

*The Physical Experience of Dance, Politics, and their Connecting Artistic Frameworks*

This essay and the described dance work, *migrate border line*, are not attempts to be or explain protest art. I am not directly challenging injustice or solving malgovernance.<sup>1</sup> Instead, I use my most recent dance work, *migrate border line*, as an example of theoretical efforts to delink policy and the art of government from Western hegemonic histories, and in their place, reveal the actions of communities through their ideologies and intrinsic choreographies. This analysis of my work through theoretical frameworks, drives forward the argument that dance itself is a re-performance of politics' unconsciously choreographic nature. This unpacking reveals the movement vocabulary of normative governmental actions and instead imagines this public force instead as choreography. These ideas explained throughout the essay are supported by Ana Vujanović's "Notes on the Politicality of Contemporary Dance," Gayatri Spivak's "Can the Subaltern Speak?" Walter Mignolo's "Citizenship, Knowledge, and the Limits of Humanity," and Michael Sakamoto's "Soil: Crisis, the cultural commons and performing South-east Asian in America", all articles that ask questions of connection, citizenship, and inadvertently, the role of dance within a politically charged environment. Through the following written inquiry and the support of my physical investigations, I ask the broader question whether dance, as a choreographic framework, succeeds in a re-performance of the art of government, and look to the future to see whether this viewpoint has the potential to unpack the ruling, Western hegemonic beliefs.

*migrate border line* was conceived from questions on community action and public re-performances of a politically private self. Born from an experience of grief on a transnational stage, I was asking "Where am I from? Who am I? and "Where do I go from here?" in tandem to

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<sup>1</sup> Karest Lewela and Humphries Sipalla, "The meaning of protest art to society" 2014.

a realization of my impact as a bi-racial, bi-national artist. Through personal practices of activating communal space in non-traditional ways, and experiences of bodily mass movement, I continue to unpack what my race and identity mean, especially as I endeavor to delink myself from the Western hegemonic views of a self. The work of *migrate border line* brought others into my personal space, dissolved the me-other/performer-audience boundaries, and allowed a meditation on publically shared environments. The diverse cast was divided into a quartet and duet. The performance was improvisatory in nature and used movement scores to model utopic modes of co-existence that eventually evolved into denser, more complicated portrayals of true interpersonal relationships and the movements that surround them. Each section of the work was paired with a physical element. The quartet created “homes” out of soil, while the duet drew their own border lines with chalk. The soil “homes” were at first separated in space, but eventually spread across the floor as the dancers became more involved and aware of each other’s movement. The second section, the duet, endeavored to re-claim the mess made by the quartet, and reinstated the utopic mode of movement through a realignment of the space with chalk-drawn boxes. However, the dissolving of the independent soil “homes” was mirrored by the once perfect chalk lines that eventually dispersed to dust. The duet was also tasked with increasing their awareness to their own relationship, an effort to reveal e their private interactions to the audience. The third section was a study on a large group’s ability to co-exist in a public space. As the choreographer, I entered the performance for the first time and transected the space with long lines of blue painter’s tape. While not confrontational, I asked the audience to follow suit and soon the space filled with people and tape. The audience’s unconscious mediation succeeds in part because they are forced to break out of their self-imposed utopic performance-attending mode and instead cross the space, communicate, and work together to create a shared

environment. The physical elements used in *migrate border line* are temporary, but allow the cast and audience to physicalize collaboration. These broad ideas that surround and support the piece arise from the works of Vujanović, Spivak, Mignolo, and Sakamoto, and allow me to then question the larger political validity and success of dance as a medium to frame a re-performance of the art of government.

Ana Vujanović's article "Notes on the Politicality of Contemporary Dance" is the immediate groundwork for my post-performance analysis of *migrate border line*. Her focus in the text is not on the "particular politics of contemporary dance," but instead on the way art "acts and intervenes in the public sphere."<sup>2</sup> I agree with Vujanović that art and dance are public social events and in the course of a dance performance, relationships and the power plays are physically showcased while avoiding directly political statements. Art-making emphasizes these relationships, creating a "grid of politicality that characterizes each and every performance."<sup>3</sup> However, relating these concepts developed through the unpacking of *migrate border line* back to normative government activities, goes beyond and challenges Vujanović proposed, slightly-too-perfect grid politicality.

Gayatri Spivak in "Can the Subaltern Speak?" recognizes the utopic nature of her belief that intellectuals should recognize their privilege and not separate themselves from that reality when conducting research.<sup>4</sup> However, it is practice that is not always executed. This model of a utopic choreographic mode is not only seen within my own work, but also in Vujanović's through the realization that policy changing art "rarely exist[s] in pure forms."<sup>5</sup> Vujanović also

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<sup>2</sup> Ana Vujanović, "Notes on the Politicality of Contemporary Dance" 181.

<sup>3</sup> Ana Vujanović, "Notes on the Politicality of Contemporary Dance" 181.

<sup>4</sup> Gayatri Spivak, "Can the Subaltern Speak?" 87.

<sup>5</sup> Ana Vujanović, "Notes on the Politicality of Contemporary Dance" 185.

mirrors Spivakian thought by stating that art should never takes its socially elevated status for granted. Instead Vujanović's perceived grid of politicality, which I am utilizing to frame my own work, should only be used as an effort to co-currently "broaden and sharpen" assessments of works.<sup>6</sup> On a larger scale, the success of dance's framework as a re-performance of the art of government occurs because of Vujanović's phrase "broaden and sharpen".<sup>7</sup> This framework succeeds in part due to the ideologies that work as the vocabulary and choreography of social movements. *migrate border line* works in tandem with this conceptual activity and acts as a dance-centric example of governmental re-performance.

Walter Mignolo's article "Citizenship, Knowledge, and the Limits of Humanity," emphasizes the building of communities and how that relates to citizenship – a construct built from hierarchies created and executed by white European Christianity.<sup>8</sup> Through the tackling of questions like "Who exactly is forced to move through mass migrations?", Mignolo explores this human movement as a type of choreographic vocabulary and therefore, a potential performance of dance.<sup>9</sup> This migrant movement however, is often in reaction to being stateless or lacking citizenship while, the migratory movement of *migrate border line*, expressed through bodies, soil "homes", chalk, and tape is considerably less traumatic. However, the work does co-currently exist alongside Mignolo's attempts to discover the movement of exploring and through that the undoing colonial matrices of power.<sup>10</sup> Together, these two forms of mass movement focus on the delinking of governments from Western hegemonic histories and attempt to raise awareness to

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<sup>6</sup> Ana Vujanović, "Notes on the Politicality of Contemporary Dance" 185.

<sup>7</sup> Ana Vujanović, "Notes on the Politicality of Contemporary Dance" 185.

<sup>8</sup> Walter Mignolo, "Citizenship, Knowledge, and the Limits of Humanity" 313.

<sup>9</sup> Hannah Schwadron, Dance Theory Lecture, 2017.

<sup>10</sup> Walter Mignolo, "Citizenship, Knowledge, and the Limits of Humanity" 319.

oppressed communities, ideologies, and choreographies that may help to heal a community through awareness, communication, and politically parallel dance practices.

Michael Sakamoto's article, *Soil: Crisis, the cultural commons and performing South-east Asian in American*, directly relates to my own transnational identity questions and aids in the unpacking of my own work to create a larger statement on whether dance can successfully re-perform politics. In the article, Sakamoto perceives the "cultural commons" or "mutating source of cultural sustenance" as a place for transnational identities to perform the struggle of understanding a true self.<sup>11</sup> These "commons" can also be perceived in *migrate border line* through my attempts to reconcile the bodily contradictions the public eye forces upon moving persons; for example, ideas about how a white body versus a black body can or should move. Sakamoto grounds his work in these overarching questions of contested social values and bodily politics and allows me to further emphasize and extend my own questions of dance-making as a potential parallel grid work of choreographed politics.<sup>12</sup> Through this work, I effort to raise social, racial, and geographic characteristics of mine and others' identities to charge and alter the policies at which my audience views performance. This creates a space for the audience to engage in their civic duty in a non-normative political practice. Dance-making creates a space of political growth and awareness in which to break apart Western ideals on how bodies interact within structured governments. This choreography mirrors the experiences Sakamoto details of transnational artists as they attempt to move across man-made borders in order to navigate their

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<sup>11</sup> Michael Sakamoto, "Soil: Crisis, the cultural commons and performing South-east Asian in America" 105.

<sup>12</sup> Michael Sakamoto, "Soil: Crisis, the cultural commons and performing South-east Asian in America" 106.

South-east Asian and American cultures.<sup>13</sup> *migrate border line* addresses the physicality of governed boundaries through the duet's and audience's experiences with the movement behind creating chalky borders. The work as a whole, questions, as Sakamoto does, whether those who participate in these bodily practices of crossing man-made border engage more broadly in their political and artistic environments.

Through my physical investigation of interpersonal relationships, power shifts within a group, and public reactions towards mass movements directed by government forces, *migrate border line* succeeds as a model of a utopic mode the art of government. The basis of my written research, experience creating, and subsequently performing *migrate border line*, is framed theoretically through texts by Vujanović, Spivak, Mignolo, and Sakamoto. Together, the dance and written works detail how and why dance re-performs political actions and governmental choreographies. This theoretical framework support *migrate border line* and allow a delinkage from hegemonic forces and in their place, bring forward the choreographies of a communities' politicality. These interpersonal relationships directly mirror those in the quartet and duet sections of my own work, and act as examples of how I am using this choreographic framework to investigate my own curiosities about relationships, group dynamics, and reactions towards politically driven mass movements. Through this inquiry however, I do believe in the performance of the art of government's choreographic nature and continue to ask what is at stake physically through this delinking action away from Western hegemonic forces.

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<sup>13</sup> Michael Sakamoto, "Soil: Crisis, the cultural commons and performing South-east Asian in America" 104.