

HOME

A LIVE DANCE SERIES

Sunsae' Davis
Integrative Project
2018-19



Introduction

My youth experience has been developed in an inner-city in Michigan called Flint. In 1908 Flint became the city where everyone wanted to move to due to the supplement of work, General Motors.¹ This city was booming and banging, but somehow this place turned upside down and never returned. In 1999 General Motors closed its historic Buick complex and eventually in 2008 Delphi's Flint East site was demolished.² The jobs were gone, homes were abandoned, schools were closing, and crime took over. As a kid, I would ride my bike up and down the block and I would be able to enjoy the neighborhoods, while meeting up with my friends to play. Now, I cannot even walk outside without double checking if there is someone shooting. As a teenager, my parents had to make a cautious decision on what school to send me to because the system was not about pro-education. In 2018, my parents' house was shot into due to a drive-by on our street, the same street I rode my bike up and down on. With all of these issues, Flint has to also embark on a water crisis causing all the community's assessable water to be contaminated with lead since 2014.³ Flint use to be a city where everyone knew of everyone, a small place with comfort, love, and community; a place to call home. Flint is not the same and outsiders only see the negative attributes, but it is time for a change.

¹ Keith Bradsher. "G.M to Close Car Factory, Delivering Big Blow to Flint". *The New York Times*. November 22, 1997. Accessed 22 December 2018. <https://www.nytimes.com/1997/11/22/business/gm-to-close-car-factory-delivering-big-blow-to-flint.html>.

² Ron Fonger. "Demolition at Delphi Flint East to start this month". *MLive*. March 31, 2008. Accessed 22 December 2018. http://blog.mlive.com/flintjournal/newsnow/2008/03/demolition_at_delphi_flint_eas.html.

³ Bryan Brown. "Poison in the Water". *Junior Scholastic*. March 21, 2016. Accessed 2 January 2019. <https://junior.scholastic.com/issues/2015-16/032116/poison-in-the-water.html#1030L>.

With my love and passion for my city, I have used the art form of dance and my skills of video documentation to create *Home*. A series of dances collectively reflecting the history and issues Flint, Michigan has undertaken. It is a collaboration of dance, music and video documentation of Flint such as the people, the water and the homes. I wanted to analyze what happens to people's idea of home when their home has dealt with severe issues such as loss of jobs, abandonment of homes, school closings, crimes and an infamous water crisis.

At the beginning of this project I started to interview people who were born and raised in Flint, and I asked them all the same question, would you still consider Flint to be your home? I realized I was not just creating this project for others to keep hope for their city. I needed to answer the question if I still considered Flint to be my home. Through the process and collaboration with others I learned Flint, my city, my home is not a lost cause. This project is a performance which displays the personal connections and explanation of the endeavors Flint has faced while using the culture of hip hop as a format. I had the help of Flint collaborators to perform, create music and design custom dance wear for the production. *Home* informed two different kinds of audiences, Flint residents and outside residents. Flint will be rebuilt with hope even after dealing with the storm.

Contextual Discussion

Flint's History

Flint is a small urban city in Michigan which has a great history of the start of General Motors, rugged environment, crucial endeavors of school closings, crimes, and the infamous water crisis. The Rise and Fall of Flint, Michigan began with car industry of

General Motors. In the *Roger & Me* film, General Motors was founded in 1908 in Flint, which led numerous of people to move into town for the prominent factory job.⁴

According to New York Times, A sit-down strike formed by the employees in 1937 which led to forming the United Automobile Workers Union. Since then this specific GM assembly has been demolished, and all the workers had to seek other jobs.⁵

Way too many individuals began to live without jobs after the demolish of different sites of General Motors which eventually led to debt within the city as Lazovic has described.⁶ Homes have rapidly been abandoned ever since General Motors leaving. Crimes elevated, and Flint became the most dangerous city in America in 2012.⁷ Schools closing were a result from the poverty and due to people moving out of town. The city closed over 20 public schools including elementary, middle, and high school within the last 10 years.⁸

⁴ Michael Moore, *Roger & Me*, Film, 1 hour 31 minutes, 1989.

⁵ Keith Bradsher. "G.M to Close Car Factory, Delivering Big Blow to Flint". *The New York Times*. November 22, 1997. Accessed 22 December 2018. <https://www.nytimes.com/1997/11/22/business/gm-to-close-car-factory-delivering-big-blow-to-flint.html>.

⁶ Brandon Lazovic. "The Rise and Fall of Flint, Michigan Beginning In The 1800s". *ODYSSEY*. February 16, 2016. Accessed 22 December 2018. <https://www.theodysseyonline.com/rise-fall-flint-michigan-beginning-1800s>.

⁷ Pamela Engel, Erin Fuchs and Christina Sterbenz. "How Flint, Michigan, became one of the most dangerous cities in America". *Business Insider*. January 17, 2016. Accessed 22 December 2018. <https://www.businessinsider.com/why-is-flint-michigan-dangerous-2016-1>.

⁸ Dominic Adams. "Half of closed Flint schools over last 10 years in predominantly black neighborhoods in northwest quadrant". *MLive*. May 12, 2013. Accessed 22 December 2018. https://www.mlive.com/news/flint/2013/05/neighborhoods_around_closed_fl.html.

In 2014, the Governor Rick Snyder announced the city had started to tackle a water crisis within all of Flint. After switching from Detroit water to the Flint River to save money, the pipes were corroded with lead and had affected most of the water supply the community used. This led to people getting sick including children under the ages of 3 and searching for clean water to drink and bathe in, while also still having to pay for water bills. Needless to say, five years later the water and pipes have yet to be fixed 100 percent.

Flint's Hip Hop Culture

As a resident, I know at first hand hip hop is a big representation of my city's culture. Hip hop lives and breathes through the concepts of dance, music and fashion. It is a form of expression for black Americans to use to address personal, economic and political issues. Not only it is an art form throughout the city, but it is one of the key elements of the lifestyle in Flint. Price III describes hip hop as a result deprived from African Americans formulating to express the issues of gang violence and poverty. Hip hop has been a key tool to celebrating the voice of others. From *Hip Hop Culture*, "The most effective and perhaps most revealing activist projects within Hip Hop may be those bringing artists together, often for the first time, to offer creative works for public consumption in order to raise money and resources for particular causes."⁹ I wanted to understand how hip hop and activism could enhance the performance and give it substance.

⁹ Emmett G Price II. *Hip Hop Culture*. (Santa Barbara, California: ABC-CLIO, Inc, 2006), 65.

Dance and Documentation for Community

The overall goal of the project should be a result of what I am passionate about and what I see myself doing after I graduate from college. My passion and communication come from the form of dance. Dance allows an audience to see through the flow of movement and understand a story in a new perspective. The literal and the abstract are both expressed through the impact of dance.

Artists and choreographers have used their own personal experiences to explain the specific issues individuals deal with to show relatability. These are artists who have created pieces within dance-based mediums and video on urban culture and personal perspectives.



Figure 1
A Letter to my Nephew, Choreographed by
Bill T. Jones, 2017.

Bill T. Jones presented a piece called *A Letter to my Nephew* at the Michigan Opera Theatre in Detroit.¹⁰ It focused on using a very personal African American story of a talented dancer dealing with addiction and the abstraction of movement with the inspiration of local hip hop and funk culture. His use of dance and formulation of each scene as a postcard to tell this story motivated me to think of using vignettes as a story telling base of my performance.



Figure 2
Precipitate, Choreographed by Emma Davis,
2016.

My former instructor and choreographer Emma Davis choreographed a piece called *Precipitate* for the annual Spring Dance Concert at the University of Michigan Flint in 2016, inspired by the Flint Water Crisis using water bottles to enhance the

¹⁰ Thea Singer. "Bill T. Jones's 'Letter' is a powerful testament". *BostonGlobe*. November 12, 2016. Accessed 22 December 2018. <https://www.bostonglobe.com/arts/theater/dance/2016/11/12/jones-letter-powerful-testament/9Q7XeJX6nALHixNzlCuhkO/story.html>.

meaning of a terrible tragedy.¹¹ I was inspired by the movement of communication from the dancers, which led me to understand the significance of collaboration on stage.



Figure 3
Black Stains, Sisters Unite Productions,
2018.

Sisters Unite Productions is a group of female artists who create visually compelling films focusing on social issues and emotional curiosity. Sisters Unite Productions created a piece called *Black Stains* which analyzes black men encompassing a broad spectrum of age, background, and experience woven with dance and navigating through complex racial issues.¹² This piece idealizes the structure of

¹¹ Roberto Acosta. "Flint water crisis inspires portion of UM-Flint spring dance performance". *MLive*. April 15, 2016. Accessed 22 December 2018. https://www.mlive.com/news/flint/2016/04/flint_water_crisis_inspires_po.html.

¹² Sisters Unite Productions, *Black Stains*, Film, 2018, <http://www.sistersunitepro.com/work#/blackstains/>.

identity and what it means in a black man's world. This allowed me to use peoples' stories as a way of being heard through the construct of dance.

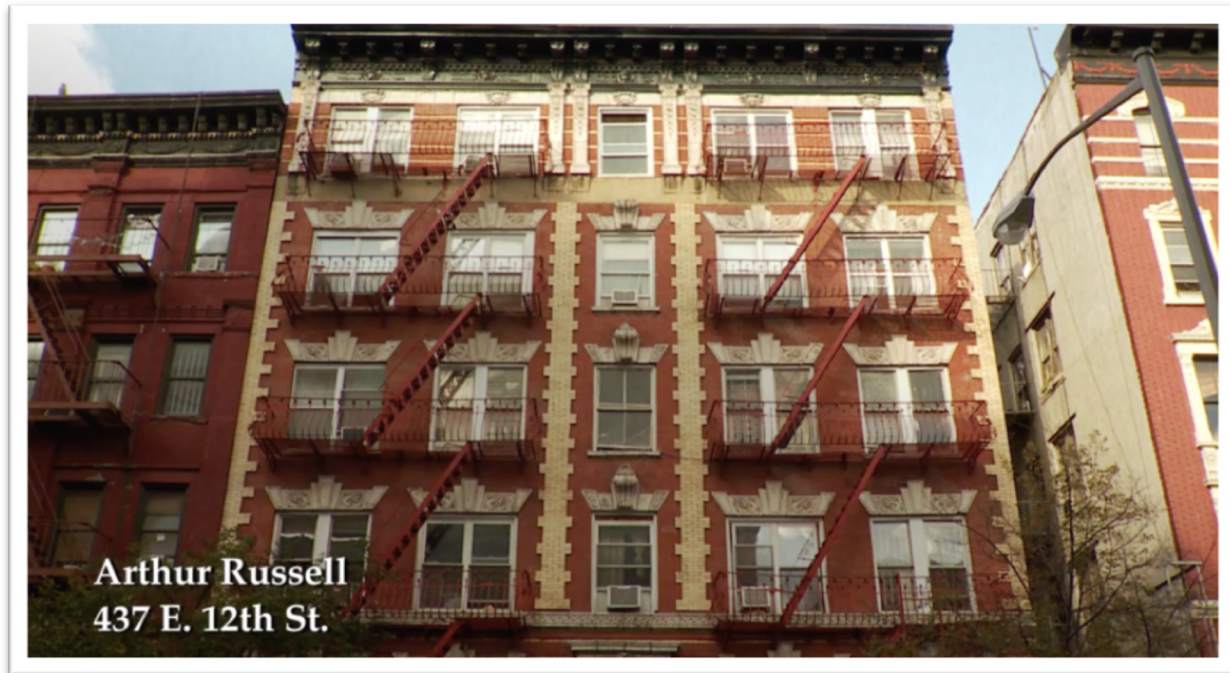


Figure 4
Last Address, Film by Ira Sachs, 2010.

An artist named Ira Sachs, who has created a film made up of exterior homes of New York artists who died of AIDs in the last thirty years titled *Last Address*. This piece focuses on the architecture and ghostliness of the homes where these artists are no longer present. It gives a piece of who these people were and an emotional attachment of where they lived.¹³ *Last Address* usage of building imagery and non-verbal communication gave me recognition of how I could utilize the environment of Flint and the setting as another element to display in a video projection.

¹³ Ira Sachs, *Last Address*, Film, 8 minutes 37 seconds, 2010, <https://vimeo.com/9940327>.



Figure 5
Beware the Dandelions, Created by
Complex Movements, 2015.

I started to research other performances or projects that used community collaboration as a tool to emphasize the subject matter such as Complex Movements. Complex movements are a group of artists based out of Detroit who collectively support and create work on communities in issued transformation. They have created a piece called *Beware the Dandelions*, which uses video installation and performance to capture the barriers and social justice of Detroit.¹⁴ Detroit and Flint are similar cities who have gone through traumatizing events. This group's style of video projecting and performance assured the importance of stylization and purpose of what these two elements could give to an audience on such a strong subject matter.

¹⁴ Complex Movements, *Beware of the Dandelions*, Film, 7 minutes 37 seconds, 2017, <https://vimeo.com/196201236>.

Methodology

The Research

Flint

The people of Flint became my starting point. I gathered a list of questions I would ask community members who still live in Flint and members who have moved away. These were the questions:

1. What was it like growing up in Flint? Good and Bad? What struggles did you have to deal with?
2. Will you leave Flint in the future or do you want to stay?
3. Would still consider Flint your home?
4. Do you have hope for Flint? And do you think that the community as a whole is being positive about the issues that are going on or do you think that they've lost hope for it to be better?
5. Do you believe that Flint has the best opportunities (Education, Work, Programs, High school, Funding, etc.) or do you think the city lack opportunities which may lead people to feel like they're stuck and not want to strive to their abilities?
6. What are the biggest issues that have affected you the most?
7. If you could change anything in Flint what would it be?

These interviews assisted me with receiving full understanding of other people's perceptions about Flint, Michigan. I noticed patterns in which responses I expected and did not expect.

Expected Responses:

1. "Flint definitely lack opportunities. The public schools have declined so much. If students cannot depend on their schools how do people expect for them to go to college? If the school systems were better, then I think things would be a lot better."

2. “Flint most definitely holds people back due to the lack of resources, poor education, work, etc. You have to want to do better to be better when you’re from Flint because I feel as if it’s easy to get stuck and not do anything.”

I felt these were expected answers because Flint’s environment generated the community to feel this way. We don’t even want to stay in this city because of the lack of resources and unhealthy atmosphere.

Unexpected Responses:

1. “Flint will always be my home. I grew up here and I decided to go to college here because I love being close to where my family is. This is home for me because this is the place I feel most attached to and comfortable with. I just love my city.”
2. “Flint is Forever!”

I knew this response would be the most important but based off of the negative feelings about the city, I did not think people to still consider it to be home which gave me hope people still love Flint.

These interviewees were born and raised in Flint and they all have different experiences in it. This process made me realize the real stories have not been heard yet from outside individuals.

After the interviews, this made my decision one hundred percent clear I would collaborate with people from the city of Flint. I wanted this project to involve as many people as possible to encapsulate the voices and experiences of the Flint community.

*The Ideas and Iterations*Fall 2018

At the beginning of this project I thought I wanted to combine reality and fantasy with distributing the concerns of Flint. Flint's story would be the most essential part to the performance. I started to brainstorm and figure out what kind of story the audience would connect to the most. The harsh reality of life is difficult to grasp and cope with, while in fictional stories there are life difficulties, but colored with fun adventures and happy endings. I took inspiration from concepts of *Alice in Wonderland* and *The Wizard of Oz*. Combining the two would be a contrast of what Flint is dealing with and a way to overcome it.

I would create four fictional characters who reflected from my past dance recitals. I, the main character, would be in deep conflict with herself about rejection and the issues of having opportunity in her city. She would embark on a journey and meet a scarecrow, a witch, a pirate and a mermaid. All of these fictional characters would symbolize an issue within Flint and the main character would realize her passion for dance could possibly help her home along with the other character's needs. The plan would be to perform all five scenes in twenty minutes. After overlooking everything, I realized the story of Flint was getting lost into all of the fictional elements. I knew something had to be changed because my goal was to make sure Flint was represented the correct way without being offensive or the issues being overlooked.

Winter 2019

I had to ask myself at the halfway mark of this process, what exactly is my intention for this performance? Why am I making this? I concluded and recognized this

piece is for the people. It is for the dancers, the musicians, the clothing designers, the flint residents, the non-residents and me. It is a project where the concept of home is conformed and emotionally invested into the eyes of the people.

The first thing I did was scratch the fantasy elements of my project. I wanted to make sure I was able to discuss multiple issues of Flint accurately. I wanted to continue to use the same issues and the same scenes, but the dancers would represent the issue itself and not a fictional character within the issue. This performance became a live dance series which included original music, original dance choreography, original dance wear, and video projection. It consists of four scenes: "The Rise and Fall of General Motors", "The Community", "The Water Crisis", and "The Rebuild". Overall, the decisions I made to take a new direction for this piece allowed me to be more confident and extremely excited for the end production.

The Making

Collaboration

Collaborating with different people from Flint was the first step to the making process. I had to organize meetings, give full details of the project and make sure every person was on board with what their responsibilities were. Collaborating included dance rehearsals, creating music, filming and editing video documentation, and creating dance wear for the show. My goal was to make sure everyone had their own creative input on each element of their work alongside what I guided them with.

Music

I knew the tone of the performance would be emotional and comprise the act of survival. These two moods had to be displayed within the music. I was looking for

multiple sounds such as slow and fast pace with aggression and passionate emotes. I thought of a person I had known since elementary school who was musically inclined and created beats for artists. I searched his website to find if his beats were equivalent to the ideas I had for music. I contacted him, and he had no problem collaborating with me. In his music I heard a variety of styles; smooth jazz, funk, and pop along with hip hop. He gave me his drive of all his work and I chose five songs to correlate with each scene which were titled *1103*, *12 17 #1 wave*, *What I See*, *Just the Both of Us*, and *Float*.

I also wanted a song where it represented the rebuilding of Flint from the people's perspective and the positivity the city holds. I used my resources and asked my brother, cousin and friend to create a song with specific guidelines of speaking about Flint in a positive light while referring to their own experiences in Flint. They decided to title the song *Lead by the City*.

Dance Wear

Street wear clothing is what hip-hop dancers normally wear for any rehearsals or performances because it fits the style of dance and it is the most comfortable to move in. I wanted the dance wear to fit the scenes they belonged to. The general motors scene is a rustic and earth tone coloring to represent the past. The community scene is a representation of colors of the public high schools closing and the only one which remains. The water crisis scene is a water and earth tone coloring to represent the damage of the water. I researched clothing designers who were based out of Flint, and I chose based on the quality of the designs from their social media accounts and websites. I told the designers the color palettes and the attire of the outfits, while they

delivered their creativity. The clothing designers are Kalm Clothing founded by Kiara S. Tyler, Deelux.Styles founded by DeAir Lewis and Drip Lordz founded by Garitt Williams and Steph Luciano.

Choreography

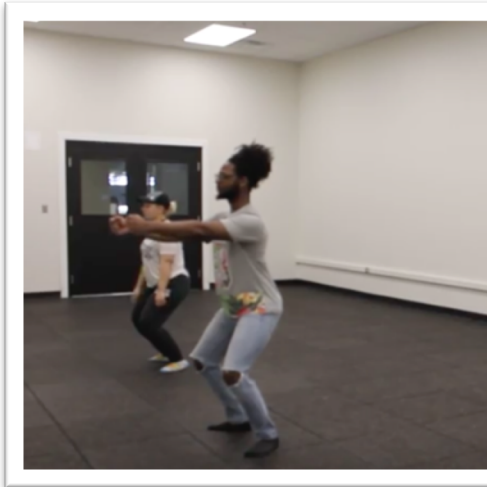


Figure 6
Sunsaë' Davis and Sandrese Green (Gesture of a car) Rehearsal, 2019.

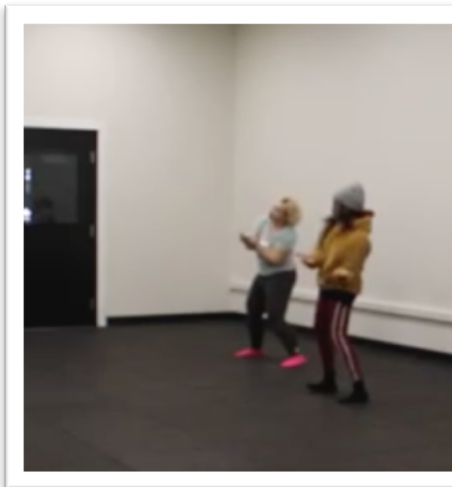


Figure 7
Sunsaë' Davis and Kayonna Garvins (Opening a book) Rehearsal, 2019.

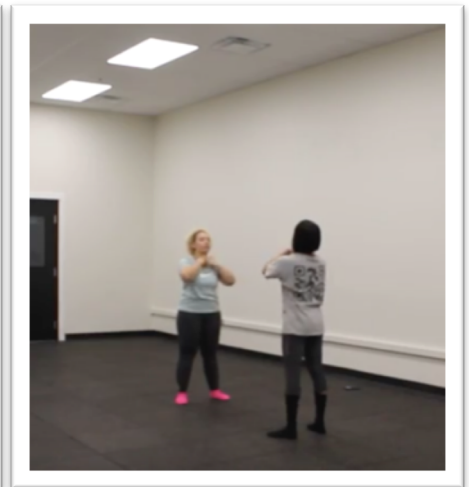


Figure 8
Sunsaë' Davis and India Young (Choking gesture) Rehearsal, 2019.

Choreography became the next essential step to the performance. Every week I worked about two to three hours to create each scene in my apartment. The first three scenes are duets and the last scene is a full cast performance. I made the choreography based off how I personally felt about the specific issue of the scene. I created specific moves in each dance to show the feelings of the people. I made tight and robotic moves to symbolize a car for the first scene. I resembled a book to demonstrate how education has been corrupted from the school closings. I used a choking gesture to represent the desperate need for water. Once the choreography was finished and I taught the dancers, they put their own creative ideas and changed

aspects of the pieces in which would satisfy how they felt about the issues and what flowed naturally with their bodies. Foster quoted, “In achieving this sense of agency, protestors are not enacting a script, where the body would function as mere instrument of expression, the meat that carries around the subject.”¹⁵ I wanted the dancers to be the sense of realness of the subject at hand.

Video Documentation



Figure 9
Video from Film *Roger & Me*
(GM water tower tore down) by
Michael Moore, 1989.



Figure 10
Image (Abandoned home on Northside of
Flint) taken by Sunsae' Davis, 2019.



Figure 11
Video from *Exposing the Flint Water
Crisis* by CBS Sunday Morning, 2018.

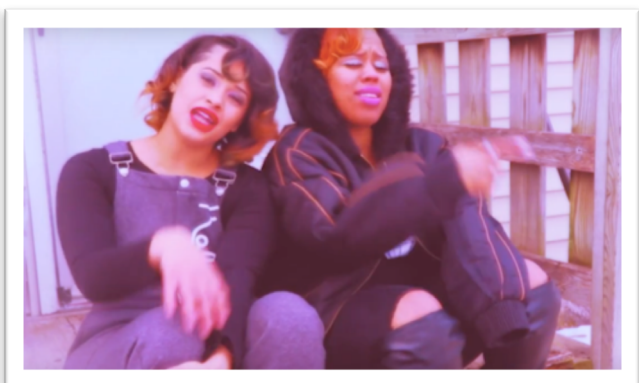


Figure 12
Video (Music Video *Lead by the City*)
taken by Sunsae' Davis, 2019.

¹⁵ Susan Leigh Foster. “Choreographies of Protest”. *Project Muse*. October 2003. Accessed 15 April 2019. <https://muse.jhu.edu/article/47705>.

The video documentation is the element where it will bring all of the other pieces together as a cohesive performance. I knew I wanted to use found footage and recorded footage. I needed to find footage I was allowed to use and cite. I wanted old found footage I would not be able to capture from General Motors and recognizable footage of current newscasts people an outside audience would not be familiar with such as neighborhoods and schools. Recorded footage needed to emphasize the places outsiders have not experienced within Flint. The last scene would involve a music video including the music artists who created *Lead by the City*. I wanted all of the footage to align together in a linear format to not overwhelm the audience members.

Creative Work

Home is a live dance series which includes four different scenes. The dance series touches base on issues and events Flint, Michigan has undertaken. The four scenes include: “The Rise and Fall of General Motors”; “The Community”; abandonment of homes, school closings and crime; “The Water Crisis”; and “The Rebuild”; the people. Flint is an urban community with majority of African American people, so the project put emphasis on the hip hop culture. The series will have hip hop dance, music and fashion while highlighting what that means for the residents of Flint using video documentation.

Home has collaborations with Flint dancers, musicians and clothing designers. The performance signified the importance of home and our interpretation of our city’s home.

There were two types of audience members who were in attendance, Flint residents and non-Flint residents. Through this process I had asked Flint residents and

myself, would you still consider Flint to be your home? The reality of home is different for everyone, but the fundamentals of home are still the same. The goal was for the collaborators to create emotion and passion for their interpretation of what Flint really is. The audience should have been able to understand the different perceptions of what the outside public eye declares Flint to be and what the actual people of Flint know it to be. With all of the elements of this performance, everyone and anyone should have felt a personal connection to it, whether you are from Flint or not, it is about home.

The performance of *Home* was performed at the Duderstadt Center Video Studio. It was performed three different times and sixty seats were available each night. There were four dance performers (including myself) performing to a total of six songs. Each scene was correlated with specific video documentation projecting onto the Video Studio screen behind the dancers. The performance is fourteen minutes and thirty-one seconds long.

Conclusion

Home: A Live Dance Series was an extremely difficult project to tackle on for one person. I knew from the beginning of this process I needed to create something huge, Go Big or Go Home. This project became so much more emotional and powerful than I attended. After the performance, a gentleman came up to me and told me they were so inspired by all of the detailed elements and the choreography was smooth, well placed for each scene. He even wanted to know if I could work on projects with him in the near future. If I had to do it all over again I would from the creating the storyline, to working

with my dancers, the clothing designers, and the musicians. These collaborators went above and beyond to help me with this important project. I believe I did my city a good justice, but this is only the start. *Home: A Live Dance Series* will continue to live on and be the creative voice of the past, present, and future people of Flint, Michigan.



Figures 13-16

Images taken by Manda Villareal, Day Two Performance, 2019.

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