

# CSWS Research Matters

## LANDLINES: A performance poetry project funded through the Oregon Arts Commission explored ideas of home and homeland.

BY ANA-MAURINE LARA, Assistant Professor, University of Oregon  
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Here we rest, here we dream, here we laugh, here we dress, here we pour, here we pray, here we love, here we remember, here we implore, here we dissolve, here we shatter, here we become, here we gather, here we struggle, here we remain, here we stay, here we collect, here we make, here we fall apart, here we listen, here we see, here we nourish, here we thirst, here we conquer, here we extend, here we disappear, here we search, here we break, here we were, here we are, here we are, here we are, here we always will be.



*The weight of history: Ana Lara holds a handful of stones used in the construction of historical markers / photo by Dana Asbury.*

I am a person far from home, if home is the place where I was born. Home is a heavy weight for me if home is history. I am home if all that home implies is this here body, complete with memory and mass. I will never be home if blood is all there is to count on. I have a home, today. I have not had a home sometimes. Homeland is a troubled battleground, and I am always on all sides of the war. All sides. Not both. Not one. All. I performed Landlines because home and homeland are not easy words to embody. They are rife with violence (erasures, lies, suffering, and displacement) as much as they are a balm (warmth, tenderness, beauty, and joy).

Home brings up questions of belonging and becoming: Who had to leave for me to be here? Who was removed and who is fighting to be present? Where would I go if home was taken from me? Or if I was forced to leave? Who would I become? If land is central to who I am, then what is my relationship to it? If water is all of me, then how do I make sense of land? Somewhere inside, I generated this piece to try and reconcile these different parts of me—the all sides of history present in my own flesh and memory. As an artist, I arrive at these truths through the creative act. As a scholar, I gather evidence to sustain what I create. As a literary activist, I know and am intentional about the implications of my creative acts.

Landlines is a performance that asks questions about history, memory, home, homeland, and land. It is an exploration of how we embed our understandings of home in our landscapes, and how conflict arising out of disparate relationships to home and homeland actually constitute spaces of possibility. Landlines attempts to witness the gaping wounds of history here in Eugene, to build on memory in order to find new meaning. If as an artist, an activist and a scholar, I take settler colonialism seriously, then what are the histories I must be accountable to as who I am, as an indigenous person far from homeland, as a queer person of color, and as a Jew?

The idea of the landlines as the conceptual container emerged from the visual element of the *eruv*: a ritual wire enclosure strung between light poles. This is done so that on the Jewish Sabbath, Jews may carry things outside of their homes. The *eruv* expands the possibilities for Jewish community, but it also expands the private space of the home into public space. There is no *eruv* in Eugene. In fact, there are few *eruvim* around the world. Sophie Calle's photo-text installation, *Public Spaces—Private Places*, was particularly inspiring for me. In this piece, twenty photographic panels of an *eruv* on the West Bank recreate the contained public space. She accompanies these with text from fourteen interviews she conducted with Palestinian and Israeli residents. By bringing both image and text together, she presents the complex contradictions of land and home implicit in this space.

I originally came up with Landlines in 2007, when I was living in Texas, and the U.S. was deciding whether or not to extend a wall across the Texas-Mexico border. I was in conversation with Margo Tamez, whose family and nation were fighting to maintain sovereignty—the U.S. government was using the eminent domain clause to overlook and deny the sovereign treaty rights of the Lipan Apache people. And I was witnessing the displacement



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*Continued on other side*



**Landlines in performance:** In August 2015, Ana-Maurine Lara led participants in a spiraling walk that started from the site of Eugene's first synagogue near Eighth and Charnelton, and arrived at the downtown park blocks. Lara's costume, designed by Shannon Dunbar, draws together elements from Sephardic Jewish men's traditional dress, as well as Arawak and African aesthetic elements / photo by Alice Evans.

yearned to feel the texture of a more complex reality.

The first day of Landlines was conceived as a solemn, solitary ritual. Instead, I was joined by volunteers and others who wanted to walk with me. Joyously, I experienced the effervescence of sacred time and space along with those who not only witnessed the performance, but who also carried the symbolic elements of the performance: the (un)covered wagon—which I initially pulled by rope (replicating the labor of brown/black people), stones (the weight of history), water (water), bird seed (the uncounted), and flowers (the dead reborn). The presence of those who accompanied me proved to be vital to the piece, to the collective breath uttered before, during, and after each point along the way. Amazingly enough, the volunteers who joined me for this ritual performance were from all over the world. Their presence was the living counterpart of this complicated history of displacement, settlement, home-making, erasure, tenderness and joy.

I chose twenty-two sites throughout Eugene to mark the presence/absence of different peoples/communities. I started at the Skinner cabin, an homage to Eugene's settler history. I am not unequivocal about that settler history. I think it indexes two centuries of profound violence against particular kinds of bodies and specific communities. I was mourning those erased and lost through that history. The (a)historical markers—the poems I wrote—were meant to signal an alternate history, one that is not embedded in the landscape or is sometimes intentionally erased. As I wrote and recited the poems, I was thinking about the Kalapuya peoples along the riverbanks; the African-American families from Ferry Village (what is now Alton Baker Park); the Chinese railroad laborers; the Japanese orchard farmers; and Mexican migrant laborers. But I was also thinking about the nine federally recognized tribes and their ongoing struggles for sovereignty; Mexican, Chinese, Filipino goldminers and the Jewish merchants that accompanied them; Black pioneers; Japanese internment; Chinese, Japanese, and Black excision from the body of the state; Jewish disruptions to Anglo-Protestant racism; LGBTQ bodies and histories; of the homeless and the veterans; and in all of this: home.

of 60,000 families (the majority migrant families) from Eagle Pass, as well as the plans to have the wall pass through the University of Texas—Brownsville, essentially dividing the campus into two international spaces. As someone who deeply believes in the rights of indigenous peoples and migrants, I was angry. As someone who sees the inherent conflict between these two ontological realities (which is not always material), I was heartbroken.

The wall in Texas was like the then recently constructed wall in Israel—Palestine (it was finished in 2006), a wall I also resent and experience as a cutting into flesh, as an excision of a still pulsing heart, as a guillotine against a fragile neck. I was angry about our seeming lack of engagement with our history as Jewish people: we had seen other walls in the past. We had seen the effects of fascist state violence. We chose to ignore history. And we were choosing to ignore our own role in the production of human suffering. I am a Jew who is firmly against the occupation of Palestine, and yet who knows and feels the anti-Semitic suffering of generations. I stand with all the other radical Jews and Jews of color—in Israel and elsewhere—who are against the actions of the Israeli state, and the wall. Who understand that

we have different choices, and that the suffering we have experienced must generate other stories. I know that among us, we are imagining those other stories. And Landlines is that troubled imagining, an imagining that places Jewish being and belonging in conversation with the being and belonging of the first peoples of this land, and the many migrants (Mexican, Chinese, Japanese and Afro-diasporic in particular) who make up this area's history. This country's founding and expansion is also built on the narrative of those fleeing religious persecution. And yet, we know it is a continuing violence.

I was not able to carry out the original walk, which was to take place over the 250 miles between Austin and Eagle Pass. I may still walk that journey. But a friend in Eugene suggested I perform Landlines right here, where I have started to "make home." I took her up on her suggestion, realizing that moving here is more permanent than temporary, and that it's quite odd that I end up here of all places on earth—having lived many places on earth, and none of them small college towns. But here I was. And, there was something to realize here: layers of complex histories covered by a singular narrative of white Anglo-Protestant homogeneity. And my body, my lived experience

This, this place  
 right here is my home,  
 where I press the silk  
 of my father's garments  
 against my chest to ease  
 the hammer's bruising,  
 squeeze the tip of a rabbit's foot  
 with calloused hands.

This, this place  
 right here is our home,  
 it is where we weave  
 reeds into baskets, bite  
 birch between our teeth,  
 laughter dancing into patterns  
 in the supple bark.

This, this place  
 right here is my home  
 I rode in on my mules  
 fed on grains of  
 corn from my family's milpa,  
 from the highlands  
 of where I was born.

This, this place  
 right here is my home  
 where I rest weary bones,  
 my fingers stained red  
 with iron, where I dance,  
 my feet percussion against  
 the clapboard floors.

This, this place  
 right here is my home  
 where the scents  
 of apple blossoms  
 corn silk, beet roots,  
 berries paint my dreams  
 even behind the  
 shock of metal fencing.



Ana-Maurine Lara marked each constructed historical marker with this card / photo by Dana Asbury.



UNIVERSITY OF OREGON

CENTER FOR THE STUDY OF WOMEN IN SOCIETY

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Eugene OR 97403-1201

# Research Matters

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The poems aimed to contain the depth of my longing, but I also wanted them to signal my difference. As an artist, I realized I had to try to embody both proximity and distance. The poems were the reverberations of that which was not seen, and yet, which fills the air we breathe each time we walk through this town. They would not contain my individual ancestral experience—my body would. And my breath, uttering these poems, would connect both.

With each mourning, there must also be a return to life. So, the second day of Landlines was about Jewish life and survival here in Eugene. Given that Eugene's Jewish community has suffered numerous attacks, I could not fail to acknowledge that Jewish history here also has deep meaning, and that the collective survival of Jewish community has been an intentional and concerted effort by many, many people—both Jewish and not. So the second day of Landlines, folks were invited to come and process through downtown Eugene. It was 10 a.m. Sunday. At that hour, downtown homeless residents are just awakening. The air was full of smoke from forest fires. I didn't think anybody would come. But folks did come. And we processed—led by the Klezmonauts, a musical band—through downtown to the park blocks. We brought little pieces of home. And our hearts and our dance.

So, here is where I also speak of *convivencia* as a necessary aspect of Landlines. The concept emerged through a historiography of medieval Spain; it refers



Ana-Maurine Lara pulled a truckload of materials for constructing her monuments on the initial 7.5-mile walk through Eugene / photo by Dana Asbury.

to the period of the relative, conditional co-existence and collaboration between Spain's Muslims, Jews, and Christians. A great deal of art, literature, music, science, and philosophy emerged from this period—not despite, but because of the convergence of different theological and philosophical approaches to similar questions. Landlines is also about the possibility of *convivencia* as a powerful alternative to occupation. It's a part of Jewish being and way of life offered as a memory of a different story. ■

— Ana-Maurine Lara is a graduate of Harvard (BA 1997) and Yale (PhD 2014). She joined the faculty of the Department of Anthropology at the University of Oregon this academic year as an assistant professor.

She is also a national award-winning fiction author and poet. Her novels include *Erzulie's Skirt* (RedBone Press 2006), *When the Sun Once Again Sang to the People* (KRK Ediciones, 2011), and *Watermarks and Tree Rings* (Tanama Press, 2011), and her short fiction has appeared in *Sable LitMag*, *Callaloo*, and other literary journals. Her multigenre piece *Cantos* was released at Cave Canem's headquarters in New York City.

Her essays are widely anthologized and she has published articles in peer-reviewed journals, including *Phoebe Journal of Arts and Culture* and *GLQ*. She was awarded the PEN/Northwest, the Barbara Deming Award, and the National Latino/Chicano Literary Contest Third Prize. Her novel *Erzulie's Skirt* was a Lambda Literary finalist. In addition, she has participated in prestigious writing residencies, studying with world-renowned poets and fiction writers. She draws from her experiences as a Dominican-American writer of Native, African, and Jewish ancestry to produce literary works and performances that blur the boundaries of artistic genres and cultural traditions.

**Author's Note:** Thank you to: City of Austin Arts Grants Commission, the Oregon Arts Commission, Tisa Bryant, Jaclyn Pryor, Margo Rivera-Weiss, Maram Epstein, Alai Reyes-Santos, Nina Korican, Alice Evans, Dana Asbury (photographer), the Klezmonauts, and all of the volunteers who made this piece come to life.