

critical dance studies

Layla Zami

Contemporary PerforMemory

Dancing through Spacetime,
Historical Trauma, and Diaspora
in the 21st Century



[transcript]

From:

Layla Zami

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Dancing through Spacetime, Historical Trauma, and Diaspora in the 21st Century

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Contemporary PerforMemory looks at dance works created in the 21st century by choreographers identifying as Afro-European, Jewish, Black, Palestinian, and Taiwanese-Chinese-American. It explores how contemporary dance-makers engage with historical traumas such as the Shoah and the Maafa to reimagine how the past is remembered and how the future is anticipated. The new idea of perforMemory arises within a lively blend of interdisciplinary theory, interviews, performance analysis, and personal storytelling. Scholar and artist Layla Zami traces unexpected pathways, inviting the reader to move gracefully across disciplines, geographies, and histories.

Featuring insightful interviews with seven international artists: Oxana Chi, Zufit Simon, André M. Zachery, Chantal Loïal, Wan-Chao Chang, Farah Saleh, and Christiane Emmanuel.

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PREFACE

THE WORDS OF A DANCER, SEEDED IN TIME

*[She] liked to look
at the drops of water
in her garden.
She often stopped
to notice how the
light shone through
their delicate shapes [and]
she loved to draw forms
in the [earth] with her bare feet.
Andrea d'Aquino¹*

Time, much time, went by.
I saw how time disappeared.
How hours, minutes, seconds, spun away.

I witnessed how Dr. Layla Zami and I, wrapped in metal,
flew through the clouds,
immersing into one time zone to emerge in another time zone,
to land,
to step out,
to linger,
to step back in,
to fly further.

¹ Andrea D'Aquino, *A Life Made by Hand: The Story of Ruth Asawa*, Hudson: Princeton Architectural Press, 2019.

Berlin – San Diego,
San Diego – New York,
New York – Fort-de-France,
Fort-de-France – Paris,
Paris – Taipei,
Taipei – New York,
New York – Vienna,
Vienna – Berlin.

Time, as it seems to me today, just flew by.
Time – in days...weeks...years – pulse.

I experienced all this precious and inspiring time,
I lived through it along with Layla.

This time, filled with experiences, impressions, theater visits, performances, workshops, farewells, hourlong lingering in bookshops, libraries, universities and online platforms, by the ocean and in coffeeshops, this time stretched itself out, at various paces, on the blank pages that became this book.

Step by step, letter by letter, syllable by syllable, words, which the author elicited from the heads, bodies, and passionate hearts of seven artists...

...accompanied by and paired with Dr. Zami's insightful and sensitive thoughts, and her deep interest in precisely this art of dance, which the choreographers create. To a dance-interested audience-readership thirsty for knowledge, she hands in her words in a crystal glass that opens, clears, and enlightens minds, filled with ice-cold pomegranate juice that expands horizons.

I experienced, saw, spoke and listened, when the author visited and interviewed us artists in theaters, dance studios, cafés, and apartments. I witnessed how the scholar stood herself on stage as a Resident Artist with my company Oxana Chi & Ensemble Xinren (also known as Oxana Chi Dance & Art), moving, performing movement, music, and words in my dance productions, to dive deeper and deeper in the expressive medium called dance art.

I was shocked, as days turned into nights, the nights almost disappeared, were abolished. Time seemed to be stretched out to the splits, as Dr. Layla Zami sat at her laptop, with pearls of sweat on her forehead, to transform all the voices of the dance-makers in the digital realm.

The words, movements, dances, ideas, musics, (hi)stories, and moods of all the involved moving bodies are archived in this book. Enriched by Dr. Zami's research

and additional expert voices from the fields of dance, dance and performance studies, gender studies, history, memory studies, physics, ecology, and general knowledge, health and healing wisdom, it all becomes readable, hearable, and perceptible. What a knowledge-building art work!

Politicized dance art, research, and creative writing nourish this book with the spirit of our times, and bring together in the dance roundelay a rich, beautiful and atrocious past, a turbulent now, and the hope of a friendly and inclusive future for all dance lovers.

Warmly,
Oxana Chi
Brooklyn, June 27th, 2020

2 DIASPORIC MOVES

*You may shoot me with your words
You may cut me with your eyes [...]
But still, like air, I'll rise.
Out of the huts of history's shame
I rise
Up from a past rooted in pain
I rise
I'm a black ocean, leaping and wide,
Welling and swelling I bear in the tide.
[...]
Bringing the gifts that my ancestors gave
I am the dream and the hope of the slave
I rise, I rise, I rise
Maya Angelou¹*

I have travelled across the Atlantic many times, within a child and within an adult body. Moving to the Americas seems to be in the family, and my ancestors arrived here over centuries, across the generations, from Russia, from Africa, from India...displaced voluntarily or involuntarily. Some stayed, some went back. In 2015, I arrived in the United States as a Visiting Research Scholar. In the diasporic space of the USA, I wrote many of the sentences that were to become the first steps of this book. After an initial stay at the University of California San Diego (in the Department of Theatre and Dance), I transferred to Columbia University, where I became a scholar at the Institute for Research on Women, Gender and Sexuality. This change in coastal location provided me with direct access to the diasporic hub and dance metropole of New York City. I had to move several times, and in the summer, my home became the Arts And Healing Center, where I resided with Oxana Chi. The center belongs to Bessie Award-winner choreographer Marlies Yearby, who lives on the third floor. How far was I from anticipating that five years later,

1 Angelou, *And Still I Rise*, 42.

I would be completing this manuscript for a distribution by Columbia University Press, and become a member of the Bessies (aka NY Dance & Performance Awards) here in New York?

Oxana and I stayed and rehearsed onsite, on the first floor, sharing a flat with Laurie Carlos, a senior writer, playwright and actress. Carlos had become famous through her innovative work in theatrical jazz², and as an early and influential member of the dance company Urban Bush Women. It was somehow surreal how my academic readings took shape in real life, through encounters, rehearsals, performances. I had met Laurie Carlos on paper in the anthology *Solo/Black/Women*.³ Now she was a three-dimensional housemate, who liked to ask me, if I “need anything from the bodega?”⁴ before stepping out for her daily walk. We bonded over the fact that we both grew up in Black-Jewish-mixed households, and Carlos shared stories about Crown Heights, itself a historic landmark where Black and Jewish Americans have lived side-by-side for decades, though with little communication or interaction. The Black social landscape of the neighborhood is made up of African-American inhabitants, and more recent Caribbean migrants and their US-born children.

Crown Heights, and more generally New York City, is a diasporic space through which people of variegated cultural heritages, inspirations and aspirations pass. Each group carries its own baggage, filled with different histories, and leaves its own footprints on the US-soil. It seemed to me that no one – except Indigenous people – could claim New York to be home, and yet everyone inhabited the space as though it were a home. The Lenape peoples, however, who originally walked Broadway before Manahatta became Manhattan, seemed absent.⁵ And yet, when we began to pay attention, Oxana Chi and I would encounter cultural signposts and Indigenous presence. We learned about Indigenous People Day, which commemorates resistance to European conquest, as an alternative to celebrating the conquest of America on the so-called Columbus Day. We travelled to Randalls Island to witness the festivities organized by the Redhawk Native American Arts Council. We attended the annual Thunderbird American Indian Dancers Annual Dance Concert and Pow-Wow at the Theater for the New City, where we met the powerful

2 For a brilliant, in-depth analysis of the legacy of Laurie Carlos and others see Jones, *Theatrical Jazz*.

3 See Sharon Bridgforth's interview in Johnson and Rivera-Servera, *Solo/Black/Woman*.

4 “Bodega” is a Spanglish diasporic word for the corner shops run by Spanish-speaking migrants.

5 Teju Cole refers to this in his novel *Open City*. For more information on Lenape past and present, see Native Resistance Network. “Mother Earth – Manna-Hata – A Native Perspective.” and The Lenape Center <https://thelenapecenter.com/>

Two-Spirit⁶ award-winning grass dancer and multidisciplinary artist Sheldon Raymore, a New York based member of the Cheyenne River Sioux Nation. We did more horizon-opening homework. So I began asking myself whether Natives were truly absent from the cityscape, or whether our socialization and education determined what and how we acknowledge presence. And I kept wondering about the absence-presence of my own Indigenous ancestry within the diasporic space of Martinique.

Real life experiences in turn shaped how I read theory and interpreted performances. In that academic year of intense travel between the USA, the Caribbean, and Taiwan, my understanding of diaspora became indistinguishable from motion. My working schedule in New York consisted of a productive and agreeable balance between library time for research and writing, training time with dance icons such as Pat Hall – former Artistic Director of the Cumbe Center for African and Diaspora Dance – and rehearsal time with Oxana Chi. At that time also, Candace Thompson, a Trinidadian contemporary dancer and soca teacher, invited me to join the freshly launched Dance Caribbean Collective (DCC) Scholarship Team. At the DCC meeting, and subsequent festival, diasporic connections were again omnipresent. A broad understanding of what Caribbean identity may mean, and how it can be preserved, performed or imagined through movement, seemed to constitute the common ground, the ocean harboring individual and collective islands of creativity.

Stepping through these New York dance spaces was a memorable, challenging and refreshing experience. It was even more fascinating to become myself part of its dancescapes. In July 2015, DCC member André M. Zachery invited Oxana Chi to perform her piece *Neferet iti* as part of his three-day festival at the University Settlement Theatre on the Lower East Side. Oxana Chi's dance, and my brief musical contribution, opened the festival. Later, when we toured the piece in Indonesia and Taiwan, my physical participation expanded. Besides playing saxophone and ocean drum, I performed a few capoeira movements, including a headstand. When I think of it today, I am reminded of the insider-outsider's perspective evoked in my introduction.

In that piece, Oxana Chi embodies the Egyptian statue known as the Nefertiti Bust, stolen from Egypt in 1912. Today, it is displayed in the *Neues Museum* located on Berlin's museum island, as a huge tourist draw. Since Germany first displayed

6 The term Two-Spirit stems from Indigenous American cultures to account for what is usually called LGBT*Q identities in the West. Across Native tribes, Indigenous words exist to refer to two-spirited persons and/or transgender persons. Prior to colonization, persons positioned as two-spirited often played a special role (e.g. healers, visionaries) in society, and were already in their childhood acknowledged and respected as cross- or transgender humans. I take this historical and contemporary information on the role of Two-Spirit in American First Nations from personal conversations and from the blog post Laframboise and Anhorn, "The Way Of The Two Spirited People."

the bust to the public in 1924, Egypt has been reclaiming it back, without success. Chi's dance raises awareness about the colonial looting of cultural objects, as well as about the discrepancy between hegemonic racist discourses about migrants, and their instrumentalization for marketing purposes, as exemplified in the Berlin campaign that praises the Pharaoh Queen as "beautiful migrant."⁷ A diasporic quest for origins, the dance entails a multitude of cultural influences. After the 2015 show in New York, legendary dance critic Eva Yaa Asantewaa summarized her first impressions of Oxana Chi's fusion dance as follows:

A chart of her dance background would look like a spinning globe – from ballet and Cunningham and jazz to Javanese and Egyptian dance. Her Solo *Neferet iti* [...] dares to draw visual and kinetic elements from different cultures, too, in a quilt-like, multi-textured performance. Her Central American plumed headdress, her yellow-gold harem pants, her hip thrusts and shimmies, her archer's bow draws, Masai jumps, capoeira maneuvers, vogue hands and dervish spins add up to a heady mixture. She believes it all works – you can see that – and makes it work. A somewhat delicate presence, she is, nevertheless, a woman writ large, claiming concert dance space for a diverse and teeming world, blessing that space.⁸

The journalist appreciates the dancer's unique dance aesthetics, characterized by the borrowing from and mixing of multiple kinesthetic idioms from Europe, Africa, Indonesia, and Brazil. As Asantewaa suggests, it is through the process of fusion that these elements come to "work," – a term borrowed from voguing vocabulary – because the performer "makes it work." The writer recognizes the specific "shimmy" technique of the Egyptian Raks Sharki dance style, often misnamed and misunderstood as "belly dance."

In the anthology, *Taboo Memories, Diasporic Voices*, Ella Shohat explains how this appellation, stemming from the French "danse du ventre," originates from and participates in a colonial fragmentation of the body, and how the label misses and minimizes the feat of a sophisticated, full-body performance technique. Shohat also refers to colonial exhibitions and how the so-called belly dancers were used in the colonial project rather than being praised as artists.⁹ Today, Chi re-frames this technique in order to de-construct the colonial mis-use of Neferetiti's bust.

7 See Chi, "Neferet iti - Reloaded"; and Zami, "Oxana Chi von Zopf bis Fluss: Transkulturelle Tanzkunst und alternative Geschichtsschreibung."

8 Asantewaa, "Hamilton and Zachery at University Settlement's Performance Project". We actually toured this version of the piece on the diasporic spinning globe, and during my time as Visiting Research Scholar, I enjoyed being part of the performance at Dixon Place Theatre in NYC, upon invitation by curator Sangeeta Yesley. I also had the privilege to travel to accompany Oxana's solo at the Youth Government Auditorium in Taipei in August and September 2016.

9 Shohat, *Taboo Memories, Diasporic Voices*, 50.

By juxtaposing ancient pharaoh iconography, colonial history and Raks Sharki, her performance complicates and contradicts Western narratives.¹⁰ Shohat goes on, criticizing teleological world conceptions that “segregate” temporality and spatiality, and put the global “South” historically “behind.” She argues for a vision that sees all “worlds” as coeval:

The spatiality and temporality of cultures as scrambled, palimpsestic in all the worlds, with the premodern, the modern, and the postmodern coexisting and interlinked globally.¹¹

Oxana Chi’s performance brings about these coeval worlds, as she challenges the conventional inscription and restriction of culture within markers of space and time. The “spinning globe” evoked by Eva Yaa Asantewaa mirrors a dynamic understanding of diaspora in interaction with dance. To be “claiming concert dance space for a diverse and teeming world” is to perform diaspora and to diasporize performance. Interestingly, the critic read the piece through the lens of her own African-American cultural heritage, by referring to the practices of voguing and quilt-making. The making of quilts is inherently a palimpsestic handicraft. It was historically used by African-American women to literally compose stories, to record and to transmit memory of the past to the next generations.¹² Thus, when the journalist compares Oxana Chi’s dance-making to quilt-making, she strikingly touches upon what I see as the power of perforMemory: a diasporic assemblage of diverse choreographic materials, gathered in expressive patterns of storytelling. Chi’s “fusion dance,” as much as what Shohat calls “polycentric aesthetics” are fundamentally diasporic. Shohat further notes how diasporic strategies contest the European monopoly over artistic creation, and counter the meta-narrative of art history:

While a Euro-diffusionist narrative makes Europe a perpetual fountain of artistic innovation, one could argue for a multidirectional flow of aesthetic ideas, with crisscrossing ripples and eddies of influence.¹³

I hope to give visibility to such a “multidirectional flow” in this book. Oxana Chi’s current repertoire certainly flows in multiple directions, and takes as its source a plurality of cultural influences and techniques, as gracefully described by Asantewaa. The multiple textures of her dance are the result of several decades of training

10 Chi’s intervention corresponds for instance to the strategy discussed in Karentzos, “Postkoloniale Kunstgeschichte” “Die postkoloniale Kritik richtet ihr Augenmerk nicht nur darauf, wie diese Objekte als Trophäen des Kolonialismus fungierten, sondern insbesondere auch auf die Grenzziehungen und Ausschlussmechanismen, mit denen solche Exponate als ‘andere’, von der ‘eigenen’, europäischen Kunstproduktion getrennt markiert wurden.”

11 Shohat, *Taboo Memories, Diasporic Voices*, 15.

12 hooks, *Yearning*, 116.

13 Shohat, *Taboo Memories, Diasporic Voices*, 79.

and inspiration gathered in over 40 countries. What is born of this fusion is a multilayered vocabulary of perforMemory. The “black ocean” sung by Maya Angelou, and quoted at the opening of this chapter, could function as a metaphor for the possibility for dance to incorporate many continents.

Diasporic dancespaces are now taking shape, be they volcanic, or oceanic. Diasporic artists dance in multiple directions in search of alternative artistic currents. The “diasporacentric” quality of the dances fuels my “diasporacentric” research, to return to the notion first mentioned in the introduction. If diaspora is indeed, to follow Fox, a “permanent intervention,”¹⁴ dance as a medium that is mobile per se seems to be an optimal site of creation for diasporic identities and practices. The magma of perforMemory resides in its painful archeology, and the dancers use their very bodies as tools to excavate stories that have been buried, overseen, forgotten, ignored. PerforMemory can be described as a movement in which the dancer combines the backward looking twist of the Sankofa bird’s head, with the feet strongly grounded in the present, as in ballet’s first position, and with the torso’s anticipation of the next movement to come, such as a jump into the future.

In the previous chapter, I have asked how postmemorial choreographers use imagination to perform counter-hegemonic interventions. The idea of a memoryzgo that was discussed in the previous chapter takes on new significations and implications when wrapped in diasporic layers. I will now explore how selected performances negotiate the interrelation between diaspora and memory. The physicality of memory’s movement becomes amplified by conceptual movement inherent to diasporic transformations. Advancing further on this path, I will now invite you to engage with Jewish, Black and feminist definitions of diaspora, while distinguishing between “diaspora” as an entity and “diasporic” as a process. I reflect on the existence of diaspora in multiple spaces: the theoretical space of academia, the physical space of the stage, and eventually the corporeal space of the body.¹⁵ I wonder: Which meaning(s) does perforMemory take on when dressed in a diasporic costume?

Moving Through Diaspora

Inhabiting diaspora

Carefully picking up a green Chinese silk dress, cradling it in her arms, Oxana Chi gently drags herself into it, and begins a magical, nostalgia-imbued dance. This scene in *Through Gardens* is reminiscent of dancer Tatjana Barbakoff’s own

14 Fox, “Diasporacentrism and Black Aura Texts,” 368–69.

15 See also Zami, “Dancing the Past in the Present Tense.”

memories of her childhood, and how she enjoyed letting the cloth textures lead her movements.¹⁶ On another level, this moving tableau in *Through Gardens* suggests the absence of Tatjana Barbakoff in today's dance historiography, and reflects the mindful ways in which Chi embraces Barbakoff's cultural legacy. The absent body of the past dancer becomes present in the performative timespace, blurring the historical and physical boundaries between Barbakoff's diasporic search in the 19th century and Chi's diasporic dance and political message in the 21st century. I particularly enjoy the versions in which Chi performs to a hang instrument. The venue fills with serene soundscapes, and the dancer moves through the vibrations as if they were silk. Her hands caress the air, inspired by the Chinese kinesthetics of Tai Chi Chuan, and borrow from Javanese classical dance, with its elaborate finger choreography and mindful poses. Yet, the slow flow is sometimes punctuated by tragic staccato, as exemplified in the interludes of shaking hands. Chi's diasporic performMemory of Barbakoff embeds the appreciation of her Chinese genealogy within her own fascination for and training in Javanese dance. At the end of the scene, Oxana Chi returns to the back right corner of the stage, steps out of the dress and places it back in its original place, as if waking up from a dream...or dropping off a memory.

The choreobiographic *Through Gardens* performs "the diasporic world we now inhabit," to use the words of Hirsch and Miller. In this world of *Diaspora Poetics*, intimate and public relations coexist and inform one another, and diasporic actors perform *Rites of Return*:

For some, return is an act of undoing – a counterfactual effort to imagine a world before disaster and displacement. That act of imagination can also become an act of repair, however tenuous. [...]¹⁷

Through Gardens, especially its first half, performs a rite of return to pre-World War II Europe. Indeed, we are projected into a time before Tatjana Barbakoff's flight and exile. Pieces of knowledge about the 1920s and 1930s are woven together, as Oxana Chi imagines and remedies the loss of historical figures, and presents them through performative presence. This dancescape materializes the diasporic movements required to travel through space, time, and dance historiography. Chi shifts from Barbakoff's geographical origins to her cultural journeys. The audience experiences memory as a space to be inhabited and traversed.

16 Straus-Ernst, "Bei Tatjana Barbakoff"; printed in Chi, *Tanzende Erinnerungen*, 2011, 16–19. See my discussion of this point at the beginning of the introduction.

17 Hirsch and Miller, *Rites of Return*, 18.