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**OF CIRCLES AND CYCLES: REMEMBERING, RITUAL,  
AND RHYTHM IN BLACK QUEER FEMALE DANCES**  
Layla Zami

On a full moon night, I scroll mentally through my memories of the past year. This full moon marks the first day of the year 2018 in the solar calendar. Some scientists call it a supermoon, while some media refer to it by the Native American appellation “wolf moon.” Images, sounds, feelings of 2017 come up to the surface of my mind, and these various textures overlap into a moving memory assemblage. I remember how another New Year started a few months ago, on September 20, 2017, Rosh Hashana, year 5778 in the lunar-based Jewish calendar. I think about my upbringing in a Black and Jewish household that celebrated two New Year’s Eves a year and wonder how this experience developed my affinity for the multidimensionality of time. I zoom into the ten days preceding Rosh Hashana, a narrow time frame within which I attended four dance events in Lower Manhattan. Experiencing such different and differentiated performances successively almost felt like journeying through a cycle, witnessing Black Queer female embodied perspectives on life, death, survival, mourning, visibility, and spirituality.

The physical settings that housed the performances varied greatly. The ample sanctuary of Judson Church hosted the Movement Research fall season opening on September 18, featuring works by Oxana Chi, Feng Jiang, Melanie Maar, Zac Mosely, and Nia & Ness. Outside, the waiting line curled around the building, reaching up to the backstage entrance on the corner. When the doors opened, a rush of moving bodies, enthusiastic voices, and immanent emotions flew in and formed a half-circle around the wide-open space. The Movement Research at the Judson Church opening was a cycle in itself, punctuated by Black Queer female performers, with Oxana Chi opening the event and Nia & Ness closing the night. This circular dynamic seemed to contain the different energies of the massive audience, which included artists and curators, religious ministers, tourists, local students, and scholars.

Ten days earlier, I had attended Taja Lindley’s *The Bag Lady Manifesta*, an “immersive performance” co-directed with Tanisha Christie at the legendary queer performance laboratory Dixon Place. Here, the waiting space felt narrow, yet also friendly, with several familiar faces and many artists greeting each other. Each audience member was handed a black plastic bag in place of a ticket and had to slowly descend into and pass through an audiovisual installation to enter the theater where the stage, partly filled with chairs, turned each spectator into a potential object of gaze.

In between these two events, I attended a new iteration (and the New York premiere) of MBDance’s *dying and dying and dying* at Gibney Dance. Entering this venue, located a few steps away from the African Burial Ground Monument, felt—that night—like entering a floating bubble made of gentle music, dim light and otherworldly intimacy. Indeed, the audience was invited to participate in a pre-show ritual. Before choosing seats, we were invited to choose one of the many personal objects dispersed across the stage, to pick it up and set it aside. Thus, the entering audience progressively cleared the stage, more or less consciously leaving enough space for Maria Bauman and her crew to move freely.

What do these four performances share? A powerful and passionate relation to movement, and the fact that they were choreographed, conceived, and performed by artists identifying and openly working as Black Queer women. I am aware that some artists expressed doubts around the term “queer,” for instance Maria Bauman (in a conversation with editor Jaime Shearn Coan) and Oxana Chi (in conversations with me), especially because of its appropriation by mainstream culture. At the time of writing, the five artists discussed here may have other words to define their identity. For instance, Nia & Ness clearly self-identify as “lesbian” in their performances. Yet, I hold on to the term “queer” as an umbrella under which many bodies may stand, to name ways of life that clearly, openly and boldly, question and challenge the norms of heteronormative patriarchy in the intimate, public, and publicly intimate spheres. Here I also think of Natasha Tinsley Omise’eke’s understanding of LGBT\* identities beyond the realm of sexuality, and her definition

of “queer” as a “praxis of resistance [...] marking disruption against the violence of normative order.”<sup>1</sup> In her analysis of Caribbean literature, the author unearths queer “fluid-embodied imaginary, historical-contemporary spaces.”<sup>2</sup> I contend that these spaces are also created on stage, where and when the Black Queer dancing bodies themselves may well be, or become, those spaces.<sup>3</sup>

My proximity to the artists and works discussed here varies greatly.<sup>4</sup> It stretches from the new encounter with Nia & Ness, who I had met a few weeks earlier at their evening-length *Run* premiere, to the close, long-term relationship to my life and work partner Oxana Chi. As a Resident Artist (music, poetry, theater, film) and Scholar with Oxana Chi’s dance company since 2010, I have had many opportunities to be an observant participant in her work.

I was on stage with her when she premiered excerpts of *Psyche* in Berlin (at the HAU theater) and in New York (at Dixon Place).<sup>5</sup> What an excitement to witness the piece again, this time from the audience’s viewpoint, holding a video camera in one hand and the program notes in the other hand. The notes describe “a choreographic exploration of body memory,” in which Oxana Chi “searches for the affinities between Psyche and Soul,” and “dives deeper and deeper into her inner self, to discover her own humanity.” Gently, the soulful sound of Sylvestre Soleil’s didgeridoo fills the church. Solar energy carries the flow of Oxana Chi’s movement, occasionally disrupted by pauses, which are sometimes restful, sometimes explosive. They often bring about a change of rhythm, almost as if the solo dancer would enter a different space-time, in which her motion is much slower than the sound. In a seamless blend of Afro-diasporic storytelling tradition and German *Ausdruckstanz*, the dancer at times alternates between mellow jumps reminiscent of Trisha Brown, with one leg bent at a ninety-degree angle, the arms reaching to the sides, and a propelling jump which transforms the body into an X with sharp lines. *Psyche*’s dancescapes are earthy, yet the ground is a base to reach up from. In her red-and-black costume, filled with lines which could be blood vessels, energy channels or geological paths, the dancer seems to embody an Afrofuturist twist on Pearl Primus’s words: “The earth is a magic dancer. She lifts her arms and mountains rise. She rolls down gently into the valleys. She hurls herself into space to form the jutting cliffs. In her is birth and death, the From and the Into of all physical forms. The earth is a magic dancer.”<sup>6</sup>

In *Psyche*, the dancer conjures telluric magic from the dance floor, channels it up through her twisting, straggling, jumping body, and releases it out into an energizing, empowering dance. I see movements of suffocation and salvation expanding into a svelte dance in which the soul becomes corporeally perceptible. I smile when I witness associate pastor Micah Busey thanking Oxana Chi after the show for the highly spiritual energy that she set in motion in the church. Through the activation of her body memory, she seems to simultaneously embody and transcend Black Queer womanhood, making her (and potentially her audience) experience a sense of transformation of the past, liberation of the present, and connection to the future.

In a different aesthetic but kindred spirit, the group work *dying and dying and dying* possesses the rhythm of a long river, traversing changing environments. The title is already a rhythmic move in itself, and to say it is almost to speak out a raga-like beat. Both the piece and its maker Maria Bauman seem at times like a little stream emerging in the mountains. At other times, they carry the energy of a rushing ocean swirling from the United States to the African continent. The cast includes the graceful Courtney Cook, Valerie Ifill, and Audrey Hailes, complemented by the powerful spoken performance of dancer-actor Alicia Raquel (Maria Bauman’s wife). The piece plays with the synchronicity and overlapping of the performers’ bodies and voices in a gentle, uplifting and sometimes disturbing manner. The dancers also use their sublime voices to name their ancestors and to sing their praises. With the use of an evocative soundtrack featuring Alice Coltrane, the piece connects not only to the familial lineage of the dancers, but also to the legacy of African American dance and music cultures. At one point, they perform a sumptuous, rewritten version of the spiritual “Run, Mary, Run,” singing “the right to a natural death” and the need to “run” or “fly” to “get to the other side,” a feat which they also enact through dance. Maria Bauman describes the work as “an evening-length meditation on various kinds of endings.”<sup>7</sup> The piece transposes in movement her will to “juxtapose” the realm of death—which she also associates

with rest and pause, as in the Yoga shavasana pose, and restlessness, or the pressure of capitalist Western socialization—which she calls a “U.S. factory-mentality.”

The inflexibility of time in a Western linear sense is also addressed and critiqued in the solo performance *The Bag Lady Manifesta*—which is part of a larger interdisciplinary body of work by Taja Lindley. By challenging the notion that past, present and future are distinct from each other, the performance is in tune with Michelle M. Wright’s *Physics of Blackness*, in which she advocates to shift from a “hierarchical or vertical” to a more “horizontal” analysis when we examine Black identities, and to account for “relationships” in the “now of the present moment.”<sup>8</sup> In Lindley’s work, the “now” pierces through the performance space-time when a clock suddenly starts ticking, putting an end to the initially celebratory soundtrack and atmosphere. The harsh, repetitive rhythm stretches over several minutes, and accompanies the performer in her physical transition towards becoming “the Bag Lady,” as she changes from a white burlesque outfit to a costume constituted of black plastic bags. Some members of the audience sit on chairs placed across the stage, and there Lindley takes a seat and waits, at times patient, at times nervous, staring afar. She challenges me to reflect upon my own position as a spectator who sits on the audience’s side and waits for the performer to “act”. Later she will also ask the audience to speak out loud and repeat the names of many Black and Brown people killed in the United States. But now she raises her arms up, and abruptly freezes with her hands in the air—as the clock momentarily stops. I think of the “stop and search,” or what Sara Ahmed calls a “technology of racism” in *Queer Phenomenology*: “How does it feel to be stopped? Being stopped is not only stressful, but also makes the ‘body’ itself the ‘site’ of social stress.”<sup>9</sup>

Ahmed’s point suggests kinetic vulnerability for bodies of color in the public space. Lindley and other Black Queer women reclaim their bodies on stage, embodying not only stories of oppression, but also bringing to a corporeal life counter-hegemonic feelings of bodily agency, power, and resilience.

Nia & Ness thematize and perform what it feels like for Black Queer women to experience racism-sexism “again, and again, and again, and again...” as says Ness White in *blind spot*. This cyclic statement echoes, in my ears, with MBDance’s emphasis on the “and” in the title *dying and dying and dying*. In this Black Queer women world, the “and” is togetherness, yet it also rhymes a liminal space of endless remembering and ritual. Nia & Ness’s intimate relationship to each other is simultaneously the theme and the structuring feature of their work. Although the artists have a soundtrack running in the background, it is clear that the rhythm of the piece—and of the movement—comes from the relationship between Ness’s intonation and Nia’s flexions. Nia’s dance is fierce, and she moves fast and intensely, raising her foot above her head, or briefly squatting down. Her agile moves pop through the air where they meet her lover’s cascade of spoken words.

Interestingly, Black/PoC female couple collaborations play a role for all artists discussed here. I already mentioned my daily personal and professional involvement with Oxana Chi’s dance. Maria Bauman featured her life partner Alicia Raquel. And after I attended Taja Lindley’s show at Dixon Place, it was her partner who sold me the book that documents the performance creation. This may suggest that for these Black Queer women dancers, the partner is not only a significant other, but also a strong element of the work—and the self.

In a way, all the pieces discussed here deal with the “social stress” encountered regularly by Black Queer female bodies, and its rhythmic patterns in their lives. They also embody the recurrence of their resilience strategies, their beauty, and assert without a doubt that Black Queer women are “Strong, powerful, wise!” as affirmed repeatedly by Nia & Ness at the end of *blind spot*. This moment felt incredibly intense, even more so because upon invitation, almost everyone in the audience started repeating the magic triad. I have witnessed the duo in other venues and contexts ever since and have always been mesmerized by the feel of individual and communal empowerment across boundaries of race. In this interactive aspect of the performance, Nia & Ness’s perspective briefly becomes a “norm” that streams and vibrates through the space. In *The Bag Lady Manifesta*, Taja Lindley motivates the audience to repeat that “we grow gardens out of graves,” and I sense how it becomes a mantra. I also think of the heteronormative protest song “Where Have All the Flowers Gone?” also about cycles. This new imagery is queer and emphasizes the collective “we” as a subject of growth. Lindley’s plastic

costume actually reminded me of a traditional healer I met in Douala, Cameroon, except that hers was made completely out of beige straw. The black plastic bags serve Lindley's intent of "drawing parallels between discarded materials and the violent treatment of Black people in the United States."<sup>10</sup> Here I see parallels with Maria Bauman's critique of the commodification of bodies, time and life. I also find a fascinating kinship between the individual dance flow of Maria Bauman and Oxana Chi. (Chi is Afro-German and has been based in New York since 2015.) Despite diverse styles, they share similar preoccupations and a strong expressive quality of embodied emotions.

The four performances correspond to what I call *perforMemory*, which I use both as a noun and a verb to conceptualize the intersections between shaping performance practices and informing memory discourses.<sup>11</sup> For Black Queer women, to *perforMemory* often leads to defying Western linear dichotomies between life and death, past and present, subject and object, observer and participant, grief and joy. The dances of *perforMemory* allow the "wake" to be a space-time to celebrate life and invite the audience to find their own way through their own spheres of remembering, rhythm, and ritual.<sup>12</sup>

As I conclude the first draft of this article, I come back to lunar cycles. One month after the "wolf moon" that launched 2018, the Dog sign spearheads the approaching Chinese New Year scheduled for new moon on February 16. I walk through Chinatown in Manhattan, and see people selling dog items in all shapes and sizes. I watch people recycling tremendous amounts of bags, which may well end up in China, knowing that plastic trash is the sixth-largest U.S. export to China.<sup>13</sup> I find bodies of all races and genders populating the urban landscape, sometimes sharing a narrow strip of space with the disposable plastic bags. In a country where not every human being actually has a right to housing, I feel how urgent and precious it is to experience the diverse ways in which artists inhabit their bodies as a dancing, malleable home. These gifted gatekeepers have the ability to arise in their audiences a sense of hope. Their performances invite us to value "the individual artist, their creative process and their vital role within society" as much as their collaborative endeavors.<sup>14</sup> These dancers not only claim, but physically embody their right to be and to live as humans, and affirm, with each cycle of opening and closing a performance, the realities and possibilities of Black Queer female circles of life.

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Dr. Layla Zami is an interdisciplinary artist-scholar-teacher. She is Visiting Assistant Professor at Pratt Institute and a Resident Artist with Oxana Chi Dance Art. She is Co-Curator of Dance at the International Human Rights Art Festival.

- 1 Natasha Tinsley Omise'eke, "Black Atlantic, Queer Atlantic: Queer Imaginings of the Middle Passage," *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies*, vol. 14, no. 2-3, 2008, 199.
- 2 Ibid, 194.
- 3 See also Layla Zami, "Dancing the Past in the Present Tense - Queer Afropean Presence in Oxana Chi's Dancescapes," *Lambda Nordica*, vol. Postcolonial Queer Europe, no. 2-3, 2017, pp. 126-50.
- 4 My proximity to the artists and works varies greatly. I am a Resident Artist with Oxana Chi Dance Art, and tour with my wife Oxana Chi as a musician/poet/scholar/filmmaker since 2010. I met Maria Bauman at the Bronx Academy of Arts and Dance in 2015 when she had a split bill with Oxana and I, and have followed and appreciated her work ever since. I attended MBDance's premiere of *dying and dying and dying* in Philadelphia in February 2017. In the case of Nia & Ness, I had seen the work a few weeks earlier as part of their *Run* premiere. Taja Lindley's work was new to me.
- 5 For visual impressions of the piece, see Oxana Chi's website, <http://oxanachi.de/productions/psyche.html>

- 6 Pearl Primus, "African Dance," *African Dance: An Artistic, Historical and Philosophical Inquiry*, edited by Kariamuwelsh Asante, (Trenton / Asmara: Africa World Press, 2002) p. 7.
- 7 Maria Bauman, *dying and dying and dying*, Gibney Dance DTI Video, <https://vimeo.com/231402496> (Accessed on 2018/02/08).
- 8 Michelle M. Wright, *Physics of Blackness: Beyond the Middle Passage Epistemology*, University of Minnesota Press, 2015, 20-21.
- 9 Ahmed, Sara. *Queer Phenomenology: Orientations, Objects, Others*. (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2006,) p. 140.
- 10 <https://www.tajalindley.com/thebagladymanifesta> (Accessed on 2018/02/08).
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- 12 Christina Sharpe, *In the Wake: On Blackness and Being*, (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2016) p. 35.
- 13 Kimiko de Freytas-Tamura. "Plastics Pile Up as China Refuses to Take the West's Recycling," *The New York Times*, November 1, 2018, <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/01/11/world/china-recyclables-ban.html> (Accessed on 2018/02/08).
- 14 Movement Research, Mission Statement. <https://movementresearch.org/about> (Accessed on 2018/02/08).



Oxana Chi in *Psyche*, performed at "Back Queer Night" at Dixon Place, New York, 2016. Photograph by Kearra Gopee.

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