

“Drop!” she said, so I dropped. A stillness; then, “Get up.” We got up. We walked in circles and in figure eights at varying speeds and directions. Then, again, “Drop.”

I’ve crossed several borders: I’ve been to France, to England, to Ireland, to Spain, and to Canada. I’ve learned about international language, food, art, culture, and history, and I will continue to learn in college, majoring in French and studying abroad. I have been fortunate to have crossed borders as a traveler. This day, however -- the day that I was told repeatedly to drop -- I would learn what it was like to cross a border in a different way: not as a traveler, but as a migrant.

This day was my first audition as a dance major at UNC-Charlotte. There were several pieces to be chosen for. One was a piece of repertory from Delfos Danza, a renowned Mexican contemporary dance company led by choreographer Claudia Lavista. Claudia Lavista was there in that audition and she kept telling us to drop.

I was told in advance that Claudia’s piece had something to do with migration -- it was called “PROW,” like the front of a ship on which refugees and immigrants travel. After this audition, I decided I didn’t particularly like the falling, and if that was what it was going to be, well, I didn’t want to do it. But, alas, two days later, my name was written under Claudia’s on the cast listing: I was cast as one of eight in “PROW.”

We spent seven months rehearsing and performing. I had to learn how to fall and to not be afraid. I had to be ok with taking risks and I had to understand that not everything was going to work out. Most importantly, I had to put myself in the shoes of an international migrant and, guided through the perspective of an international choreographer, learned the urgency of migration for both migrant and bystander.

I already had experience hearing about the plight of immigrants. The majority of my friends are the children of or themselves immigrants. I’ve heard about how their parents crossed the border, one mother when she was 6 months pregnant. I’ve heard about their own stories, like Miracle, who was born in the middle of a civil war in Nigeria, named in awe by the nurse who delivered her. But when I started dancing it, my understanding suddenly changed, because when you dance something, you live it. Before, I knew about the stories, but I didn’t really know about the feeling: Crossing the border is like running in a circle for twenty minutes straight through smoke and the heat of blue lights, and you can’t see and you can’t breathe, and for some reason you keep falling. Your knees get skinned and your feet bleed and you start to have a pain in your left ankle that hurts when you jump. At the end of “PROW,” a border is created with

clothing -- the dancers are split four and four on each side and we can't cross: On top of the strenuous journey, upon reaching the end, you may not even be able to cross the border.

I'm not going to pretend that now I know what it's like to be a migrant. Of course I don't. But I am closer to understanding now than before, because art gives you a new understanding of things. Because of my friends, I think about immigration and refugee issues a lot, but unlike for them, it doesn't control how I live. Being placed in an artwork where I *had* to live this issue forced me to put all of my energy, all of my hopes and fears, and all of my thoughts into it, and made me more aware of the urgency of the situation.

"PROW" was 20 minutes of running and falling, and I hate running (my mile time in high school was thirteen minutes), but real migrants *have* to do this all day, whether physically or emotionally; their journey can't wait and can't stop. Having experienced even a little of this, I now realize that I *should* be thinking about this issue every morning and every night and in between, because if I don't, and we, as the comfortable, don't act on this issue -- help make these journeys easier -- then they will have to *keep* running, not just for 20 minutes at a time, but for lifetimes.

The arts are a way to remove oneself from one's own life and imagine what it's like to be someone or something else. Dance allows the dancer to feel a different life and an audience to witness one. For those of us dancing and watching, we were able to live the urgency of migration, and recognize its prevalence to the world. I have learned not only a new perspective and compassion for migrants and refugees, but a responsibility to immediately address the issue. For now, having heard the stories of my friends, heard the experience of a Mexican citizen, Claudia (who has several times crossed the border, herself), and, most importantly, stepped into the role of a migrant, I have become a witness.

This May, I will travel to France to see my sister who is studying abroad, and I look forward to one day studying abroad, myself. My mother and father will be with me on this trip, but we will not be alone. Beside us will be the migrants who carried me through "PROW," the brave whom I once encountered. They are my companions, too.