

Dancing the Past in the Present Tense

Queer Afropean Presence in Oxana Chi's Dancescapes

SAMMANFATTNING

Med tanke på osynliggörandet av icke-vita personer i gängse historieskrivning är redan själva deras närvaro på scen subversivt, då den gestaltar den omfattande marginalisering de utsätts för i det hegemoniska europeiska tidsrummet. Queera, icke-vita artister kan använda sina kroppar för att nå bortom stela geohistoriska konstruktioner och simma mot den västerländska linjära temporalitetens ström. I processen att dekolonisera och queera kulturella re-presentationer, kan kroppen fungera som en brytpunkt för feministisk, postkolonial, queer- och performativitetsteorier.

Genom att sammanlänka dessa multidisciplinära källor och medverkande performanceanalys, presenterar denna artikel den queera afropeiska koreografen Oxana Chis repertoar under 2000-talet, vilken bygger på så varierande tekniker som global afrikansk teater, *Ausdruckstanz*, balett, kung fu, raks sharqi och sufisk dans. Hennes senaste arbeten syftar att ge kraft åt icke-vita kvinnors livshistorier i den traumatiska kontexten av Förintelsen, kolonialism, samtida rasism och migration. Utifrån tesen att hennes produktion förkroppsligar och gestaltar "en närvaro i historien, en historia i nutid" (Tinsley 2008, 195), undersöker jag tre solöföreställningar, *Through Gardens*, *Neferet iti* och *I Step on Air*. Utifrån frågan hur dekoloniala, queera kroppsligheter framträder/försvinner i det kulturella minnet, visar artikeln hur Oxana Chis dans fyller viktiga luckor i europeisk historieskrivning och re-presenterar det förflutna i förhållande till samtida maktförhållanden och idéer. För att utforska det jag kallar minnets dansskap, använder jag begreppet rum på tre, sammanlänkade nivåer. Jag börjar med en kort översikt över

queera och dekoloniala processer i det akademiska rummet. Därefter diskuterar jag Oxana Chis queera, diasporiska narrationer och tidsrum på scenen. Slutligen visar jag hur hennes rörelser snurrande, tvärgående och hoppande förvandlar den dansande kroppen till en motståndssfär.

Keywords: dance, memory, Oxana Chi, diaspora, resistance

A somewhat delicate presence, she is, nevertheless, a woman writ large, claiming concert dance space for a diverse and teeming world, blessing that space.
Dance critique Eva Yaa Asanterwaa (2015) on Oxana Chi.

Tuning in

RAISING THE ARMS to the sides, she jumps up energetically, lands only briefly enough to regain strength, and reaches the air again. The jumping pace accelerates, the emotional tension intensifies. Her movements and facial expression evoke a restless quest for recognition, reparation, and affirmation. Oxana Chi performs *I Step on Air*, a dance solo dedicated to May Ayim, Ghaneean-German feminist poet and anti-racist activist. No longer in the audience's rows, I am now within the stage space, as I accompany her dance with live-music and words in this piece.¹ This newly gained insight into the dance art of Afropean choreographer Oxana Chi took my research to another level.² It deepened my fascination for Oxana Chi's capacity to perform memory in a contemporary idiom, and her ability to link the exploration of the past to the preoccupations of the future. I recall witnessing her dance for the first time in 2009 at the Werkstatt der Kulturen Theatre in Berlin, where she performed *Through Gardens* (*Durch Gärten*). Her powerful and mindful engagement with the biography of Tatjana Barbakoff, a Chinese-Jewish-Latvian dancer from the 1920s and 1930s, left a deep imprint on me, and has inspired me to examine the connection between dance, memory and gender studies ever since.

Following her work and even working with her on stage, I gained a deep interest in the conscious linking of dance and diaspora, storytelling and struggles, performance and politics, movement and memory, bodies

and battles. Backstage, I found many spaces of knowing: the *knowledge* surrounding the intents of the artist, the *acknowledgement* of the obstacles encountered en route toward alternative narratives, and the *know-how* to negotiate and overcome them through diasporic dancing resistance.

An internationally celebrated artist “born in Germany of Eastern Nigerian and Eastern European descent,”³ Oxana Chi has been running her own dance company since 1991. She also works as a choreographer, dancer, filmmaker, author, mentor, and curator. Dwelling inspiration from her numerous travels, studies and stays in thirty countries in Asia, Europe, Africa, the Pacific, and the United States, her repertoire has reached audiences in Berlin, New York, Taipei, Paris, Singapore, and Solo, to name a few places. In this paper, I focus on her solo performance work, and more specifically on three current repertoire pieces developed in the 21st century: *Through Gardens*, *Neferet iti*, and *I Step on Air*. Even though each piece has a specific aesthetic and narrative of its own, they are all emblematic of the dancer’s personal “fusion” of dance techniques, choreographic styles, cultural inspirations, and multilayered soundscapes. They blend political meaning, spiritual healing, and feminist storytelling.

Tracing the lines of meaning in the work of Oxana Chi, this paper analyzes how a queer body of color in motion shakes the foundations of Western heteropatriarchic narratives, and performs the past into the present. I will examine how her choreographies inhabit and create what Natasha Omise’oke Tinsley (2008, 194) calls “fluid embodied-imaginary, historical-contemporary spaces.” Using the abovementioned dance productions as an orientation, I aim to map out the moving connectivity between the material spaces and conceptual spaces of academia, diaspora and memory in the European context. In order to explore what I call memory dances, I use the notion of space at three interconnected levels. Starting with a brief outlook on queer and decolonial processes in the academic space, I then turn to the dancer’s queer diasporic narratives and timespaces onstage. Finally, I read the dancing body as a space of resistance by exploring three specific sets of movements in her current repertoire.



Oxana Chi in Neferet iti, Performance Project @ University Settlement, New York City, July 2015. Photo: Layla Zami

Queering Diaspora, Diasporizing Queer

The dancer often compares her working process to that of a scientist's who is constantly "re-searching." Interestingly, her words resonate with the postpositivist methodology I apply, whereupon "the researcher shares much in common with the choreographer" (Green and Stinson 1999, 94). According to this model, intuition and interpretation go hand in hand, while personal preferences and creativity fuel the research methodology and writing. Oxana Chi's own perspective on her work is also akin to an epistemology where subjectivity, autobiography and academia merge, in a long lineage of feminist and especially Black feminist situated knowledge. Talking about the development of her piece *Through Gardens*, she emphasizes the role of the dancer as a (his)tory-maker:

Who actually, here in Germany, who actually, here in Europe, who actually in the world, writes history, or is allowed to write history? It became

clear to me that it is extremely important for contemporary artists like myself to write history ourselves. And if I don't have the means to write a book, then I must place myself on stage and dance it out, this history. I have to bring alternatives, or create alternatives to all this mainstream, which actually very, very intentionally narrates a single history, which for my tastes is very, very limited, and instead, to widen the radius, without exclusion. (Chi 2013)

This vision of dance as a dynamic tool to challenge hegemonic narratives and promote alternative perspectives on historiography is particularly relevant for postcolonial and queer studies, for it encapsulates a liberating and empowering potential. The choreographer's will to "push against the gaps of history and narrative" (George-Graves 2010, 72) materializes in her staging of historical female biographies, such as Tatjana Barbakoff, May Ayim, and Nefertiti, as we will see below.⁴ By "creating characters who exist in alternate realities and characters who represent entire populations," as feminist dance scholar Nadine George-Graves (2010, 72) shows in the case of the dance company Urban Bush Women, Black women have historically negotiated power through storytelling on stage. However, Black female choreographers are seldom found on European stages and cultural agendas, and even less so queer ones. When they strive to produce work outside of stereotypical expectations, their performance opportunities and chance to access large funding may decrease. Oxana Chi's success outside of mainstream structures and her performances within the counter-hegemonic islands of feminist academia, signify the vitality of her work. Although she may express it in other words, her dance fulfills the "project of decolonization" as described by dancer-scholar Ananya Chatterjea (2004):

[C]reating aesthetic frameworks that are permeated with an interventionary politics, working not solely in reaction to hegemonic structures, but generating beauty and power that, while creating specific kinds of pleasure and value, resists reinscription into reigning dominant constitutions. (Chatterjea 2004, 135)

What is appealing in Chatterjea's definition of dance as political intervention, and fitting to the work of Afropean choreographer Oxana Chi, is the intersection between beauty and power, especially in a Western context where queer people of color struggle to access visibility and resources. Here dance demonstrates the power to transform societal power relations. Following this understanding of dance as a potentially counterhegemonic, decolonial⁵ practice, the paper asks how she transforms the stage into a diasporic space, a place of moving presence for decolonial queer corporealities.

Decolonizing the Postcolonial?

What does postcolonial actually mean? María do Mar Castro Varela and Nikita Dhawan (2009, 9) define the postcolonial as an "anti-disciplinary intervention" denouncing the creation and fixation of Otherness by hegemonic imperial discourses. Postcolonial is not meant here as a time period after colonialism,⁶ but as an epistemic attempt to overcome past and present forms of colonial-racist violence that in my view include the Transatlantic Slave Trade, the European Holocaust and the 21st century persecution of migrants. However, the word colonial, regardless of its prefixes, is in itself problematic and inappropriate, for it stems from the Latin root "to take care of." The word *Maafa*, Swahili for catastrophe, is an alternative term to name past and present racist-imperialist violence from the Transatlantic Slave Trade to contemporary police brutality.⁷ Such a transtemporal axis echoes Michelle M. Wright's (2015) critique of Western linear historiography and its marginalization of queer perspectives. Drawing from quantum physics and James Baldwin, she produces the notion of "epiphenomenal time," according to which spacetime is circular and the past cannot be thought, written or performed independently from where we are situated "now" (Wright 2015). This informs her definition of Blackness as situational rather than historical. While Wright focuses on literary examples, it seems to me that no other form of expression is more embedded in the performative "now" than the art of dance. Thus, the decolonization of history and memory needs to happen, among other things, through

performance. Chi's performances indeed re-tell *history* liberated from "his" weight, and courageously perform creative re-presentations of the past into the present. Her dances, speeches and writing, perceived as a whole, weave seemingly disparate motifs into clear patterns of racist legacy of violence and diasporic resistance to it. Her dance productions resist the invisibilization of all those who do not conform to white patriarchal capitalist norms. As mentioned earlier, her choreographic process strives to deconstruct and counter hegemonic power relations in the telling and writing of the past. She contests and intervenes in the how, who, when, and where of dominant historiography. Who is no longer (only) a white male historian or scholar, but a queer performer of color. When and where is now in the timespace of the performance, on stage in diverse venues from theatres to open-air festivals. How is no longer only in writing, but rather through dance and through the physical, contemporary embodiment of historical figures. "To reinscribe history through one's body," (Cooper Albright 2001, 439) means in the case of Oxana Chi to inscribe Queer Afropoan corporeality into the story.

Reclaiming Dance

The connection between queer and performance studies generates the idea that queer performers transform the spaces in which they move. From José Esteban Muñoz' (1999, 195) "world-making" power and Jill Dolan's (2005, 5) "utopian performatives" to the recent anthology *Black-tino Queer Performance* (Johnson and Rivera-Servera 2016), queer scholars unleash performance as the practice not only of representation, but also of transformation of society. In the field of theater, Stephanie Batiste (2014) describes how Sharon Bridgforth's play *delta dandi* collapses linear time, embodying multiple queer Black subjectivities and lives. She argues that Bridgforth uses a multiplicity of voices to render "the capturing, collapsing, and extension of time such that the past, present and future exist in the same moments, words, gestures" (Batiste 2014, 238). As we will see below, Oxana Chi's current repertoire achieves this through a multiplicity of movements within one body. Ramón Rivera-

Servera (2012, 211) urges us to take seriously the “theories-in-practice” that move in and through queer Latina/o dancing bodies. In a publication on *Through Gardens*, which is now in the curriculum of the Humboldt University’s gender studies program, I have shown how dance produces queer-feminist knowledge (Zami 2015). This article anchors to this precious legacy of transdisciplinary explorations of the intersection between performance, race, and gender.

The gendered, racialized, ableist connotations bound to the body within western heteronormative patriarch capitalism should move our quest to question the moving body as a site and subject of alternative discourses and empowering praxis. In the legacy of groundbreaking feminist works theorizing creative writing, poetry, music, and visual art as empowering resistance to oppression, cultural studies need to grant more space to the art of dance. Dance is a field to be *stridden* in postcolonial and gender studies and an art to be *performed* around and within the academic space. Concert dance, however, is often left aside from the tremendous and vital body of academic work dealing with embodiment and art as a form of resistance, both in Europe and in the United States. In the spirit of Brenda Dixon-Gottschild’s (2015) powerful statement, according to which “dance is a barometer of culture – and a measure of society,” my research calls for attention to the role of bodies in motion in understanding social configurations. What does the barometer of Oxana Chi’s dancescapes tell us about societal pressure today, yesterday, and tomorrow?

Queer Diasporic Narratives and Timespaces: Re-membering the Dis_membered⁸

Oxana Chi’s dance repertoire remedies the absence of women of color in hegemonic constructions of the past, especially in Germany where she was born. More importantly, she connects her interpretations of the past to current sociopolitical discrimination issues. Thus, her movements materially and metaphysically fill the gaps of *Ent_innerung*, as defined by Kien Nghi Ha (2012), which I translate as *dis_remembering*. The erasure and marginalization of certain names, perspectives, and stories within

a linear colonial narrative can also be called “dememorization” (Taylor 2003, 196).⁹ For Ha, *dis_remembering* is not antagonistic to memory, rather, it conceptualizes the process of tearing memory apart, eventually impeding memory from unfolding. He denounces how Germany’s colonial past is officially erased (from textbooks, media and other forms of cultural memory), thus allowing the colonial past to fuel contemporary racism. This may explain his interest in the dancer’s repertoire. By inviting her to perform *Through Gardens* at the book release for *Asiatische Deutsche* in 2012, he actually expanded the notion of diaspora by integrating an Afro-German performer into the memory-making process of the Asian German diaspora.

Through Gardens aims to revive the memory of Tatjana Barbakoff, a Chinese-Latvian-Jewish dancer who was very famous in Europe in the 1920s and 1930s, but has since been left out of institutional memory following her murder in Auschwitz in 1944. *Neferet iti* (named after the pharaoh queen’s ancient name, meaning “the beauty has come”) is a decolonial critique of the way ancient Egypt’s Nefertiti, symbolized by a bust detained in a German Museum, is being used in contemporary public discourses about women, migration, and diaspora. *I Step on Air* tells the story of Ghanaian-German author-performer May Ayim, who was internationally known for her poems, academic work and activism in the feminist and anti-racist movements in the 1980s and 1990s. Taken as a whole, Oxana Chi’s repertoire builds bridges between disparate diasporic narratives. Her choice to embody strong women of color characters – a dancer, a pharaoh, a poet – reflects a “dual performativity” which operates both on stage and at the “meta-theatrical” level, when “an aesthetic use of performativity in a performance site implies awareness and agency” (George-Graves 2010, 40–1). Here *agency* is the performer’s power to actually *enact* the figure she is dancing and *awareness* is awakened by *acknowledging* persons and achievements, which are rarely or not at all otherwise acknowledged by institutional memory structures. Oxana Chi *presents* and *re-presents* figures from the past on stage, filling the *dis_membering* gap, by gathering fragments of stories and incorporating them into a new narrative. In this sense, she counters

the absence and performs the presence of queer decoloniality, and enacts a corporeal intervention into mainstream cultural memory.

Her memory dances are a repertoire in the performative sense and in the sense of an artistic intervention in the European cultural archives of historical trauma. Given the legacy and contemporaneity of “colonial dismemberment” (Taylor 2003, 209), how does the diasporic body *re-member* on stage? The ladder to answering this question is made out of several slippery steps, which I can only briefly sketch out in the context of this paper. In the case of Oxana Chi, remembering becomes diasporic resistance at four interconnected levels:¹⁰

- the choice of the themes: e.g., women of color biographies (*Through Gardens, I Step on Air*), German colonialism (*Neferet iti*), queer resistance (*Killjoy*), and body memory (*Psyche*);
- the form of the narrative: to disrupt linear time and to contemporize the past;
- the narrative intent: e.g., the scene of the struggle, emphasizing individual resistance to the Holocaust in *Through Gardens*;
- the choreography: her self-named “Fusion” style dwelling in such diverse sources as classic Indonesian and European dance, West African dance and hip-hop, Egyptian Raqs Sharqi, modern dance, tai chi, among others.

Diasporizing and Queering the Stage

If we understand queer, following Tinsley (2008, 199), not only as referring to same-sex sexuality, but more widely as “a praxis of resistance” that bears the power of “marking disruption to the violence of normative order,” Oxana Chi’s work can mostly be read as queer, even when it does not involve outing same-sex sexuality on stage. It queers biographies by re-presenting them outside of heteronormative assumptions, thus allowing for broader interpretation of their lives, like in the case of Tatjana Barbakoff and May Ayim. It is also queer in the sense of Sara Ahmed’s (2006, 157) queer phenomenology and her concept of “dis-orientation” as “bodily experiences that throw the world up.” Oxana Chi uses Nigerian fabric, which is used as a Sufi-inspired dress. Nefer-

titi's crown is made out of feathers, reminiscent of aboriginal costumes rather than classical Egyptian aesthetics. At the beginning of the piece, she performs a sunrise and sunset with her arms enacting the movement of time, then, significantly, takes off her Native American feather crown, and gently crowns a member of the audience. By transgressing the boundary between performer and audience, she transforms the whole venue into a performance space where visitors are included. The gaze is also temporarily re-directed from her, solo dancer, to a random person seated in the front row. She also "disorientates" the audience through her questioning and disrupting of dominant narratives of the past. This materializes in the presentation of a Chinese-Jewish-Latvian artist, or by personifying a statue stolen in the colonial context, and imbuing it with agency. Oxana Chi's introductory speech also denounces the gendered-racist marketing campaign, calling Nefertiti "the most beautiful migrant in town." The performer embodies the statue's coming to life in the Berlin museum, where she is "imprisoned," and re-traces, through dance, the timespaces that brought her to Europe: movements inspired from *raks sharqi* (Egyptian belly dance) as well as hip-hop, Capoeira and Sufi dance shape the piece. In the originally commissioned version of *I Step on Air*, Oxana Chi blurred the lines, as she embodied simultaneously Ghanean-German poet May Ayim, Afro-US-American poet Audre Lorde, Roma musician Panna Czinka, and Afro-Peruvian activist Delia Zamudio. The dancer transforms the stage into a diasporic space where multilocationality is embodied and enacted and boundaries transgressed. Tina Campt (2005, 180) reminds us that "memory provides the source of the defining tension of diaspora," thus emphasizing the founding grounds of diasporic memory. Indeed, the stage is a context where moving bodies acquire the power to dis/locate and re-member new memories and to unfold them in multilocal dancespaces shared with the audience. Avtar Brah (2003, 625) conceives diasporic space as characterized by "relational positioning" and "multi-locality across geographical, cultural and psychic boundaries." Applying this concept to the stage means tracing the spatial links between corporeality, politics, and memory as they move

together in the dance pieces. It invites us to ask which boundaries surround the stage physically and metaphorically: geographical boundaries between in and outside, between the stage and the audience, cultural and psychic boundaries between an imaginative performer and a more or less receptive, open-minded audience, racialized, gendered, ableist, and classist boundaries. Traveling through space and time, materially on stage and metaphorically, Oxana Chi challenges conventional inscriptions. So her “diasporic spidering” (George-Graves 2014, 33) and diasporic journeys may be about reinscribing presence into (his)tory and settling down imagined and imagining selves in the instantaneity of the performed moment.

Auto_biographical Presences

By interlinking abstract biographical storytelling, personal experience, past events and present issues, the three above mentioned pieces enable the audience to auto/biographically perceive the performance, which continues to show effect within them long after the show. In her work on Afro-Germans, Wright (2003) also speaks of a “diasporic strategy” used by Afro-Germans to produce a counter-discourse, as exemplified in the autobiographical genre in literature, artistic, and activist activities. Every artist inevitably draws on personal experience to create art and so does Oxana Chi. Her goal seems to be more complex than telling only “her” story; moving further, she inscribes and incorporates other people’s stories, which echo her own, in the public sphere. Thus, she constantly slides between an “autobiographical impulse” (Lauré al-Samarai, 2009, 121) and pulsating biographies. The dancer reveals the multilayered proximity she feels with her protagonists:

I have worked strongly biographically in the last pieces, actually worked on figures such as Tatjana Barbakoff, Neferet iti, and May Ayim. These are figures with whom I am familiar to some extent. Each one has, in a very distinct fashion, a lot to do with me. Not only in terms of biography, but also as soulmates.

This quote suggests how Oxana Chi consciously blurs the boundaries between biographical storytelling and autobiographical experiences, between historical facts and narratives and current sociopolitical debates, a process I have described as choreobiography (Zami 2017). Her dance moves stretch linear notions of temporality and spatiality and bend linear history into curvilinear timeframes. New spaces emerge in which history and contemporary are no longer opposed, but rather flow into each other. Absence of queer diasporic figures and moves turn into presence; spaces fill up with embodied imaginations and physical presences.

Context plays an important role and some wonder why an Afro-German artist participates in German Holocaust memory. In reality however, her will to create *Through Gardens* originated in her encounter with Tatjana Barbakoff's dance and personality through an exhibition catalogue from the August-Macke-Haus in Bonn (Drenker-Nagels et al. 2002). Oxana Chi states that before encountering the figure of Tatjana Barbakoff, she could not identify with the omnipresent, white-washed, and heteronormative dance history that failed/fails to account for dancers of colors. Performing her story on stage, Chi offers an alternative to the heteropatriarchal reading Barbakoff has been subjected to (Zami 2015). She actually identified deeply with Barbakoff's mixed cultural heritage, her choreographic mix of styles (especially Asian influences), her biography of struggling against racism, and her collaborations with women and work as an avant-garde solo performer with live music. Oxana Chi excavates Tatjana Barbakoff's influence in the shaping of what is known today as *Ausdruckstanz*. Bringing back to the stage, live, a figure marginalized in dance historiography, she operates a "disidentification," defined by Muñoz (1999, 31) as a queer of color performative move which "recircuits [exclusionary machinations] to account for, include, and empower minority identities and identifications." In a metaphorical and physical sense, she embodies center stage identities that were historically marginalized and her own. Tatjana seems alive, as is Oxana, and as Oxana-Tatjana dances, she offers identification opportunities for the next generations of women of color, and for

white audiences interested in cultural history. A solo dancer on stage, Oxana Chi embodies Tatjana Barbakoff's story as an epic journey of success, struggle, and persecution during the Nazi period. Through a long scene of martial arts-driven movements, infused with balletic grace, the scene of the "Struggle" emphasizes physical resistance to oppression. This feels empowering in a European context where narratives of the Holocaust tend to present victims as passive objects of oppression. Here the performer's biographical narrative is imbued with agency and her mere moving presence on stage breathes an alternative wind through the otherwise homogenous representations of this time period.

Moving Homes

Is home a geographical space, a historical space, an emotional, sensory space?
(Mohanty 1998, 487)

Defining dance as her home, Oxana Chi would probably answer yes to all of these adjectives. Dance becomes a multilayered home, a space made of the performative blend of time, emotion, and senses. A queer Afropean dancer moves center stage, countering the tracing of boundaries that define who is in the center and who is in the margins. She also occupies the streets of Dresden, a city often depicted by the media as the country's central location for racist demonstrations. The advertising of the annual Jewish Festival, Jüdische Theater- und Musik Woche, where she performed *Through Gardens*, set Oxana Chi next to Jewish cultural icons. Spatiality unfolds itself from the space as a context of performance, to the body: a space of resistance. The movements of the body through space and time transform the spatial context into imagined counter-hegemonic spaces, where shifting locations of race, class and gender are mapped out, creating a queer Afrodiasporic timespace that is not utopian, but physically real.



Oxana Chi in 'Through Gardens, Théâtre de Belleville, Paris, September 2012.

Photo: Layla Zami

Memory As a Site of Movement in Oxana Chi's Dancescapes: Moving Through Space

Let us map out the dynamic cartography of the movements of Oxana Chi's multidimensional memory dancescapes. I have outlined how the space of academia and of the stage can be queered and decolonized as exemplified in her work, conceptualizing the stage as a diasporic space and queer diasporic bodies as sites and subjects of resistance. The spaces of representation reclaimed by the dancer are physically invested on stage. Grace, flexibility, and strength are not only metaphorical as in Chela Sandoval's (2004, 2004) "differential consciousness"; they physi-

cally support the dancer's expression. Dance, in essence, lives in the live movement of bodies on stage. In the process of moving on stage, Oxana Chi fully acquires the agency to transgress hegemonies and perform imagined atmospheres where there is enough geographic, political, and psychic space. *Through Gardens* exemplifies the quest for space and liberation through the fusion of ballet pirouettes with Senegalese jumps, explosive kung fu-like kicks alternating with slow Javanese hand grace. Eva Yaa Asantewaa (2015), a legendary dance critique, and a Black lesbian New Yorker, described Oxana Chi's inventive way of crossing boundaries of geography, history and styles:

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. (Asantewaa 2015)

Asantewaa compares Chi's dance to a quilt, a cloth technique historically used by African-American women to tell their stories. This assemblage in which movement patterns co-exist is emblematic of her personal fusion style. It works, indeed, and in this section, I spotlight three realms of movements: turning/spinning, crossing, and jumping.

Turning and Spinning

Circular forms are found in many dance traditions, and even the etymology of *choreo* is sometimes traced to the Greek idea of a circle. The curvilinear is also described by Kariamuwelsh Asante (2001) as one of the seven commonalities of the very diverse dance cultures she theorizes as "Africanist dance."

There is “power” in the circle, the curve, the round, supernatural power if you will. [...] The form is paramount in helping the artistic experience along, spurring on the imagination of the participants, viewers, or listeners. (Welsh Asante 2001, 146–7)

Oxana Chi, who dwells in Africanist techniques and cultural heritages, indeed uses the curvilinear in the three pieces mentioned here. The first scene of *I Step on Air* ends with the dancer tracing a circle around herself with red lentils. The curve conjures diverse images in the audience, some reading it as a circle that restricts her movements, others as a protection circle. Eventually she will gingerly step out of the circle and look back at the form left behind her. Is this circular space a protection, a diasporic home that the Afro-German protagonist and performer leaves, in search of Africanist traditions and Afrofuturist visions? Or is she looking proudly back at the result of all the seeds of achievement gathered so far? Until the end of the piece, Oxana Chi will have to acknowledge the circle that remains visible at the forefront of the stage, an empty trace waiting to be filled with the viewer’s interpretations.

When no one can be above or in front of the others, the circle jeopardizes hierarchic positionings. In my view, the circle disrupts the rectangularity of concert stages. Scenographic and choreographic circles transform the spaces into imagined locations. The premiere of *Neferet iti* at the Dance(a)Summer12 Festival in Berlin was staged in a circus tent, and the circular space indeed impacted the audience’s perspective on the piece. Once again, the circle is here, supernatural: in the last scene of the piece, as the mind-blowing live music stops, Oxana Chi starts spinning in absolute silence. Dressed in an earthy Sufi dress sewn from Nigerian fabric, she keeps spinning for seven minutes. This repetitive spinning, seemingly endless like the spinning of the planet Earth, becomes more and more powerful and conveys a deeply meditative atmosphere. The circular is now the unit of display, throwing us off our usual linear spatial and chronological landmarks. Here again, one can think of Ahmed’s (2006) feeling of disorientation and, simultaneously, Oxana Chi’s deeply grounded presence, an essential feature for such a technical feat.

In the second scene of *Through Gardens*, we watch the dancer execute pirouettes and other ballet-inspired moves as she roams over an imaginary circle over and over again. Dancing full circle, she traces a line visible to all, which exists only in her movement. It is by power of imagination that we see the circle she is tracing. Thus, she creates an abstract, open space where her imagination and the fantasy of the audience can meet. She is turning on her own axis and looping around the stage. The expressive quality of the music and movement suggest a joyful atmosphere, channeling the rising successes of Tatjana Barbakoff in her career as a dancer in 1920s Europe. The pace of the movement accelerates, and this change of tempo feels highly dramatic, especially when one knows the biography of Barbakoff and her tragic end in the gas chambers. For now, she is still alive and lively, spinning, turning, and jumping and has not yet been hampered by the rise of National Socialist forces. The transient nature of the performance serves the narrative's purpose, for it transmits a sense of short-livedness, appropriately reflecting Barbakoff's ephemeral success. Chronology explodes into a constellation of instants that carry an embodied truth, freed from geohistorical location, opening up the realms of interpretation for the audience. When Oxana Chi continues to use the circular form in the scene called the "Struggle," it becomes clear that she dances, until near exhaustion, not only the resist-dance of the 20th century, but also the resist-dance against the actual "stop and search technology of racism" (Ahmed 2006, 140). With the additional afterlife scene, in which Tatjana-Oxana moves beyond death, she performs and enacts the survival of Jewish/Black/Brown/Queer bodies in the 21st century.

Crossing and Transgressing

Staying in *Through Gardens*, let us take a closer look at the scene of the "Journey." A video projection shows Wayang Kulit figures, puppets used on stage in Indonesia to depict historical events and comment on socio-political issues. As the video ends and the stage lights dim, the dancer returns to the stage in a new costume. The puppets on the screen are mirrored by her silhouette detaching from the dark. Standing at the back left corner of the stage, she follows the paths of light as they appear

and disappear diagonally, in zigzag shapes. Her steps are reminiscent of tai chi walking exercises, in which one slowly steps one foot after the other in order to regulate the yin-yang balance in the body. She adds another dimension to this technique, by letting an almost imperceptible energy circulate through her body, a flow that animates her arms. Thus, she seems to be a puppet hanging in the air, being moved by external forces. In this fashion, she travels across the whole stage diagonally, finally reaching the top right corner. The performer is crossing world borders in a few steps and a few minutes, but the travel seems very long through the very slow motion in which she is moving. Each time she reaches the end of a light path, a newly lit diagonal appears for her to step into. The zigzagging across the stage inevitably reaches the borders of the stage. This trip mirrors the main protagonist Tatjana Barbakoff's migration from Latvia to Germany at the beginning of her career. But taking a polysemic stance on the piece, which I know to be intentionally multidimensional, I also see it as the dancer fleeing from Germany in 1933 and eventually crisscrossing through France from one hiding place to another, attempting to escape the fascist persecution she was exposed to as a Chinese-Jewish-Latvian dancer, more so as a performer of critical sociopolitical pieces. It may also tell of Tatjana's dreamed travels from China to Europe and her real travel from Latvia to Germany to France, from newspaper covers to the gas chambers of Auschwitz. The scene may also be framed in a linear reading of the piece's dramaturgy, or precisely as a disruption of it, for it enacts several time periods within one movement. Therefore, it also personifies a Blackness that can only be situated in the "epiphenomenal time" of the "now" (Wright 2015).

The space of the stage is also diagonally queered in *Neféret iti*, where Oxana Chi shoots from one stage corner to the other like a flying arrow, suggesting the pharaoh queen's warrior resources. Diagonals move away from the norm of moving from left to right or from front to back. A performer moving in diagonals traverses the whole stage without fully facing, and neither turning, one's back to the audience. The diagonal may trace counter-hegemonic spaces urgently needed by all those who want to move away from capitalism, patriarchalism, and occidentalism.

The borders created on stage carry multiple meanings; they can be read as geographical borders, psychic boundaries crossing the minds of those who live in a daily colonial situation, or cultural boundaries between conflicting entities. The stage, especially when invested with the dancer's diasporic queer presences, is truly a diasporic space in the above defined sense. This shows again that performance is as much a source of knowledge and meaning-making as the theorizing one draws on to interpret it.

Jumping

The above described incorporation of a female warrior in *Neféret iti* is also performed through the energetic use of jumps. Jumping across the stage, Oxana Chi's moves consciously break down rigid linear narratives and build up new possibilities to relate to *history*. The dancer rejects any attempt to confine memory within a museum space. Filling the stage as she fills up the blanks of institutional memory, her art inspires a transformative spirit, spurring on political awareness and stimulating social healing. Jumping and crossing the stage simultaneously, sometimes through the queer diagonal, she embodies a strong protagonist full of willpower and determination. A very complex move consists in jumping laterally whilst simultaneously sliding across the stage, in a scene inspired by Candomblé spirituality. Far from the passiveness attributed in dominant discourses to historical queens and contemporary female migrants, the performer is imbued with agency.

In *I Step on Air* the jumps seem to incarnate liberation from a painful mindspace. The work dedicated to the memory of May Ayim evokes the constriction of an Afro-German subject countering daily racism and sexism. The jump is embedded in Africanist technique to which Oxana Chi adds her specific touch of expression. These jumps appear as a leitmotiv throughout the piece. Chi has a way of using repetition with a subtle intensifying of emotions that renders the repetition very absorbing.

The festive scene of *Through Gardens* portraying Tatjana Barbakoff's success is also full of complex jumps, inspired partly from Senegalese (to the side) and partly from classical European ballet (to the back). Here the jumps are integrated into the curvilinear trajectory. The constant

changeover between spinning and jumping creates a very dynamic and intense atmosphere. Jumping from one story to another, back and forth from her present self to past selves, the dancer jumps above the abyssal gap of absence in centuries of one-sided Western historiography, digging out Afropean possibilities for the future.



Oxana Chi in Psyche, BlackTinX Performance Festival, Bronx Academy of Arts and Dance, New York City, November 2015. Photo: Layla Zami

Turning out

This article sketched patterns of presence and absence of decolonial queer corporealities in the cultural memory dances of Oxana Chi. Having reaped the benefits of involved embodied research, I am

grateful to this exceptional artist for sharing her spaces of feminist reclaiming, spatial-temporal queerness, and fluid resistance. As a non-gender conforming, able, queer artist academic of color born and based in the West, I am aware of the bias my positioning may entail. In the short spacetime devoted to this paper, I can only lightly touch upon her rich and complex art. Dance goes very deep as the performer is requested to flip one's self inside out. In the case of Oxana Chi, the performances display, embody, and enact queer Afropean corporealities. This seems to continue to be a major theme for the artist as her new work-in-process *Psyche*,¹¹ excavates her own Afropean heritage. Here jumping is liberating, as it draws ancestral energy from the ground as much as it floats above any attempt to reduce and narrow one's identity. Jumping here also queers one's relation to body and self. Infusing the stage with the power to represent oneself and to share this representation with the audience, she invites us to move beyond the very idea of representation. Despite the intense seriousness Oxana Chi puts into dealing with tragic past and present power relations, her dance is accompanied by an infinite tenderness, a deep humor, inevitable melancholia, and an ever-present horizon of hope.

Making present sense of a future-relevant past, her dance art profoundly impacts memory transmission by shaping individualized access in a collective performance space, producing what I call a fluid, mobile "perforMemory" (Zami 2017): a medium whose content is transferable to others, if they are willing to connect. This form of ten-sile memory brings into existence a remembering anchored in present power relations. Queer diasporic strategies, narratives, and movements live in the corporeal presences I have attempted to map out here. This vital, dynamic dance-resistance to hegemonic storytelling in European timespaces should be acknowledged as a source of knowledge. Watching and sensing Oxana Chi dance, the audience walks along powerful dancescapescapes, uncovering the borderless mapping of facts and feelings, following her as she dances the past in the present tense.

LAYLA ZAMI is an academic and artist working with words, music, performance, video and photography. PhD in Gender Studies from Humboldt-University in Berlin (2017). Doctoral Fellowship from the German Ministry of Education / ELES Foundation (2013–2016). Visiting Research Scholar at Columbia University, IRWGS (2015–2016). MA from the Paris School of International Affairs Sciences Po (2006). Publications in English, French, and German for UNESCO, transcript, Orlanda Frauenverlag, w_orten&meer. Rooted in an Afropean-Jewish-Caribbean-Indian cultural heritage, Zami blossoms on tour with Oxana Chi's company. They recently presented lecture-performances in the USA, France, Taiwan, Germany, India, Turkey, Indonesia, and the United Kingdom in venues such as Dixon Place, HAU Berlin, and City University of New York. www.laylazami.net.

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NOTES

1. Oxana Chi choreographed the piece *I Step on Air* in 2012, commissioned by Dr. Natasha A. Kelly at Humboldt University, Berlin. In this piece, I play the saxophone, kalimba and sounds, and perform a poem by May Ayim, also known as the Afro-German Audre Lorde. The piece toured internationally, especially in the context of feminist and women's conferences at universities such as Bielefeld University, Yeditepe University (Istanbul), City University of New York, Rutgers University (Philadelphia), Technical University (Berlin), and Mainz University, as well as queer venues and events such as Dixon Place, the Bronx Academy of Arts and Dance (BAAD!), and Delhi International Queer Theater and Film Festival (DIQTFF).
2. The term Afropean is the abbreviation of Afro-European. Similarly to Afro-Cuban or Afro-American, it refers to European citizens of African descent. I know the term as a result of its popularization by the music group Les Nubians in France.
3. Oxana Chi, personal communication. Interview conducted in Berlin, Germany in 2013 by the author in the realm of doctoral research. Translated by the author. For audiovisual impressions of the artist's work, see www.oxanachi.de.
4. Oxana Chi is also currently touring a short memory solo piece entitled *Killjoy* in reference to Sara Ahmed's concept of the feminist killjoy. *Killjoy* is dedicated to the Jewish lesbian artist/activist Claude Cahun and her partner Marcel Moore. It was commissioned in 2012 by Prof. Dr. Lann Hornscheidt for the "trans/forming politics" symposium at Transdisciplinary Center for Gender Studies, Humboldt University, Berlin.
5. For the use of the term "decolonial," see Pérez (1999).
6. For another critique of post as a linear marker, see Hirsch's (2012) concept of postmemory.
7. See Ballé Moudoumbou's (2016) article on *Maafa* in the anthology *Inter-Dependenken*, which I co-edited with the working group AK Forschungshandeln.
8. My use of the dynamic hyphen is inspired by Hornscheidt (2012). While Hornscheidt generally uses it to question binary genderist language forms, here I wish to emphasize the gap in institutional memory-making processes.
9. Here Diana Taylor actually translates from the Spanish, and refers to the expression *un paiz desmemorizado*, coined by the artist Teresa Ralli, from the artist group Yuyachkani.
10. See also the three modes of resistance (idiomatically, choreographically, thematically) developed by Chatterjea (2001).
11. The piece premiered at BlackTinX Performance Festival at the Bronx Academy of Arts and Dance (BAAD!) in December of 2015. In 2016 it was shown at the following places: Archives Matter Conference (Goldsmith University, London), Moving Memory International Symposium (Technical University, Berlin), and Summer Residency Festival (NYU Tisch School of Arts).