

Confronting Privilege through Activism and Art

MAY 15, 2020

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Photo by Backpack student Gavin Schuster.

Rahila Coats, a senior in the BFA dance program, was introduced to the world of dance and performance at a very young age. The south Minneapolis native grew up watching her mom teach yoga and movement classes and participating in theatrical summer intensive workshops with Penumbra Theatre Company.

“I kept on doing things that I love and it kept on being dance,” Coats says. She initially began her college and dancing career at Gustavus Adolphus College, but soon after beginning her freshman year, she took the opportunity to tour in Atlanta with [Threads Dance Project](https://www.threadsdance.org/) (<https://www.threadsdance.org/>) (while continuing her university courses online).

After spending time away from home, Coats wanted to look for creative experiences even farther afield than Atlanta. “I knew from when I went into my sophomore year that I was going to go abroad,” she remarks. Knowing that these opportunities were available at UMN, she auditioned for the BFA program and transferred here for her sophomore year and beyond.

Jerusalem

Coats has been fascinated with the *Gaga* dance technique ever since being introduced to it as a high schooler. The *Gaga* technique is characterized by its purposeful lack of mirrors, choreography, and audience members. Dancers focus on “listening” to the rhythm of their bodies and choosing to let that internal rhythm guide them, resulting in uninhibited, flowing, improvised movement. The technique is deeply centralized in Israel and Israeli culture, so traveling to the instructors and creators in Jerusalem is often regarded as the best option for those hoping to study it. Coats was quick to take advantage of UMN’s learning abroad program for dancers to do just that.

While in Jerusalem, she took classes with the founder of *Gaga*, Ohad Naharin. She also found herself working closely with members of his company, Batsheva Dance Company. The conversations Coats was able to have with Naharin and members of his company allowed her to understand *Gaga* much more extensively. “Before going to Jerusalem, I understood *Gaga* as a technique, a procedure of movement that was not limited to a body type, fluidity, or motion. Being able to take class from the people who created *Gaga* and continued its practices showed me that [to me] this dance style is more of a dogma, and that its glorified image comes from a place of exoticizing countries that are accepted in the Western lens while disregarding the life and culture of another,” she states. Her changed perspective on *Gaga* and those who practice it fed a growing internal conflict with living and learning in Jerusalem.

“I knew that trying to do art in a space that [to me] is supporting a state-sanctioned violence and military occupation was contributing to the oppression of a country and population, and making art in that space ignored the issue at hand,” she explains. “And it wasn’t furthering the benefit of a lot of people, specifically Palestinian people in that space.” This tension prompted her to leave Jerusalem at the end of the semester. Not ready to return to the US so soon, Coats turned to UMN’s learning abroad website and found a dance program in Accra, Ghana, where she spent her spring semester.

Accra

Whereas her dance in Jerusalem was fairly similar to what she was used to learning in the US, Coats found a different experience waiting for her in Accra, Ghana. Coats explains that the lens through which dance is viewed in the US and other Western societies and cultures can differ greatly from the perspective of other cultures, and that traveling to Accra was no exception. “It was very different being in the space, understanding the drummer, having seven hours a week of one particular dance,” she says.

The styles that Coats learned in Accra were different from what she had learned in the past and challenged the ways she saw and practiced dance. She states that the dance curriculum and faculty at UMN also work to challenge the way students have been taught to view dance. “In the dance program at the University of Minnesota, there is a focus on styles that stretch beyond the Westernized and codified definition of dance. Offering classes such as jazz, urban and street dance forms, yoga, tap, tai chi, Argentine tango, students are encouraged to deepen their movement, knowledge, and understanding of the influence of dance beyond the physical body,” Coats says. She explains how these curriculum choices have helped her better understand dance and its place in different cultures. “This focus has challenged me to view dance in its historical context, especially when abroad in Ghana. Being able to look through a lens at dance as a form of communication, expression, and reflection in Ghana helped me deepen my knowledge and appreciation for my experience and connection with my peers and instructors,” she explains.

Coats was the only American student and one of only two students not from Ghana heavily involved in her program, the dance BFA and BA. While many students would find this scenario isolating, that wasn’t Coats’ experience. “I’ve never felt so welcomed into a community so quickly,” she says. “I learned that what I care about is community in dance spaces. And I really felt that, especially when I was in Ghana.”

Activism & Dance

Coats explains that dance is often tied to capitalism in Western societies. “If I do one move correctly, if I’m the one who’s capable of doing that, then I can get this job and get this opportunity and then get paid and be able to buy things,” Coats says. “It’s a part of this constant cycle we have.” She adds that even the spaces where dance is practiced in Western culture are also rooted in capitalism. Capitalism even influences who gets to appear on stage and who gets to be part of the audience.






On returning to UMN and the United States, Coats brought with her new ideas about what dance and activism mean to her moving forward. In Coats’ opinion, dance can be an avenue for activism by just having bodies in a space. She elaborates: “The power that dance has, specifically, is that certain bodies onstage hold different histories, and when those bodies move in certain ways that strike a chord with us, consciously or subconsciously, it helps us understand things in a different way.” Coats recognizes and has accepted her role as an activist in society since she believes that “in everything you do, you take a stance. Everything that you buy, the spaces that you enter, or even just when you choose to speak up, or when you choose not to, it’s a step.”

And as far as stepping across borders goes, Coats recognizes and acknowledges the privilege she experienced abroad. Those feelings have further fueled her activism. “With an American passport,” she explains, “you can really go anywhere, you can be anywhere. And I think I want to continue to explore that and find ways to use my passport in a way that can benefit others instead of just benefiting myself.”


Coats reflects on her experiences abroad and offers this advice to her fellow students, “If you can go abroad, I highly recommend it. Also, understand why you’re doing it, too, and for whom. Don’t go just to go, know why you’re doing it.” She recommends the experience for those that are willing to put in the labor of doing more than just acknowledging one’s privileges. After her experiences studying and dancing abroad in two vastly different cities, Coats concludes that she “found a lot more beauty and appreciation in the nuances of life.”


This story was written by an undergraduate student in Backpack. [Meet the team.](#) ([/backpack/people](#)).

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