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Interview with Layla Zami, Visiting Research Scholar at Columbia's Institute for Research on Women, Gender and Sexuality

by [Meredith Smith](#) | April 8th, 2016

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Layla Zami is an artist and scholar, currently a Visiting Research Scholar at Columbia University's Institute for Research on Women, Gender and Sexuality (IRWGS). She is a PhD candidate at Humboldt-University Berlin in gender studies and performing arts, where she is teaching a class on cultural memory in the spring, and has studied International Relations at Science Po in Paris. Recently she co-realized an artistic documentary film titled "Dancing Through Gardens" (Durch Gärten Tanzen) – with artist Oxana Chi – which explores dance and memory and involves 3 generations of women and takes place in 3 different countries.



How did this documentary *Dancing Through Gardens* start?

For me, it started when I met Oxana Chi. In fact, it was originally an idea from Oxana. She has been working on the theme of the memory of Tatjana Barbakoff [an artist of the 1920s] since 2007.

I met Oxana when I saw her performance "Through Gardens" in Berlin 2009, and I was mesmerized by it. When she was invited to perform in Indonesia later that

year, she asked me if I would like to come and document that. I didn't know yet she had bigger plans for a film when I went along and accompanied her, or that it would take place over several years, as it did.

It was a long process, primarily because of funding. We finished the editing in 2014 in Berlin. For me, it all started in 2010 when we met, we soon started working together. I wasn't aware then that it would become this monumental film.



Photo of the DVD cover released in Berlin, 2014.

Tell us more about this first encounter with Oxana Chi who, in a way, is the main character in the film?

I learned of Oxana first through posters that were up around Berlin. Then I met her at a French dance performance on memory and the Second World War, but we really got to know each other when I attended her "Through Gardens" performance at the Werkstatt der Kulturen in Berlin in 2009. Through her I found out about Tatjana Barbakoff.



Photo of Tatjana Barbakoff, 1920s.



Photo of Tatjana Barbakoff by Robertson; Berlin, 1929.

I was born in France and am also of Jewish decent (in addition to many other backgrounds including Caribbean and Russian), which I think determines my strong interest for and interest with history and memory-making processes. When I saw Oxana's performance "Though Gardens", I was fascinated by the way she performs history. Rather than the way it had been presented to me in a classroom via a textbook, it was more abstract, and more open to personal interpretation.

Also I was drawn in by the way it focused on a single biography. This was more compelling and accessible than a story with numbers and no individual. There is a scene in the piece that explores resistance, and you see it in the movie. Oxana was showing how Tatjana was struggling and resisting in her own way; this dynamic resistance process is not usually told in history textbooks.

The performance transformed the way I think about historical storytelling. It is what fundamentally motivated and inspired me to pursue a doctorate and to bring my background in and passion for cinematography to it.

Throughout the movie we see Oxana emulate and grow from female predecessors, Tatjana Barbakoff in particular. In fact, there is no definitive voice that wrote the narrative text and dance pieces. It gives this sense that reality is slippery and there are multiple actors and not a definitive truth or 'historical document.'

Oxana found out about Barbakoff from fine arts catalogue but she was someone who is largely absent in dance historiography. Right now in my research and writing, I am writing about absence and presence in performative memory, by the way. Oxana identified with this woman who seemed to be very different from mainstream dancers; they had lived in the same cities – Berlin, Paris, and Dusseldorf – and were migrants as well as being women choreographers who were doing their own, original work, alone on a stage.

You can see the movie and get a biography of Tatjana, but you also see another story of Oxana. In both, you see a story of individuals struggling to have success in the dance scene in Germany, Europe and fighting against racism and also confronting gender. Additionally, you can project another story about storytelling itself. As you watch, you see scenes from the 1920s and 30s weave together with contemporary scenes of the 21st century. There's interplay between historical documentation of the performances, archival footage, fictional accounts or re-telling of documents such as letters.



Photo by Layla Zami of dancer Oxana Chi during her performance "Through Gardens"; Berlin, 2010.

Gender is something you're focused on in your studies as your based at IRWGS and it comes up throughout the film. I am interested in how you see it in relation to identity and memory.

The film has been very inspirational for me in this regard. I see these elements not necessarily as separate but as different layers that interplay. If I hadn't been so closely involved with the performance and the filmmaking process, I wouldn't be able to write the thesis I am writing now. I am not interested in writing a conventional academic thesis. A film and additional visual materials will accompany it, that I have been collecting for several years.

Tatjana's work has sometimes been read through a heteronormative lens. Oxana and I wanted to open more space for telling a different story. We want to present different facts that have been overlooked. Identity is a complex matter; for example, Tatjana was of Chinese and Jewish descent yet some historians have negated certain aspects of that background. Though someone may identify as one ethnicity, others might say they are not. The story written about her is also always influenced by the person's social positioning in terms of gender, and what is told in history books is not always the whole story. So, we wanted to explore this as a deeper questioning about who holds the truth.

There is a statement at the end of the film saying we look at the past, yet want to be in the present. The film presents this reality in which time and truth are shifting.

Yes, we did a lot of research in the archives in various museums and libraries, and we played with this in the filmmaking process as well. Oxana used a Super8 camera at times to shoot contemporary scenes at locations where Tatjana performed, conveying an archival feel, and interweaving it with actual archive photos from the 1920s and 30s and with my 21st century footage. Also we didn't clearly tell whose voice is the narrator. If you watch the movie, take time to read the credits, you will be surprised and will find out more about the script.

Truth also is something we were thinking about a lot. We found an article from 1933 with Barbakoff and the first wife of Max Ernst (the painter) in which she spoke much about truth, and veracity. It was at a time when Barbakoff was very isolated, in France without any work permit. I think in watching dancing, it's not so much about a certain historical fact but it's about a form of embodied knowledge that transmits information through emotions that maybe makes you want to research more and find out more about history.

Oxana and I were both very interested in exploring what is a historical archive and what we do add to it. At the screenings, people were struck by their realization at the end of the movie, that it really made them question how history is constructed.

Through the film we show how Tatjana got into her memories – it was through her costumes. (They are in a museum now.) We saw in her and also have experienced in ourselves the struggle to find or create space to share memories that have not yet been told.

This comes out through many scenes in the film; the opening scene, for example, with the unpacking of the suitcase seems a metaphor for unraveling the ties of history.



Photo by Layla Zami of dancer Oxana Chi during performance, titled "Chinese Dream of Sunset".

In your work and with each of the women in the film there are these individuals working to make sense of things in the midst of so much trauma and war, and who are confronting these violent moments that they are living through, whether in present day or in memory. Can you comment about the connection to conflict resolution in your work?

I think present conflicts are strongly determined by conflicts from the past. We need to understand and know better about those conflicts from the past in order to manage present day conflicts, especially those that are fueled by racism.

I really see connections with conflict resolution because I think that if people watch this movie, and attend Oxana Chi's performances, or get familiar with work I am doing in the frame of my PhD thesis, maybe they will be encouraged to research history and engage with history in a different way, seeing it as more complex than it is usually narrated. Many voices are often marginalized – of women and persons of color – and these voices need to be heard in order to have more dialogue in the society today and to achieve peace.

That is why we switch registers in the movie, thematizing Islamophobia as well as right-wing fascism and anti-Semitism, and various cases of extreme violence that have gone unaddressed now and throughout during the history of the 1920s and 30s. I am very interested in how this film can engage with and be integrated into conflict resolution programs.

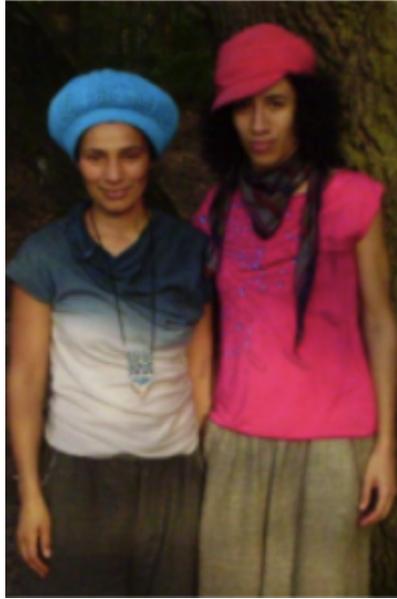


Photo of Oxana Chi and Layla Zami.

Learn more about Layla Zami: www.laylazami.net; and, for more info on Oxana Chi: www.oxanachi.de. To host a screening or buy a DVD, contact: mail@laylazami.net.

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