

## Dancing After Life: Flexible Spacetimes of Black Female ResistDance

Layla Zami  - including a contribution by Oxana Chi

My mission in life is not merely to survive, but to thrive; and to do so with some passion, some compassion, some humor, and some style.—Maya Angelou

### Collaborative Processes: Black Women Performance from Berlin to Brooklyn

“I am alive!” clamors a Black woman in a Jamaican café, located in Brooklyn. Her face composure and her hand gestures express expansion, as her utterance powerfully moves upward in the air. She is simply responding to someone who asked her, “How are you?” With her take-out order in hand, she walks toward the exit and swiftly rushes out onto Malcolm X Boulevard, ready to face the day. This observation happened in pre-pandemic times. I share it here as a reminder that Black women have always been reflecting on, as well as practically exploring and reinventing, what it means to survive, to be alive, and to thrive in challenging circumstances.

How do Black women performances express tools of living such as passion, compassion, humor, and style? How can dance performance become a spacetime of liberation for Black women, within and beyond hegemonic constructions of race, gender, sexuality, time, and space? Can dance be a medium of individual and collective time travel?

These are some of the questions I explore within this article. To do so, I offer a case study of contemporary dancer-choreographer Oxana Chi’s repertoire, and more particularly her solo dance piece *I Step on Air*,<sup>1</sup> dedicated to the Afro-German writer-activist May Ayim. Reflecting on this dance piece offers many insights into the interrelations between and the intersections of choreography, writing, and activism in the Black diaspora. My interest lies in a constant search for innovative ways to generate meaning within and beyond academia. The quest for innovation is also a connecting link between my research, Oxana Chi’s choreography and writing, and May Ayim’s writing and former activism. In order to account for these multidimensional, multilayered realities and epistemologies, I devised a “choreography” for my writing, consisting of three parts in

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the key of C: Conjuring, Contextualizing, and Contemplating. The text interweaves performance analysis, interdisciplinary theory, and auto-ethnographic experience gained through (active) observant participation during rehearsals, onstage, and backstage. I also include the voice of the choreographer: a piece of creative writing giving precious insights into Oxana Chi's choreographic process in her own words.

My approach rejoins what Leanne Betasamosake Simpson—an Indigenous Michi Saagiig Nischnaabeg scholar—calls “*thinking in formation or thinking with*” (2017, 37). Here and elsewhere, Simpson reflects on the parallels between Indigenous and Black feminist intellectual and practical modes of resistance (she also cites the work of Alexis Pauline Gumbs), and the networks of thought that they both require to exist and recreate through their existence. My collaborative thinking formation is a collaborative process with Oxana Chi, made visible here through the inclusion of her essay-poem about her piece *I Step on Air*. On another scale, Oxana Chi is also *thinking in* and *choreographing with* the figures that inspire her productions, in this case May Ayim.

I also find it useful to refer to Simpson in order to question whose terms are used to measure academic excellence and what is defined as academic knowledge. Here, Simpson names the “racialized and gendered” mechanism through which readers sometimes “position” a work as “narrative” or “creative nonfiction” rather than academic (2017, 32). She explains the fallacies that come with having to qualify one's work as something else, and names excellence on her own Indigenous terms. In the context of this article, and in the spirit of Black epistemological and ontological traditions, I find the most meaningful criteria defining academic excellence to be innovation, information, diversity, and knowledge production in a dialogical relation with artists and ancestors. I also use abstraction, storytelling, and reflection as epistemological values transmitted to me through my African-Caribbean-European-Jewish-Asian cultural heritage.

The idea of *thinking with* also resonates with the role of collaboration in queer communities and perspectives. My research is indeed informed by and contributes to *thinking at* the intersection of dance and queer studies. Here I think of Thomas DeFrantz's discussion of the power of queer dance, Black dance, and Black queer dance (2002, 104). I understand queer not only as an LGBT\* positionality, but also, following Omise'eke Natasha Tinsley, as “a praxis of resistance . . . marking disruption against the violence of normative order” (2008, 199). This definition of “queer” moves beyond the realm of sexuality to address daily artistic and activist intersectional practices that challenge and resist against existing hierarchies and power relations. If we believe, with Clare Croft, that dance allows its practitioners and spectators “to imagine other ways to live in and move through this world” (2017, 26), we can argue that Black dancing women stretch the ways in which we live and move through spacetime. Croft emphasizes the “particular power” of dance “within queer work because dance emphasizes how public, physical action can be a force of social change” (2017, 2). Through collaborative processes in queer performance making, the stage can be(come) a common ground on which choreography, activism, and societal transformation nurture one another.

As a resident artist with Oxana Chi Dance & Art, I often have the privilege of witnessing the work from the prime perspective of the stage. My research has been tremendously enriched by all the hours spent in rehearsals, performances, and conversations with the dance maker. Creating and performing music, spoken words, and physical theater for, and in dialogue with, her choreography, I gain(ed) invaluable stage experience on the workings of live performance and more particularly dance, which loops back into my academic research. The spacetime of Black female dance is itself a constant looping between a never-ending past, a suspended present, and the possibility of a future. Like a flat note in jazz, this spacetime is as melancholic as it is soulful, as dramatic as it is hopeful.

When Oxana Chi invited me to collaborate on her newest piece, a duo for a body and a saxophone called *feelingJAZZ*,<sup>2</sup> which has inspired dancers across New York City and beyond, I started

exploring with the use of live loops. Live-looping technology can help to channel these multidimensional emotions. The use of a loop pedal transforms the musical dialogue with movement. In these moments, we—the artists and the audience—are propelled in the very essence of what it means to be in suspension. We listen, move, breathe, and live in that interstitial spacetime existing between the instantaneous recording of a pattern and its immediate *archiving in and repeating through* the loop machine. The phrase emitted by the instrument *live, just now*, already becomes a musical backdrop *from the past* against which to play a new musical layer.

## Contextualizing: Dance (as) History and (as) Activism

In September 2020, as I am revising this article, originally written in 2019, #ScholarStrike hashtags erupt across screens throughout the United States. The constant live-looping between the adversity of the past, the complexity/absurdity of the present, and the (im)possibility of a future is the backdrop against which the Black Lives Matter movement has earned increased visibility around the Western world. It now feels more urgent than ever to value a Black female dancer's life, which entails naming some of her accomplishments.

Oxana Chi is a Nigerian-German dancer-choreographer, filmmaker, curator, author, and mentor. She started her own company in 1991, inscribing her choreography in Berlin's cityscapes. She moved to New York in 2015 and was listed, three years later, in *The Dance Enthusiast's* "A to Z: 20 Questions – Celebrating 10 Years of Dance Enthusiasm and People Who Power the Dance World."<sup>3</sup> She created nineteen productions, including two commissioned works for Humboldt-University, funded by several public and private sponsors. In one of her first productions, shown in a politically shape-shifting Berlin in 1993, she was already addressing the nature of time, freedom, emancipation, and integrating the words of a poet with her choreography. Most of Chi's current repertoire is solo dances, emblematic of her self-created "Chi Fusion style," which blends such diverse techniques as ballet and classical Javanese dance, African Total Theater, Egyptian Raks Sharki, German expressionist dance (Ausdruckstanz), jazz dance, and Chinese Wushu. The dancer likes to collaborate with artists from the fields of music, visual arts, and theater, who often accompany her onstage. She has performed across North America, in venues and contexts, including NYU Jack Crystal Theater, Abrons Arts Center, Movement Research at the Judson Church, University of Toronto, Rutgers University, and Howard University. Chi has also performed across Germany, as well as in France, India, Indonesia, Taiwan, Martinique, Turkey, Singapore, Ghana, Finland, and the UK. These achievements consist of and contribute to a geographic choreography that requires movement across boundaries of nations, performance settings, and dance genres. Chi also hops from one historical spacetime to another, thus creating a repertoire that includes time periods ranging from ancient Egypt to now. By spotlighting names and/or narratives that are often marginalized in mainstream historiography, her choreography expands and deepens our understanding of history.<sup>4</sup>

## Choreography in and beyond Historical Contextualization

In dance scholarship, the relations between choreographic and historiographic storytelling have gained increased attention in recent years. Several scholars of African American studies have situated Black bodies as receptors and generators of culture, and highlighted how dancers perform and negotiate the intersections of race and gender onstage.<sup>5</sup> A main axis of inquiry remains the role of reenactments, as for instance in the work of Rebecca Schneider (2011) or in *The Oxford Handbook of Dance and Reenactment* (Franko 2017). In Francophone scholarship, I think, for instance, of Anne Bénichou (2015) and of the special issue of the journal *Recherches en Danse*, edited by Claudia Palazzolo and Guillaume Sintès, on the topic of memory of/in/through works of dance, to which I had the pleasure to contribute (Zami 2019).

Rather than striving to reenact past events or past dances, Oxana Chi uses choreography as a tool to access and embody the past in a new way. Her twenty-first-century repertoire moves at the

intersection of choreography and historiography, and she often pursues what I call a *choreobiographic* endeavor (Zami 2017). Her intent is to unearth silenced stories and perspectives, with a focus on female biographies:

There continues to be—all the way into today, and even beyond, into the future—other artists, who have distinctly helped shape our history, who have even created our history, but who are not named. This is why I find it very, very important that I attempt . . . to create alternatives, and to incite other artists to create alternatives to the narrative of history we encounter here [in mainstream discourses]. Because I believe that here, a great deal is left out, that is actually extremely important. (Chi 2013; my translation)

Chi's choreographic memory work slides into these slippages of history, and is complemented by her curatorial practice. In 2009, she initiated the annual Salon Qi, soon to become a popular event in the Berlin independent arts scene known as Freie Szene (Free Stage). Besides her own dance, *Through Gardens*, in memory of Tatjana Barbakoff, Chi curated other artists in multiple disciplines, along with conversation and workshop programs. Together, we installed Salon Qi in Paris in 2011 and prepared a New York edition, now postponed due to pandemic-related restrictions.

In Oxana Chi's multidisciplinary productions of performative memory, one can see what Amanda Walker Johnson theorizes as “the simultaneity of conjuncture and *disjuncture*” in Black feminist ethnographic productions (2017, 403). Johnson understands these terms as follows:

Conjunctures refer to the coming together of common histories, cultural formations, and social processes at moments that can be either immediate or long term, and disjunctures refer to the production of differentiation, disconnect, and displacement between subjects, knowledges, expectations, and conceptions/experiences of time and space. (Johnson 2017, 411–412)

The piece *I Step on Air* exemplifies the possibility for Chi to simultaneously embody and enact the conjunctures and disjunctures of Black German identities in their historical experiences and contemporary realities. Black women dance can make visible, and physically tangible, how conjuncture and disjuncture coexist onstage, in our bodies, and in society.

Oxana Chi created *I Step on Air* as a tribute to the Ghanian-German feminist artist-activist May Ayim, who has come to be known as “the Afro-German Audre Lorde,” (and Audre Lorde was indeed friends with May Ayim). *I Step on Air* was originally commissioned by Dr. Natasha Kelly, a Black German scholar and activist of Jamaican descent. At that time, Dr. Kelly was teaching at Humboldt-University in Berlin. Her May-Ayim seminar centered on the work and biography of May Ayim. In this realm, Kelly and her students produced a wandering decolonial exhibition titled *EDEWA: The Postcolonial Supermarket*.<sup>6</sup> Interestingly, Dr. Kelly developed the May-Ayim seminar after she had attended a lecture-performance about May Ayim at Gallery Gondwana in 2011, in the realm of Salon Qi, among an ebullient audience of diverse artists, scholars, journalists, cultural and social workers, and spiritual leaders.<sup>7</sup>

The world premiere consisted of three sequential performances held across Berlin in November 2012. Here the performative spacetime was stretched already in the process of spreading the premiere over three weeks and three different locations. With each new performance date, Chi added a new scene to the prior one. The first performance was presented on November 2 at the Pangea Haus, an intercultural house hosting West African communities, the second one on November 9 at the Roma Aether Klub Theater, an independent theater run by actors from the Eastern European Roma diaspora, and the third one on November 16 at the Casa de Las Culturas de Latinoamericana, a culmination of the full thirty-five-minute threefold performance.

This is one of the many ways in which the piece enacts and embodies a nonlinear, circular spacetime.

If Black Queer resistDance is a ritual, it is a circular one. In *Physics of Blackness*, Michelle M. Wright proposes the notion of “Epiphenomenal time” (2015, 4). She argues that, in order to understand the multidimensionality of Black identities and experiences, we need to find new frames beyond or aside from the “Middle Passage epistemology.” Instead, or rather in addition to linear progress narratives, Wright invites us to imagine time as “a circle with many arrows pointing outward in all directions... . The circle denotes the ‘now’ of the present moment, and the arrows represent all the spacetimes that intersect with that ‘now’” (2015, 20).

Wright refers to scientists such as Lisa Randall and Jennifer Ouellette. She is certainly also aware of the omnipresence of the circle in non-Western cosmologies and mythologies. The circular motif is a stellar figure of African and Afrodiasporic dances, often associated with a “supernatural power” (Asante 2001, 146) and a space and time of “communal experience” in which “transformations can occur” (George-Graves 2014, 142). Oxana Chi’s *I Step on Air* makes space for a multidimensional experience that rushes the Afro-German past into the African diasporic now. The performance creates a spacetime that disrupts the linear distinction between May Ayim’s historical legacy and the contemporary experiences of Black female subjects. I will now offer contextualizing information on Ayim’s biography in a mode that traces a circular epistemological relation between Ayim’s activism and Chi’s choreography (Chi 2020).

### May Ayim’s Activism as Choreography

Ayim’s biography<sup>8</sup> can be interpreted as a performance of Black womanity in and of itself. In the choreography of her life, Ayim shifted between and simultaneously embraced multiple professions, identities, and roles in the community. Her trajectory and legacy can be read through the *tools* mentioned earlier in this text and which I borrow from Maya Angelou. Her subtle *sense of humor* reflects in much of her political poetry, which she performed with a magnetic *style* that left everyone impressed and impacted. With *passion* and *compassion*, she worked as a restless activist and a language therapist committed to undoing racism and ethnocentrism in the fields of therapy and education.

May Ayim also taught as a part-time faculty member and is now acknowledged as one of the most influential founding figures of Afro-German studies. Her graduate thesis, titled “Afro-Germans: Their Cultural and Social History on the Background of Social Change,” was the first scholarly study of Afro-German history, covering the period from the twelfth century to the 1980s. Because none of the professors at the University of Regensburg had agreed to supervise her research, she had to *physically move* to Berlin, where she found a supportive white, female professor and completed her study. A major actor of the (sometimes overlapping) feminist and Afro-German movements, Ayim was involved in the founding of the Initiative Schwarze Deutsche (Initiative of Black Germans and Black People in Germany) and the Black women association ADEFRA. In 1986, she coedited the seminal book *Farbe Bekennen* (later published in the United States as *Showing Our Colors: Afro-German Women Speak Out*). Ayim also authored two poetry anthologies, most notably *blues in schwarz weiss*.<sup>9</sup>

Originally born in Hamburg on May 3, 1960, of a Ghanaian father and a German mother, and raised by white foster parents, May Ayim died in Berlin on August 9, 1996. Although the official narrative says that she committed suicide by jumping from a rooftop, one can also claim that she was killed by society and its racism, or “the pale face of a sickness—that privately and publicly devours us,” as she wrote in her poem, “Soul Sister,” dedicated to Audre Lorde (Ayim 1995, 57; my translation). It is important to note that Ayim strived to connect with the African diaspora across the globe, in a quest for a spacetime of liberation beyond Germany. She gave talks and performed her poetry in South Africa, Canada, the United States, Ghana, Brazil, Kenya, and the UK, where she met the



Photo 1: Oxana Chi and Layla Zami in *I Step on Air*, New Delhi, 2016. Photo courtesy of Anil Katiriyu.

legendary Jamaican dub poet Linton Kwesi Johnson. His musical tribute, “Reggae Fi May Ayim,”<sup>10</sup> commemorates and celebrates her, regretting “how history and biography can plot against you,” emphasizing her “resisting,” “giving,” “defying” character, which corresponds to an arms akimbo stance, and corroborates my interpretation of her life as a work of (com)passionate resistDance.

### **Oxana Chi’s Choreography as Activism**

Oxana Chi’s *I Step on Air* is a choreography that responds to Ayim’s legacy of *activism as choreography*. After a successful premiere in Berlin in November 2012, the piece was scheduled during Black History Month in Berlin in 2013 (upon invitation by people who had known and worked with May Ayim). Soon, we became invited into activist and/or academic circles across Germany and beyond.<sup>11</sup> To *frame* her choreography, Chi chose a poem titled “Against Liversausage Gray—for a colorful Republic” (Gegen Leberwurstgrau—für eine bunte Republik), written by Ayim in 1990 (Ayim 1995, 62–65). In this poem, Ayim speaks of all the “hyphenated Germans,” namely Germans with a family history of migration, and denounces a timely issue, which I would call the conjuncture of pre-elections hypervisibility and post-electoral invisibility for People of Color. In the process of making *I Step on Air*, Oxana Chi asked me to perform the poem at the beginning and the end of the piece, in addition to Oxana composing and improvising music. To interpret the poem, I chose an actual frame, a simple prop turned into a multifaceted performative tool. With her dramaturgical talent, Chi supported me in the use of physical theater, so that my movements would complement the spoken words uttered to frame her choreography.

The role of frames in the performance was astutely commented upon by Kerry Downey, a former educator at the Museum of Modern Art and current professor at the Rhode Island School of Design, after having watched the US premiere at Dixon Place in Manhattan in 2015:

I was really interested in the way this performance was framed, initially with a literal frame that could be read as a window, picture frame, painting frame, television, screen, etc. I thought about how we see difference and the role language plays in how we determine the lives of others, particularly with race, ethnicity, citizenship, and gender. The use of language to bookend the performance worked really well. I slowly became more and more curious about the relationship between Oxana and the author, how they were perceiving cues from one another, watching, listening, seeing each other in ways that felt were outside of other than that initial frame being used to set up the problem of difference. They were expanding the frame through their recognition and observation of one another. (Downey 2015)

What Downey hints at here is the role of representation, and the possibility for performing artists to move within and beyond conventions of representations projected onto their bodies. Chi's choreographies, and more particularly this piece, subvert mainstream representations of Black women in media and other "frames."<sup>12</sup> In *I Step on Air*, Chi centers a Black female biography in all its nuances, and makes space for socio-emotional complexity by using a wide array of movements. For instance, the choreography sometimes oscillates between an aesthetic reminiscent of German expressionist dance (*Ausdruckstanz*), with tragic facial expressions conveying the fragmentation of self, and the proud display of Western African hip movements expressing a strong sense of holistic grounding, mobility, and freedom. In my interpretation of Chi's piece and of Downey's commentary, Chi's work "expands the frame" through which Black womanhood can be seen, by decoding difference and physically performing "the simultaneity of conjuncture and *disjuncture*" quoted earlier. What the above described juxtaposition of movement genres achieves is overcoming binary representations (for example strength versus vulnerability) and allowing instead the possibility for many nuances to coexist in and through the choreography.

*I Step on Air*—and Oxana Chi's repertoire at large—contribute to what Kelly calls a "program change," necessary to overcome Germany's "permanent cognitive coloniality" (2016, 70). Whereas Kelly sees "agents of change" in May Ayim (and others such as W. E. B. DuBois), I would argue that dance makers can also be agents of change, especially when they reframe history through innovative choreography, bring to the forefront themes and biographies that come from Black culture, and are relevant to society as a whole. The change also lays in offering a truthful, yet empowering, representation of a Black female biography, otherwise blatantly lacking in representations of Blackness in Germany.

Chi herself is well aware of the links between choreography and activism in her work and more specifically in *I Step on Air*. Her choice of topic, movements, and dramaturgy is a constant negotiation of what Ananya Chatterjea calls "resistance to inscription by and in the terms of the meta-narrative of Euro-Western dominance" (Chatterjea 2004, 104). This also becomes clear in her creative writing about her dance, as shown by the text included in the next section. The choreographer's use of language is embedded in a physical relation to words that in turn reflects the physical process of the dancer. The tone of the text also makes allusions to May Ayim's writing through its sense of humor, its abrasive use of language to pinpoint painful truths, and its choreographic arrangement of words almost step-by-step, with the use of pauses (to breathe) and movement on the page. The text deploys and choreographs on the page the precious *passion*, *compassion*, *humor*, and *style* as Black female tools of life. Another point of entry into Oxana Chi's performative poem is to read it as a written representation of the "arms akimbo" stance, a subterranean figure dancing between the lines. The interlude that follows shall serve as a flexible spacetime of resistDance, a commentary to the choreography, in which the artist simultaneously conjures, contextualizes, and contemplates.

## Interlude: Commenting

### *From Here to There*

#### A Performative Poem by Oxana Chi about the Dance Performance *I Step on Air*<sup>13</sup>

*Here in Berlin ... And ...*

*I dance the whole night in the disco “industry” in Lagos and understand that everything that I was taught by the white German majority society about swinging the hips, is, and was, a brainchild of frustration, more frustration, and even more frustration.*

*The hips are swinging in Nigeria and I dance and swing the hips,*

*so long until I feel so happy, that I conversely understand, why the white mainstream sexualizes or fully rejects this form of dance.*

*To become delighted,*

*to be delighted,*

*without having to pay for it,*

*does not fit in capitalism-orientated concepts.*

*Human paternalism by Western DE\_MO\_CRAC\_Y*

*With an emphasis on Y ...*

*Yukky, like the global deportation of the possibility of participating to culture, art, and creativity.*

*We humans\_artists continue to smile, to organize, to dance.*

*Our nerves and our purses are incredibly stretchable, because we continue to hope, to dance, to love,*

*and to pray*

*and surely*

*and securely*

*to pay for it.*

*Life goes on, surely it does. We Afro-Women<sup>14</sup> transmit the pressure onto other Afro-Women, PoCs, LGBT\* PoCs, Minorities, because the white mainstream is pressing us down. Buff, the soap bubble explodes and the foam leaves a trace on the West, the Wild White West. Luckily!*

*I step on the stage, and am pleased to now tell our / my / May’s story.*

*Intensely, and wide as the horizon, I sense May’s thoughts, hovering in the air around me ...*

*they move me, they confuse me, they make me feel dizzy.*



WAIT A MINUTE. STOP!

*I would like to add . . .*

*I collect myself, time and again, attempt to dive in without drowning.*

*Because what would society gain from losing so many Afro-Artists?*

*Next to May's presence and her word\_choreography I began to tie a rope, a net, a quilt,*

*and I am still knitting, and I knit, more and more, like the fishermen here by the ocean at the Carbet.*

*As precisely as possible,*

*I wish to combine my choreography, my own dances, with May's words.*

*I have quite enough to dance, because it is also my time. My life, starting with my childhood, up to NOW. This life of which May spoke\_performed\_wrote and jumped. There are thoughts and words of May, which I do not wish to accept. The ones that speak out of her so-called education.*

*Yes, yes, I know, it is easy for me to write that here, but not easy for one to simply let go of one's mis\_education, to strip it off, to run away from it, to jump out of the caldron, that already lays on the stove to cook us soft. Without peppers, without savor, that goes without saying... Well, German cooking.*

*Yes, yes, yes, I know, it is incredibly difficult to bid farewell to these not chosen, uppity Western, white, foster parents from a self-named world of pseudo-First Class\_seal of quality, this technical-socially-emotionally-scientificly proven destroyed, no I mean to bid farewell to my democratic world. And the risk is high to be labeled a pig-headed hellion by consumers who pig out on knuckle.*

*The sun goes down. A blue red yellow horizon blinks at me. I am in Africa, or wherever. Palm trees on the beach offer me shade, or I sit inside the house at the writing desk and listen to . . . the neighbor's motor saw? Whichever mood it may be, here and now I must admit, that I was raised by white madmen, and even after all these years, I did not succeed in throwing out all stones of this educational past out in the ocean. Up to now I do not always succeed on a daily basis.*

*But I always succeed in my dance.*

*Dance has the power to turn all this rubbish into magic. Out of dust becomes sand, red like the earth in Okahia, under which my father lays buried. I draw a circle with red lentils on the stage floor, I circle my world in. With this RED under my feet I sense more than I can express here in words. And by the way—that which cannot be told through words is that out of which sprang the choreography I Step on Air.*

*How it all started . . .*

*the rehearsals for the May Ayim lecture-performance which I curated in the realm of our Salon Qi 2011 and our dance festival Dance@Summer 2012 with Layla Zami and Suheer Saleh left a strong imprint in me. May's poems and stories were and are our stories, in fragments.*

*Togbe, May's grandfather in Ghana and May and I and Layla and Suheer. Our grandfathers and grandmothers. Berlin, and surely also Kreuzberg, and Madinina (Martinique), Alexandria, Anambra . . . and Ghana. More and more stories came together.*

*Suheer lays on the floor, sideways, and rehearses May Ayim's poem entitled "between Avenui and Kreuzberg." The way she pronounces Togbe goes under the skin. I feel that she thinks of her own father who died in Alexandria. Her body rolls from one side to the other. Tog\_be flows out of her mouth.*

*And since I am at it, already standing here at the May-Ayim-Ufer, and fighting, fighting for the right to dance, here, at this significant place named after May Ayim, to earn the right to organize my small dance festival. Here and now, to dance my performance Neferet iti. Africa, colonial looting, stealing. And time and again, exclusion of us, us Afro-Germans, Afro-Europeans, even here at the May-Ayim-Ufer.*

*But I may dance . . .*

*Yes, I may, and for what price? Plangent, slap-in-the-face hourly rates in my face. The rates were surely and most certainly calculated for a large company and pierce my two-persons non-profit organization consisting of me and my partner. Thrown at us by the persons in charge.*

*I accept the deal . . . for do I really have a choice? Whom does the city belong to? The city that could host a small dance-art-festival, a festival with political, decolonial perspectives on the program? Whom does the May-Ayim-Ufer belong to? And all the cafés along the river, the circus tent, the sidewalks, the small stones on the street . . .?*

WHITE

CAPITALISTS

SHARKS

WHALES.

*Yes, you are reading correctly, EVERYTHING belongs to THEM.*

*I, as an Afropean woman, a citizen of the world, am here as a tiny, tiny fish-human. Instead of feeding me, they want me, and other humans like me to feed them up.*

*I do not have a choice but to agree and to sign all contracts with "O.Chi." Contracts which of course I am the only one expected to follow.*

*TOG\_BE! I raise my arms and fly to Avenui, dancingly I fly with May's poem in my ear. Ghana. Berlin-Kreuzberg. And more stories come into play. Layla's story, and mine, and her music, kalimba, and the dance-out-of-my-guts, saxophone, singing, my rhythm, the necessity to choose precisely those gestures, facial expression, and position.*

*And then, what a gift, the EDEWA exhibition was born, decolonial resistance, the May-Ayim seminar under the direction of Dr. Natasha Kelly, who invited me to choreograph a dance about May Ayim. Yes, sure, I would love to perform I Step on Air. This metaphor walked passed me and I said "yes, I like you."*

*We are sitting in a car and driving alongside a dreamlike shoreline. Brown hands are cutting through fish with sharp knives. "The light is wonderful here, let's step out and walk on the sand," I say to her.*

*Curious to meet her, I started asking,*

*What could her name be?*

*"May Ayim"*

*Where may she be from? From Africa? From the Caribbean?*

*“I am Afro-German” she responded.<sup>15</sup>*

*I am Afro-German and receive the red lentils, that mark and frame my world from the hands of an Afro-Indian-Caribbean-Jewish-French woman named ZAMI. The lentils drizzle in my hands. They will be enough for my world. The hill in my hands grows and grows. I am not the only one holding my hands open, I think to myself.*

*I am sitting by the sea. Am I sitting by the sea? I am sitting in the sea. A sea of sexism and racism.*

*And yet, in spite of all, I rise up and reach my hand out to EVERYONE.*

*I shake hands strongly in the hope that the persons will wake up and stop taking relaxing baths in this sea. That they will dry themselves off and get dressed, gaze directly at me in the eyes and let the word “EQUITY” swim along their lips without a salty aftertaste. Is it asking too much?*

*The whole white Western world has its hands open. They receive hills over mountains of precious goods and products from Africa, Asia, the Americas, the Pacific and the Caribbean regions.*

*We stroll back to the car... Let’s go, I say, because there is a police car close to us, filled with white policemen who are starring at us and look bored. I am not up for a profiling.*

*The large gray fish is split in pieces and almost fully sold out. The head and a fin are still left. They are taking a sunbath. Yes, the head, and the fin ... until the Caribbean sun sinks into the sea.*

*I am sitting by the sea. Am I sitting by the sea? I am sitting in a sea of waste and exploitation stamped “fair trade” for a clear Western conscience. HAHA!*

*I step beyond the border ... think of May, am May, and carefully step out of the circle, which I drew with the lentils ... so it goes on ... surely it goes on ... but I turn my head and look back behind me.*

*Talking about goods, what about the precious cultural goods, which are permanently consumed, without the authors being named. It is always said, that they are not yet ready to be named, that they must develop themselves. Hmm ... but millions of dollars are willingly earned with their art! Locked up in museum-prisons!<sup>16</sup> Nameless, annotated with numbers and country of provenance.*

*I travel across Europe all the way to Cairo, a travel through dance, that goes without a saying. Flamenco, Raks Sharki, Modern Dance, Ballet ... I dance a Fusion of these African and Asian treasures which I carry in my luggage. My eyes towards the clouds up in the sky, I thank Romas and Sintis, Ghanian, Nigerian, Turkish, Egyptian, and so many other people for their precious cultural presents, which they keep on reaching over to me.*

*Culture, as a present to the whole white world ... until today!*

*Generosity. Give, transfer, keep, renew ...*

*ART! Pain, Exclusion, Love, and Hope. Since centuries ... how could it be different? And time and again Joy, Laughter. Dance makes happy and Art is sage for ... whom?*

*We are sitting by the sea. Are we sitting by the sea? We are sitting in a sea of sexism and racism.*

*We get up, very peacefully, smile, or have a concentrated look, swing the hips, and perform RESISTANCE.*



Photo 2: Oxana Chi in *I Step on Air* at the University of Ghana, Legon, 2018. Photo courtesy of Bronwen Clacherty.

## Conjuring: Moving through and beyond Spacetime

### Dance as a Time Traveling Vessel

Chi's performative poem illuminates the dynamic at stake in her dance, namely a move beyond hegemonic conventions of space and time. Linearity is bent into a circular dramaturgy. Chi's ingenuous use of repetition generates a circular feel, for instance, when she reprises a choreographic motif from the first scene in the final scene. In this motif, Chi performs a series of arm shuffles around her head, with her hands repeatedly waving. While pursuing this figure, she also embarks on a jumping venture. The occasional jumps, during which she widely deploys her arms to the side in a Western African inspired move, disrupt the head-framing hands and create a connecting and disconnecting affect, allowing the audience to experience the flowing and disrupting texture of time.

The role of the circle also plays a key role in what feels like a rite of passage. During the rehearsal process, Chi came up with the idea of having me pause my music playing and join her center stage for a powerful and multifaceted encounter. She instructed me to pour in her hands the grainy grocery item, which I had originally intended to use for sound. In a slow motion, she gingerly pours the lentils on the earth, while pivoting on her own axis. She creates a circle around herself, out of which she eventually steps. Is this circle a shelter, a ritual practice, a diasporic protection? The interpretations may be as manifold as the audience members. After the very first performance, an Afro-German man who was a friend of May Ayim came up to Oxana Chi, thanking her for the piece. He confessed what he had seen in the scene: it had reminded him of a life experience when someone had given him a gift out of which he made a prison for himself, and how he needed to step out of this imaginary prison. Looking back at this memory today, I think of Nigerian author Ben Okri and his latest novel, *The Freedom Artist* (2019), which starts with the assertion that all humans are born in prison. Another interpretation may be to trace the color red back to the red earth of the Igbo region of Nigeria where Chi's ancestors stem from and where her father is buried, as she alludes to in her performative poem.

In Chi's Black female ritual of survival through movement, the transitional space of mourning (mourning May Ayim, mourning the father, mourning any other Afro-descendent being?) can simultaneously be a spacetime of celebration, a corporally tangible possibility of what Christina Sharpe would later theorize as the "wake" (2016, 35). This non-paradoxical juxtaposition of emotions, and generative tension between an earthly pull and an aerial drive, is inherent to an Africanist relation to movement and gravity. In the context of the United States, a unique performative spacetime of diasporic mourning exists in the tradition of second lining that emerged in New Orleans and inspired one of Camille A. Brown's dance productions. In her discussion of Brown's *New Second Line*, Rachel Carrico assigns a symbolical meaning to this (non-) duality:

The second liner must lift her weight away from the earth while grounding that lift with a downward drive... . Symbolically, it yokes opposites into an interdependent relationship wherein boundaries dissolve: celebration and mourning, life and death, body and spirit, and self and community. (Carrico 2020, 196)

Chi's dance physically enacts this tension, or should I rather say reunion, between contradictory forces. Her multiverse of emotions shows the possibility of simultaneously mourning Ayim's death while celebrating her life. *I Step on Air* is therefore fundamentally anchored in a Black diasporic storytelling tradition. Here, as in more traditional embodiments of memory, remembering is a complex endeavor traversed by the ruptures of history; a tale expressed in a form that disrupts binary emotions; a sermon that summons to the table, or to the dance floor, all the feelings that inhabit the performer.

### Channeling Temporalities of PerforMemory

When Dr. Kelly initially commissioned Oxana Chi to create a performance for EDEWA, she had four women in mind: May Ayim, as well as the African American poet Audre Lorde (1934–1992), the Roma musician from Hungary Panna Czinka (ca. 1711–1772), and the Afro-Peruvian activist Delia Zamudio (b. 1943). Chi eventually decided to focus on Ayim, a decision that she attributes to a spiritual connection to Ayim and her guidance as an ancestor (Chi 2013). The three other figures clearly remain present, albeit in the background. The important role of poetry in the piece hints at Lorde; the choice of a poem that specifically addresses unbalances of power, minorities, and elections would certainly please the trade unionist Zamudio; and Czinka seems to subliminally hover over the dance at times, when Chi carries an intensely tragic dramatic expression, or when she mimics the polysemantic act of juggling.

The multiple identities and legacies of these four women may well have shaped a *quadruple consciousness*, informing Oxana Chi in her choreographic process. I borrow the term from Malik Gaines, who coined it to describe Nina Simone's "mode of performance, which is intensely dramatic while politically challenging" or in other words "both politically radical and emotionally believable" (Gaines 2017, 38). The author was obviously inspired by the song "Four Women," and it is interesting to note that he actually discusses an Afro-German actor in his study of Black performance.

Chi's specific mode of performance has inspired me to coin the term *perforMemory* (Zami 2018). The word "perforMemory" shares with Toni Morrison's "rememory" the capacity to be both a noun and a verb. PerforMemory blurs the lines between the making of memory narratives and the performance of memory in practice, between the historically written and the contemporarily moving body. When Black women perforMemory, they dare to question the linearity of Western dichotomies between life and death, past and present, subject and object, observer and participant, grief and joy. Is perforMemory "unbound by the limits of time" (Gumbs 2020, 17), although it is contained within the fixed spacetime of a concert dance performance?

This constant loop between humans and spirits is also a looping of the four women. Maybe they can be likened to avatars, as in Uri McMillan's study of Black Feminist performance art, for whom "time, like avatars themselves, recurs, reverberates, and exceeds artificial distinctions between the past and the present" (McMillan 2015, 13). While the focus is on May Ayim, the three other figures are called upon through movement, and constantly (dis)appear. In my understanding of performMemory, spacetime dances away and transforms itself into its anagram, a timescape. In dance, "time breathes and breezes, sweats and sneezes, crawls and curls, runs and roams, flies, flees and foams" (Zami 2020). Oxana Chi's performative time can evaporate and escape, lead and leak, rest and ripple, spin and swirl. In her performMemory of May Ayim, time tiptoes, ticks, and twists . . . time moves.

Switching seamlessly from one role to another, may it be from Oxana to May to Afrekete to Audre to Delia, the dancer becomes a shape-shifter through movement, a power that can "index the slipperiness of time itself," in the words of McMillan (2015, 13). This skill imbues the performer with the capacity to move away from linear spacetime, and to take the audience along on a journey when and where (hi)stories are told anew. Here, we can also think of Stephanie Batiste's analysis of Sharon Bridgforth's play *Delta Dandi*. Batiste argues that Bridgforth's use of multiple Black subjectivities and voices conjures "the capturing, collapsing, and extension of time such that the past, present and future exist in the same moments, words, gestures" (Batiste 2014, 238).

Throughout *I Step on Air*, there is no clear demarcation between past, present, and future. Ayim is referenced in words and movements; however, the text is as relevant to the current realities of African Americans as it was to Afro-Germans in the 1990s. The dance could also be creating a vision of an Afrofuture glistening in the air. The avant-garde combination of the emotionality of German expressionist dance theater, the dynamism of West African jumps and hip releases, the precision of Egyptian Raks Sharki, and the flexibility of a European balletic back bend, among others, creates a universe of her own. At its core, the solo dancer-choreographer flies and flows in tune with a polyrhythmic musical soundscape that also incorporates multiple traditions—with kalimba, saxophone, and object sounds.

Have you experienced moments when a dance performer expresses with one movement pattern a truth that you as a scholar would need dozens of pages to tell? For example, Michelle Wright asks us to consider a horizontal relation to spacetime as an alternative to vertical, genealogical engagements with the past. When Chi engages in side steps, pushing the hips and sweeping across the stage, while generously expanding her arms in a gesture of praise, she literally moves through spacetime horizontally. She uses her proprioception sense to express knowledge beyond verbal language.

Chi's side steps and the alternate gaze and hand gestures toward the ground and toward the sky may also remind some audience members of the Afrekete dance in the Arara tradition (known as Yemaya in the Yoruba tradition), the Goddess of the Ocean. Afrekete is a West African deity of transformation and of language, whose embodiment works through multiple genders. Therefore, it is no coincidence that she plays a role in Ayim's poetic work. Although such dances are performed to live drums, I accompany this sequence with a mortar and a pestle from my matrilineal Caribbean heritage. This remix of a Martinican household item into a percussion instrument represents a historical layering of Black women labor. It is emblematic of diasporic processes, suggesting how displaced Black individuals and communities continuously reinvent(ed) tradition, by filling the absence of instruments, resources, and relatives with the presence of creativity.

It seems to me that one of the most powerful features of Chi's choreography is that she holds her dance as a mirror to the audience, so that each and every person may recognize a piece of their own human story and humanity in it. When witnessing *I Step on Air*, the African American community in Berlin also sensed a resonance with their own past experiences across the Atlantic. Sadiq Bey, formerly active in Detroit's experimental and political music scene, and now bandleader of the

Berlin-based *schwartzgeist*, attended one of the first iterations of the piece and praised it as “out-standing avant-garde.” Maybe he recognized in *I Step on Air* a choreographic echo to his own poetic tribute to Sun Ra, in which Bey wrote of “feet rushing with the wind on a new world” and a bird soaring “through the threads and fringes of today, straight to the heart of tomorrow” (Bey 2010, 82).

### **Diasporic Moves: Walking, Dancing, and “Spidering”**

Is this dance sequence a “memory walk,” as described by Ama Oforiwa Aduonum (2011)? Aduonum refers to the history walking in Guadeloupe, or what is called in Creole “fe memwa mache,” which literally means to take one’s memory on a walk, and more specifically to Yarimar Bonilla’s discussion of it (Aduonum 2011, 54). In the Caribbean, this process is also activated during carnival, as I experienced it in Martinique. Walking through the city to the beat of the drum, climbing hills up and down, wearing a costume matching the color of the day, in unison with a crowd of thousands of people, participants activate their ancestral memory as much as the more recent memory of moving through the city. The memory walk, as well as the carnival marches, share Black diasporic affinities with the second lining tradition evoked earlier. All of these performative walks do not only put memory on public display, they enact memory in the very act of walking and dancing through the public space, in a communal spirit, with a ceaseless loop-like flow of energy between the official performers (musicians, dancers) and the moving audience. To perform Memory on the street, or onstage, is to create a *memory2Go* (Zami 2018), unmediated by an external carrier other than one’s own body. When Chi “walks” onstage, she merges a quotidian and a spiritual pathway, turning her own Black woman body into a portal through which the audience may gain access about the past: May Ayim’s past, Afro-German past and present at large, and maybe also their own past?

Let’s take a step back toward the multigender trickster figure of Afrekete. She bears affinities with the spider god Anansi, who crawls at the heart of Nadine George-Graves’ notion of “diasporic spidering”: “

the multidirectional process by which people of African descent define their lives. The lifelong ontological gathering of information by going out into the world and coming back to the self” (George-Graves 2014, 33).

This back-and-forth itinerary is at work in May Ayim’s poem “Borderless and Brazen” (Grenzenlos und Unverschämt), written in 1990 like “Against Liversausage Gray.” In this case, the performer, who wrote a poem dedicated to Afrekete, oscillates between her African and her German identities, between her Black and white genealogy. She asserts herself as an assured subject embracing her duality as an enriching complexity. Ayim affirms that, instead of being either-or, she will be “African” and “German.” She repeats that she will “place one more step forward,” a poetic movement imagery echoing in Chi’s contemporary performance title.

Watching one of the few videos<sup>17</sup> that remain of Ayim’s spoken word artistry, I am struck by her hand gestures, which extend toward the camera/listener and continuously come back to herself. In the opening scene of *I Step on Air*, Oxana Chi mimics a speaker, who could be May Ayim and/or a politician holding a speech. Her hands reach out to the audience and always come back to her core. She speaks without words, the only sounds being the delicate tones from my kalimba playing. Later, Chi will also shake hands in a tragicomic mood. Her choreography plays with pace, starting in a calm, slow tempo reminiscent of Ayim’s own rhythm of speech, followed by a progressive acceleration culminating in turns on her own axis, and leading to the leitmotif of the piece, when the hands brush past the face. The idea to always return to the self in space mirrors the permanent return to the “now” in time, as suggested earlier in regards to Epiphenomenal time.

Both Ayim and Chi use their art as a tool of survival, and move within an “African diasporic heuristic of ‘crossroads’” (Johnson 2017, 412). Whereas Johnson discusses these crossroads in the context of Black



Photo 3: Oxana Chi in *I Step on Air* at Dixon Place, New York, 2015. Photo courtesy of Kearra Gopee.

feminist ethnography, I find it interesting to apply it to Ayim's poetry and Chi's dance. In *I Step on Air*, the whole stage at times becomes a space of crossroads. The dancer ventures through these crossroads with the power of movement, granting us new insights into a serpentine spacetime.

In the video, Ayim stands on one spot, constantly in a frontal position to the camera/audience. The location, in the iconic year of 1990, has obviously been chosen carefully. The backdrop to Ayim's performance is a dual space, reflecting the binary of her Afro-German identity. Behind her, on the left side, we can see a large piece of the Berlin Wall. On the right side of the screen, we can recognize the infamous Brandenburger Tor because the wall is no longer standing in front of it. A tree in the foreground seems to stand for the hope of a new life and society. Ayim staged herself at the juncture between the wall and the opening in the wall, symbolically performing the erasure of the border in a historical space where a physical border is being removed.

In her choreography, Chi sometimes resorts to the straightforward position of a speaker, but disrupts the frontal position by making the same movements (pointing with the finger, extending the hands, and shaking hands) in multiple directions. By seeming to address an audience where there actually is none, for instance when she moves along a diagonal axis, she instantly implodes the space of the stage or the theater. She forces the audience to question their positionality, to occasionally find themselves in a lateral viewpoint, or even at the back of the dancer. Chi's movements inform and are informed by "diasporic spidering," and make visible what George-Graves describes as "processes of journeying, gathering (wisdom and memory), gaining insight, sharing, and connecting" (2014, 35).

In her use of tension, release, balance, accents, pace, coherence, fragmentation, emotionality, and multiplicity, the dance maker molds and stretches spacetime in visceral ways that diverge from other art forms.<sup>18</sup> Her *perforMemory* is a dancing presence whose engagements with the past is bound to physically and metaphorically move forward in the present. Through her *perforMemory* of May Ayim, we come to understand that memory is always a site of movement. To *perforMemory* then, is to move and live in the intensity of the dancing instant, with the conscious possibility for a Black woman to transform her body into a timescape of resistance.



## Contemplating: Troubling Duress and Telluric Tenderness

### Meditation and Transformation in a Sick Society

In a conversation with the dance editor of *The Brooklyn Rail* magazine, Oxana Chi described her dance as “a multilayered landscape of feelings from which everybody can take something” (Jakab 2020). She went on to explain that she does not want to “impose” a story on the audience, rather she understands her work as being open enough for people to project their own story into it or interpretation to it, although she does create and perform with a clear narrative in mind.

Chi holds the attention of the spectators by stretching time to extremities, pulling one into a silky temporality and spatiality, when breathing becomes the clock by which to measure time passing. In the first scene of *I Step on Air*, she spins around her own axis in extreme slow motion, wrapping and unwrapping her arms and legs around her spine. An ensouled, centrifugal body asks the viewer to pause, and to tune into the frequency of her contemplative practice. This aesthetic is situated in the lineage of Africanist choreographic traditions in which, according to Kariamu Asante, “time is a factor, but enough time rather than a set amount of time” (Asante 2001, 150). Chi also seems to be drawing her relation to temporality from her yearlong interest in Asian cultures and her regular stays in countries, including Indonesia and Taiwan. Her travel to India in 1989 had a lifelong impact on her choreographic process:

India was quite an important experience for me, because I found a particular freedom for my choreography and dance which really matters to my choreography. Namely, that I can treat time as I wish to. My movements need a wealth of time, and I want to deeply savor each movement—and this is what India taught me—something which may have gone lost in Europe, or which may never have existed in the first place. (Chi 2013)

Besides contributing to the lesser known history of Black-Asian cultural exchanges in dance, Chi’s comment communicates the transformative potential of a dance practice in which she can shift hegemonic, Western notions of spatiality and temporality. Despite the increasing interest in quantum physics and their demonstration that spacetime is not linear, Western cultures and societies remain permeated with straight structures informing our calendars, our writing, and our thinking. Dances of perMemory are both the result and the source of the deconstruction of linear time modes and the corresponding hegemonic historical narratives. Thirty years after her initial travel to India, and three years after our conversation, Oxana Chi and I had the chance to perform *I Step on Air* at the opening of the Delhi International Queer Theatre & Film Festival, held at the NCUI Auditorium in New Delhi in December 2016. The festival included an enchanting ceremony with established guest speakers such as Prince Manvendra Singh Gohil—who calls himself the first openly gay prince in the world—and Canadian Deputy High Commissioner Jess Dutton. *I Step on Air* was described in the Indian press as a “dream in slow motion” (Deepak 2016). The journalist Sunil Deepak deemed that “appreciating the performance required a slowing down and focusing of attention, almost like being in meditation.”

The performance also reminded the journalist of his work experiences in the context of mental health. This is undoubtedly one aspect of the performance, as Chi is also embodying—in her dance and in her text—the struggle of Ayim to stay healthy in a country and society plagued with racism and sexism, for which there is no vaccine. Let’s ponder on the title of the performance itself. To *step on air* can evoke an association with Ayim’s death—she is said to have jumped off a rooftop. It could be an Afro-German version of what is known on this side of the ocean as the *Afro-Atlantic flight* (Commander 2017). Every jump in this dance could be an attempt to take flight, a personification of May Ayim’s desire to connect with her Ghanian ancestors. The focus on air can also be interpreted as a timely, and at times prophetic take, on current societal issues, including anti-Blackness and the acute global crisis of health, climate, and architecture. We may thus

anticipate that, after having failed to move beyond the color line, the problem of the twenty-first century will move along the breathing line. Who will be allowed to breathe—when, how, and for how long?

In her visionary trilogy, Alexis Pauline Gumbs asks, “How do we breathe across generations?” (2020, 17). I find that *I Step on Air* offers a gentle, nuanced answer to this question through Oxana Chi’s deconstruction of linear spacetime. As a co-performer, I try to let my music breathe along with her dance and Ayim’s stance, and the audience is invited to join this intergenerational process. In the “perpetual metamorphosis” that is dance, in which the body “plays with gravity, spatiality, temporality, directionality, senses, and the self’s relationships to the world” (Marquié 2016, 98), Black women movers use these parameters to transform their selves, and possibly the audience’s, awareness of them and themselves. They become a powerful vector of perforMemory and a living testimony to the capacity of humans to rebound on the past, to leap across the present, and to reach toward the hope of a better future.

### **Telluric Tenderness in Black Womyn ResistDance**

Do we agree with Thomas DeFrantz that there are Black gestures of dance, and queer gestures of dance? In *I Step on Air*, we can see these “queer gestures of reaching, flexing, flailing” (DeFrantz 2002, 103). Chi reaches out to the audience, to me, with her hands. She also reaches out toward the sky with her body, and reaches back, a Sankofa-symbol, like her intense backbend. She does flail in her very own way, in the earlier mentioned movements, when the hands shift in front of the face, interspersed by jumps. The performance is also, as DeFrantz would put it, “incontrovertly ‘black’ in its percussive accents, its sharp-edged precision, its presumption of coolness” amidst the emotional dramaturgy.

The very vision of a Black woman body dancing center stage is in and of itself an empowering moment, a timescape that exists outside of dominant societal representations of Black space and time. In my view, the reunion of Black and queer aesthetics in Black women dance generates a kinesthetic sense diffusing and infused with telluric tenderness. *I Step on Air* is a work of telluric tenderness per se: the movements are strongly grounded in the earth, and simultaneously imbued with a lightness, a tenderness, in each gesture, each spin, and each act of reaching out. An embodied practice merging the resiliency necessary for resistance to the softness of a dancing body. In this feat of resistDance, bodies, stories, and visions propel us away from traumatic pasts that weigh us down, and upward toward a lighter set of possibilities.

### **Notes**

1. *I Step on Air*, Oxana Chi, Oxana Chi Dance & Art, 2012–2018. My engagement with and description of *I Step on Air* is based on the live performances in Germany, the United States, India, Canada and Turkey between 2012 and 2018. See also <http://oxanachi.de/productions/i-step-on-air.html>. My warmest thanks go to Oxana Chi. Much gratitude to the School of Liberal Arts and Science at Pratt Institute for granting me research support through HMS and HAD Mellon Research Grants. I also deeply thank Ria Cheatom for allowing me to access personal archival material by May Ayim before her archive was relocated to the Free University of Berlin.

2. *feelingJAZZ*, Oxana Chi, Abrons Arts Center, June 29, 2018. Chi developed it in 2017–2018 during our residency at Abrons Arts Center, in the first historical cohort of the AIRspace Grant for Performing Artists. Earlier iterations of the piece were shown at legendary queer venues of the New York performing arts scene, such as Dixon Place Theater and the Bronx Academy of Arts and Dance, also known as BAAD!.

3. “A to Z: 20 Questions – Celebrating 10 Years of Dance Enthusiasm and People Who Power the Dance World.” *The Dance Enthusiast*, March 14, 2018. Accessed March 28, 2020.

<https://www.dance-enthusiast.com/features/a-to-z-20-questions/view/Dance-Enthusiast-A-Z-C-Yanira-Castro-Oxana-Chi>.

4. *Through Gardens* centers the life and art of Russian-Jewish-Chinese dancer Tatjana Barbakoff. *Neferet iti* investigates the Egyptian Pharaoh Queen and the issue of colonial looting of art and spiritual works. *Killjoy* commemorates and celebrates the surrealist art-activism of the French couple Claude Cahun and Marcel Moore.

5. Here I think of the precious scholarship produced by Brenda Dixon Gottschild, Nadine George-Graves, E. Patrick Johnson and Ramón Rivera-Servera, Thomas DeFrantz, among others.

6. EDEWA was a politically humorous distortion of the word EDEKA, the name of a German supermarket chain known for its colonial past and present. The new word, “EDEWA,” stands for “Einkaufsgenossenschaft antirassistischen Widerstands,” which can be translated as “Purchasing/Retailer Cooperative of Antiracist Resistance.”

7. The lecture-performance was an idea of Oxana Chi, who paired me together with Egyptian-German actress Suheer Saleh, a legendary actress in the former GDR. The Heinrich-Boell-Foundation, a regular sponsor of Oxana Chi’s work, funded the lecture-performance, as well as, later on, Dr. Kelly’s EDEWA program and Oxana Chi’s *I Step on Air*.

8. All biographical information is drawn from a posthumously edited collection (Ayim 1997). I am also indebted to Ria Cheatom, Professor Dagmar Schulz, and Ika Hügel-Marshall, who were close friends of May Ayim and Audre Lorde, for providing precious information about May Ayim’s life and work over kitchen table and *Schrebergarten* table conversations. As this article is going into press, Schulz and Hügel-Marshall are working as co-editors on a new anthology titled *May Ayim: radikale Dichterin, sanfte Rebellin*, which can be translated as *May Ayim: radical poet, gentle rebel*.

9. Published with Orlanda Frauenverlag in 1995. The title translates as “blues in black and white,” a title later chosen for an anthology published in 2003 in the United States with English translations of some of her poems, essays, and interviews.

10. Linton Kwesi Johnson, “Reggae Fi May Ayim,” *More Time*, LKJ Records, 1999, compact disc.

11. The performance tour history includes the wandering exhibition *Homestory Deutschland: Schwarze Biografien in Geschichte und Gegenwart/Black Biographies in Historical and Present Times* (Hamburg, Westwerk, 2013); University of Bielefeld (Action Weeks on Gender and Power, 2014); Yeditepe University in Turkey (International Symposium Writing Women’s Lives, 2014); Mainz University (All Women’s Student Program, 2015); the City University of New York (Second Annual Women’s Conference, BMCC, 2016); Rutgers University (Women’s History Month Conference, 2016); University of Ghana Legon (ICTM UNESCO Symposium on African Music Scholarship, 2018); University of Toronto (Black German Heritage & Research Conference, 2018); and Howard University (Nankama African Dance Conference, 2019).

12. In 2018, we were invited to perform *I Step on Air* at the University of Toronto as a keynote performance for the Black German Heritage & Research Annual Conference, held this year on the topic of *Reframing History and Life Narratives*. Framing, reframing... always!

13. Chi wrote the text in Berlin, Germany, and Carbet, Martinique. An earlier iteration of this poem (in German) appeared in the anthology *Sisters and Souls: Inspirationen von May Ayim*, edited by Natasha Kelly (2015) and sponsored by Oxana Chi’s longtime sponsor, Foundation Gerda-Weiler-Stiftung. Chi and twenty Black German women were asked to write about the role of May Ayim’s legacy in their contemporary practice as artists, activists, and educators.

14. In Germany, the term *Afro-German* (Afro-Deutsch) is used to refer to German people of (partly) African descent, and was coined by the Afro-German community to replace the pejorative words in the German language.

15. Here, Chi refers to the words to Maryse Condé’s first encounter with May Ayim, told by Condé in the preface to Ayim’s first anthology. See Ayim (1995, 7–8).

16. This word is borrowed from Professor Kum’a Ndumbe III. See the interview “Aus Kriegsbeute wird Schenkung,” *Hinterland Magazin*, Vol. 12, 2010, 64–67. <http://www.hinterland-magazin.de/zzold/pdf/12-64.pdf>

17. See May Ayim, *Grenzenlos & Unverschämt*, 1990. <https://vimeo.com/148467687>.  
 18. For an extensive discussion of this aspect, see Zami (2020).

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