

Thesis Artist Statement

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When people ask me about my purpose as an artist, and why I chose Gallatin and my program, I often think back to 2012. During that year, a light bulb turned on for me. I was invited to join a group of students from my high school to go on a volunteer trip. For four years, I spent a few weeks in a small town outside Lima, Peru, called Villa El Salvador. While there, I was given the opportunity to volunteer in multiple community centers such as healthcare facilities, after-school tutoring programs, foster care facilities, and nursing homes. From organizing fashion shows with the children to doing crafts with the elders, I quickly realized the power of art to heal and serve as an alternative tool for education rooted in dialogue and creativity. Granted, I did not know that was what I was experiencing then. I only knew that whatever I was doing resonated with the community and myself and that art was a big part of it. At Villa El Salvador, I recognized for the first time that my work as an artist had to go beyond entertainment and that I was responsible for serving the community and making art accessible. I firmly believe artists greatly influence how humans think, view, and express themselves. Almost everyone is exposed to art in one shape or form. Therefore, why not make sure that we, as artists, use this amazing tool humans already find comfort in to bring forward an awareness that can help create positive transformative change?

As I sit at this moment and think of my time in Peru, I can't help but get emotional. I remember begging my mom every year to let me go on this trip because I knew that place inspired something different in me, something special, a passion I had never experienced, an indescribable feeling of comfort and peace in my heart that I never wanted to go away. I enjoyed

studying acting in college, and because of it, I grew as an artist in ways I couldn't have ever predicted. However, when I graduated, I missed the feeling I had when I went to Peru. I knew it was a passion that derived from collaborating with others. From engaging in pedagogical experiences, sharing what I knew about art with others, and seeing their own light bulbs turn on. That's when I found the art of teaching. With so many uncertainties, it all clicked when I stepped into a classroom for the first time. That fire that I once felt in Peru started to flare once again. In one place, I could practice all my passions, such as acting, directing, teaching, and collaborating with communities exposing themselves to my first love: theater. There is nothing more satisfying than sharing the things I love with others and having them enjoy it as much as I do. I did that for five years as a teaching artist in New York City, working in multiple communities in foster care, juvenile centers, public schools, and community centers. I knew the work I was doing resonated with the communities that I was engaging with. Therefore, I wanted to theorize and understand "why" that was happening. What was the reasoning behind such incredible transformative outcomes? In those years of wondering why this work helped and how I could improve and expand on it, I decided to apply for my MA at Gallatin NYU on Arts for social justice, human rights, and education with a focus on theater and documentary filmmaking.

Three years after starting my research and school work at Gallatin, one pandemic in between, two different countries, numerous classes, and multiple teaching jobs, I am in my room writing the introduction to my thesis with tears in my eyes. Tears of joy, melancholy, pride, uncertainty, and, most importantly, accomplishment. As I recognized that I have engaged in research that I have desired since I was a sixteen-year-old teenager from Puerto Rico volunteering in a small village in Peru. I was able to intersect multiple humanities and write an interdisciplinary thesis that directly speaks to the work of teaching artists. An extremely

important work in our society as they bring art to communities that lack access to it. Teaching artists to prioritize the community and its needs above their artistry. They are a community that understands the importance of engaging in different art forms for social and emotional learning. This thesis is for them. For all the teaching artists in the world who choose to be in a classroom, a community center, a park, a prison, or a hospital, first and foremost, sharing the knowledge they were so privileged to acquire. This thesis is also for all the students and participants who have crossed my path and formed me as a teacher. The communities that opened their doors to engage in play, opened their hearts to share their stories and were so kind to collaborate with me and take a risk—giving me more than they could ever imagine. Every single one of them lives in my heart and will always be part of my life story and memory. This thesis memorializes their stories and our work, the moments of peace and joy we shared among so much uncertainty in our lives and world. I am, and this is because of them.

This thesis is a compilation of three years of research in human rights, transitional justice, education, participatory art, community engagement, and applied theater, along with a residency project influenced by multiple personal experiences as a teaching artist, serving as an example of many ways all these humanities may intersect. It is by no means a formula, but a guide, proposing ideas and thoughts and opening a room for more questions. It is ongoing research to inspire others to engage in similar work and pedagogy. Although I feel accomplished as I finalize this research, I still have many questions regarding this thesis. They all come from a desire to make this world a better place rooted in peace, justice, and love. At the end of the day, that is all I can hope for. This research gave me hope, and I hope it gives you too.