*The Romanticized History of the American West*, was a topic most closely related to Crime and Splendors: The Desert Cantos of Richard Misrach. This research showed various

moments in history where people fabricated the story based on their desires for it. Solnit speaks eloquently and poetically about the reality of the west, with its bloodshed, nuclear remnants and open spaces in relation to the romanticized west filled with theatrical cowboys and indians, blurring the lines between reality and fantasy. She also makes a profound comparison between women and the west. Both open spaces, trampled over and defined by outside forces. For the colonizers the west was/is geographically open, it seems limitless; unlike the east with rolling green hills and intimate environments. The seemingly limitless land meant the “explorers” conducted themselves without self governing. This is exemplified in the atrocious and traumatic slaughter of indigenous people that occurred on this land, and still today, in how the military allows for and continues to rape and discard female bodies across the Mexican/American border. Again, the open space of the female body and the West experience colonizing trauma. The erroneous assumption that open space is somehow empty.

This falls into the final category of research *Cowboy/Dominatrix*. This image deals with power and privilege and how the gender binary provides a different relationship to each. The Cowboy is more specifically the Hollywood Cowboy which emerged as a defining figure of America, Pre World War 2. He was used as a symbol of white normalism and nationalism that was meant to cover the Great Migration and continual immigration. This continues to be the defining image of American masculinity in contemporary culture. The Dominatrix is a complex symbol in this research because she is a powerful female, however, her power is solely through her fetisized sexuality. Placing these images next to each other provides a clarity in how power and space are defined by gender. The white Cowboy has free range over land and is accepted by society as a positive force. The Dominatrix is desired, but shunned to the confines of a lair, her power is specific to her space. This complex image concluded the first six months of research



for the project. The overt and the concealed, the provided and the desired. The opposite ends of given or embodied power provided a place a reflection.

I took three months to critically look at what we developed. I noticed the lack of representation within the cast and how that was problematic to an inclusive discussion. Our research group was constituted of five white female dancers and one black male actor, and while they are all incredible thinkers and movers, the dominant discussion was about feminism, coming from a place of our upper middle class experience. They each provided important input to develop the project, but I understood that if I wanted the project to be effective and reach a larger audience, it would need to embody more types of experiences.

In the final month of reflection I took a workshop in Tijuana Mexico with La Pocha Nostra. La Pocha Nostra is an international collective that creates collaborative performance activism and oppositional art. They do this through a pedagogy of radical trust, which they teach in two week workshops around the world. This helped me reflect in an active way and provided me with tools I could use to allow others to access their embodied experience of the world and reveal it in a performative image. My time with La Pocha was invaluable to this project and my own art making.

When I returned to The States and this project I reached out to artists from across disciplines and cultural backgrounds, who were already talking and making art around the topics of race, class and gender. I gathered a group of seven artists; two dancers, a musician, an actor, a designer, a writer and a sculptor; whose cultural background had a spectrum of white, black and latina. Only two of the artists had been involved in the previous body of research.

Our rehearsals began by getting to know each other through La Pocha Nostra's pedagogy of gaze. These artists spent the first month engaging in a practice of seeing and being seen,

allowing a difficult place of vulnerability to surface. From that vulnerable place they began to move with each other based on impulse and trust. This promoted a practice of radical trust, nurturing and tenderness. This became the foundation of the process. Building from that foundation we began to move in a more confrontational way. Positioning the gaze with two artists seated in chairs facing each other and allowing the body to respond unhindered, knowing that it is always coming from the place of deep trust with one another.

Over the next few months our practice was of deep listening to the body's knowledge in response to one another. Feeling and being felt, seeing and being seen, hearing and being heard in vulnerability and totality, so that deep and uncomfortable experience could be presented and embodied. The next step to this was identifying what our bodies were telling us and transforming it into an image on another body. We began this in the physical form first, and then used costumes and props to more clearly define what we were saying. One of the artists in the piece called this practice "thumbnails." We began playing and experimenting with what and how we wanted to show our body's knowledge.

Once each artist had a clearer idea of the image and content they wanted to work with, they began to build it on them self. Living in their own image allowed them to feel it from the inside out and add movement. Finally, making a full circle, these images, which are the ones detailed in the beginning of this paper, began to respond physically with each other. Rather than working with each other as themselves, they were improvising as their character. This is complicated because the characters are derived from a place of self identity, but can't define them as a whole person. Most of the images come from the part of their identity that has been placed on them, their colonized body. Working with the intersectionality of combining images allowed them to become even more defined. The artists also began journaling with this practice

so that their voice was clear alongside the voices of the other artists. From here each journey was built.

We chose which pairings felt the most defined and imperative for each character. From there I placed the solo and paired interactions in an order that allowed each character to develop and be heard. Working with the musician we built a sound score that set the tone, provided information about each image and allowed each character to have a defining sound that follows them through the performance. The sound score progressively becomes more amplified and busy, adding to the chaos of the performers' journeys. The improvisational movement score and the set sound score became the performative project. Multiple voices coming together to present a personal and historical narrative of imperialism and oppression.

Moving forward and reflecting on how the piece was received by the audience I am able to find places of improvement. I feel like the project was effective, but also abrasive. I noticed a multitude of responses, from white females especially, of paralyzing white guilt. Other responses included anger and readings of black on black crime. These are all unintended negative readings of the piece. Finally I found the piece to be extremely depressing, with only one character and interaction providing a place of hope. I would shift the format so that there are more moments of rising above and finding a new ways to cope with the provided circumstances of capitalist imperialism. I also hope to create a piece with more artistry and aesthetic in combination with these difficult topics. I feel like placing these in combination with one another may help alleviate the crippling white guilt and anger. However, I understand that there is no way to determine how the audience will receive art, and there is no way to eliminate white guilt or anger, it is all a part of the anti-racist process. I am happy with how the piece presented itself

and can use this process and research as a stepping stone for many projects. The nature of these topics are multifaceted and the work that can stem from them is infinite.

### **Collaborators**

James Whitfield  
Danica Strushensky  
Mawiyah Dowd  
Maggie Fenning  
Andrew Terron Purvis  
Austin Blakely  
Nicole Diaz Pellot  
Ella Cuda  
Sarah Beranbaum  
Rhiannon Laymon  
Eric Singletary

### **Academic Assists**

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