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Artists Discuss: How Cultural Identities Inform the Creative Process, Part 1

by Kalila Kingsford Smith

*On November 14th, 2016, students of dance and choreography gathered at Gibney Dance for a panel, organized by New York Foundation for the Arts, to discuss how cultural identities inform creative processes. Moderated by **Wendy Perron**, the panel included **Reggie Wilson**, **Eiko Otake**, **Patricia Hoffbauer** and **Zvi Gotheiner**. In the aftermath of the election, young attendants at the panel were desperate for guidance about what artists are to do in a changing political environment, so while the moderated questions focused on cultural origins and expectations, the conversation strayed into more explicitly political discourse. What ensued was a series of conversations highlighting the differing cultural impositions that these artists navigate, as well as a discussion about what it means to have an American identity when you originate from a different country. Even months after this panel, I am chewing on the stories told, reflecting on what the panelists had to say about how we manage identity and audience interpretations, and what the artist's role is in the aftermath of a traumatic event. The following is Part 1 of a two part series compiled and edited from the event's transcription.*

Arriving in New York: "I *became* American modern dance"

Wendy Perron: When you came to this country as a dance artist, what did you expect would open up for you, what did you expect in terms of difficulty? And for Reggie, what did you expect coming to New York?

Patricia Hoffbauer: I had no idea. I was 19 when I came here. I grew up under a dictatorship. I was born in 1960, and 1964 was the [Brazilian] military coup, so that's all I knew. I lived in a militaristic state and my father was a political prisoner lawyer. I felt privileged and

very safe in many ways, but [in many ways] I wasn't. You knew what was happening to a lot of people, and as I grew up, I became more and more aware. Artists weren't suffering perhaps as much as the people organizing and being killed, but they were being censored and there was no money. Basically, that's what we're all concerned will happen here.

New York was the place we all went. I had *Dance Magazine*, and I looked at those people on the cover—Martha Graham, etc.—and I came to New York looking for that. Not Martha Graham, but a way that I could be a dancer. The dance scene here had a lot of different things that I couldn't get in Brazil. I couldn't have mentors and people I could talk with.

It's hard, because I knew the United States was responsible for the coup in Brazil, but I knew that the internal politics was different. The United States for the people in the United States was going to be much better than the United States for the people in Latin America. So I had to deal with my political feelings [when I came here].

Zvi Gotheiner: When I came to New York as a dancer, I had no expectations. I had no idea what was in front of me, but just a sense of exhilaration to finally discover my life. I was [raised] in a small kibbutz in rural Israel. There was no television, so I had little exposure to the outside world. I learned dance in the army service, and after finishing the army service I joined Batsheva Dance Company. After two years of dancing with the company, I was offered a scholarship to study in New York. I did not apply for it. The foundation decided that they wanted to spend money for me to expand my horizons. I had no idea what that would mean, to expand my horizons, because I was so isolated and naïve. But I remember walking down Broadway four days after arriving here and coming to the realization that this was going to be my home.

In Israel, for men, it was expected to grow up and be a solider. From an early age, we were navigating at night, learning survival skills to help us be a functioning solider. The identification of the individual over that of society was an odd thing to do. When I left the force to come here as a dancer, I could be an individual in a way that [wasn't so connected to the society]. This was a fantastic privilege, to be in New York and slowly dissecting all of the unnecessary identities that were projected onto me. It's interesting now, coming back in my middle life, and after this election that it may now have to be necessary [for me] to go back to being a soldier and [being] part of a movement, and I don't know how I feel about it.

Eiko Otake: I came to this country in 1976. I was twenty-three years old. Koma and I came together after having been [raised] in Japan. We were in Europe for two years creating work, and people started to ask us to stay there in Germany. I didn't want to. The history was just so heavy. … So I didn't really want to be there much beyond our experimentation time.

We went to a major theater in modern dance and met Lucas Hoving. He came to us and said, "You guys have to go to New York." I said, "Why? We are against America. We were fighting against them in the war and we were very hurt by them." But then he said two things, "One: it's over, it is just over. Two: New York is different."

It took us one year to make $5,000. We hardly ate that year, but we brought that money to the airport and they gave us a six-month visa no questions asked. In those six months we performed everywhere we could find. Many didn't charge us to perform, but they didn't make us any money. But by the end of the six months I was already surrounded by friends who would come and talk to me about what they saw, connecting to what their experiences were. And [at that point], I knew I was going to stay here.

"New York is where new choreography is." – Reggie Wilson

Reggie Wilson: I was born in Milwaukee, Wisconsin. I did Swing Choir, or show choir (like *Glee*.) It was a magnet school, and it was very diverse, and I didn't realize how lucky I was, [to experience] that kind of '70's experimentation on kids. I was introduced to Martha Graham's technique in high school, and I also desperately wanted to come to New York. I asked the teacher who trained me in Graham,

“Do you think I could do this dance thing?” and he was like, “yeah.” But my mom really wanted me to go to school. So I thought the easiest way, not the cheapest, but the easiest way to get acclimated to New York [and to dance] was to go to NYU. So I auditioned and got in.

I didn’t realize I was traumatized for a few weeks until one of the RAs in the dorm asked, “Is there something wrong?” And I realized, “Oh my god, I am the only black person anywhere near here [NYU].” It was 1985. Larry Rhodes had just taken over.

I was 17 when I came to New York. I came here because I thought I wanted to see a lot of Broadway shows, and I wanted to go to jazz clubs. I think in the years I’ve been here, I’ve seen maybe four Broadway shows, and I think I’ve been to two jazz clubs.

[While] living at NYU and learning dance history, I started to take all of these post-modern classes. I left Graham behind, but both Broadway and Graham got me so excited about so many other things. I think the reason I wanted to stay and be in New York was to be in a body of choreographers that are from Israel, from Brazil, from Japan. New York is where new choreography is. I think that, to me, is the most compelling reason I ended up here.

EO: So I never took American modern dance in the US once I arrived. But once I arrived, I *became* American modern dance, even though I don’t use American modern dance technique. This is an important part of my creativity.

WP: So how do you consider yourself an American choreographer?

EO: Well, I live and I work here.

RW: There’s no other qualification than that.

Identity and Choreography: “Cunningham was doing cultural work”

WP: All four of you bring a sense of another culture to your American choreography. So, what parts of your culture do you bring? Are there parts of your culture that you are expected to bring? Are there stereotypes about your culture that you’ve had to side step?

RW: It’s happened sometimes that people expect there to be tap dance in my work. When I teach a dance class or a technique class, they will expect it to be hip-hop or African. I never studied African dance until I was almost 30. I went back to Milwaukee to start studying the American culture that I grew up in, which I took for granted. People didn’t have a word for what it was—it wasn’t tap, it wasn’t blues, it wasn’t hip-hop, it was shouting and religious. So I found the Ring Shout. I went down South to do work there, then I started going to the Caribbean, and then I started going to Africa. I continue to go to Africa now, and I mix those things [into my process]. But I also go to Alaska, I also go to Korea, I also go to Israel.

So this idea of how or what I’m mixing [into my process] is not [meant] to represent something other than the lens that I’m seeing things through. Sometimes it’s really frustrating when people project [an identity] onto it.

“Culture is nuanced by history.” – Eiko Otake

EO: When I first came here, a lot of audiences made very quick connections to Hiroshima and Nagasaki, which is kind of like saying,

“Oh gee, she’s from Japan, [that’s what she must be dancing about].” I began to resent that. Except, I think I was wrong. It was only after 9/11 that I began to understand how much a massive trauma it was, and we were looking to each other to understand that. [With an event like that, you don’t realize that] you put your guard down. I knew I was already a target, but because I was here, I began to put my guard down.

I had also begun to understand why I started to study the atomic bomb, and that many people see Japanese bodies and have a problem [with them]. When I began to understand that this is what people see in me, [I decided] I had better learn about this, so that I don’t just say, “This is distasteful that they expect this of me, [they don’t understand].” So I decided to tap into this after 9/11, and it was necessary for me to study it.

It brought me to the following idea: I’m really not Japanese, per se; I am an “imposter” Japanese person. The way I’m Japanese is very different from my mother’s generation. I was born in 1952, this was the year American occupation ended. So I look at the same things from that perspective, that experience. What I’m trying to say here is that cultural implications are not about the nation and the culture. It’s about time. For me, I don’t want “culture” to be the only thing we talk about. Culture is nuanced by history.

PH: I grew up in a country that was completely shaped by the US and its music. Of course, I grew up listening to Brazilian music, but we always heard rock and roll. In Brazil—I don’t know what it was like in Japan or in Israel—but we thought Americans don’t have any culture. I mean I didn’t *really* think that, but there was that sort of perception—that America was very ethnocentric. [We had the perception that] they were uncultured, and therefore I never felt oppressed by Americans, which a lot of people all over the world do. So I went to NYU, but my friends, my ideas, my thoughts were all Latin American. I had a few American friends. I watched all the films that I couldn’t watch in Brazil, I read all the books that were censored in Brazil, so I became incredibly resilient. I became a third-world revolutionary woman. I didn’t hate Americans but I also wasn’t hanging out with them. I held them at a distance.

I think that changed when I graduated from college, and I knew I wasn’t going to go back to Brazil, and I started working with people who felt exactly like I did. They were also very critical of the US, and their work was shaped, influenced, and informed by that, but we were all doing post-modern movement.

I was always trying to figure that out. I couldn’t move any other way than the ways that I was learning in the classroom, and all my teachers were white American post-modern dancers. They knew nothing about what I was talking about in terms of my politics, so I always tried to layer it on top. [Many people critiqued this.] So my work was trying to collide [my political] ideas with [this post-modern] form.

“Whiteness is no longer unmarked.” – Patricia Hoffbauer

When I started dancing with Yvonne Rainer, I said, “You know Yvonne, your dance is white. *Trio A* is white.” She said, “You’re crazy, I hate the way you talk about dance being white.” And I said, “Dance is black, but dance is not white?” We are going to have to look at this differently with Trump—white identity has been completely invisible, and [socio-economic] class was not spoken about. I’m white because white people see me as white. So white has to do with class and privilege, and [the default has been that] authority is white, and upper class is white.

When I started to make work about race and about whiteness, I realized that I had something that was going to be explosive. [When I talked about this in the classroom,] some students wouldn’t speak. I would ask, “Why aren’t you talking?” The student was like, “I have an accent. I can’t speak.” So I started to deal with that, the exclusion, and the disability [of being Other.]

I think that this culture thing that Reggie was saying gets projected onto us has to do with ignorance. It has to do with not seeing, or not

wanting to see that we all have culture. We are all doing cultural work. Merce Cunningham was doing cultural work—that deadpan performance. It's not because he was born that way, it's because he couldn't be gay in the world, so he and Cage were like, "let's just be cool." That's culture!

But now, white people have an identity after this election. White identity. It's working class identity, but it is an identity nonetheless. Whiteness is no longer unmarked. So I think that we all are going to have to deal with all of that very differently. We're all going to have to work together, whites and non-whites, people of color and non people of color, are going to have to work together.

Choreography Post-Election: "Continue with even more acceleration"

WP: How do you think your work might change since the election? Reggie, your piece *CITIZEN* is opening in a month—are you rehearsing differently, are your thoughts about it any different?

RW: No, not at all. [*Reggie describes this SNL Election Night video*.] I don't underestimate the racism of America, and I think a lot of people of color, and what Dave Chappelle has called the historically disenfranchised, haven't been looking at America through these rose colored glasses. *CITIZEN* is about belonging and not belonging. It started from thinking about Zora Neale Hurston and being part of the Harlem Renaissance, and how many of her fellow artists were going to Europe to make their work because they thought they wouldn't have to face the same kind of racism as in America. She felt confident enough in herself that if you didn't want her at your party because you didn't want a black person at your party, she seriously thought, "Poor you. You don't get me at your party, I feel so bad for you." That created a spark in my head, thinking about the African American experience in this country, or any number of folks in any other country. [So this piece addresses] the context of how you belong to a group or not belong.

When I started making this piece, everybody thought it was about Black Lives Matter. I was like, "No. It's not *not* about that." This piece is not *not* about Donald Duck, but it is, but it's not new. They haven't *just* started killing black men. We haven't just started not wanting to listen to women. This is not a new issue. It unveils and it pulls back more for people who are unaware of it, but, then, it is a good thing.

EO: I wanted to talk about this Whiteness that we just brought up. Over time, something that I found very alienating is this notion that a choreographer has empty space to create a work. I never understood that. Why? Because no space is empty, and silence is full of sound. Space is not empty. So, in a sense, in my project that I've been doing, putting my body in places, is that I go to where people are. I don't wait in the theater for the people to arrive. I don't have so many things to say in the theater, but I go throughout the city.

I'm antagonistic. I can't really change the system, but to me it's important that I actually come through as antagonistic [in my work]. So really that is my mission, and how do I continue now with even more acceleration?

I think I will continue. I will continue to teach. I will continue to speak. I have already felt that movement can sometimes lie. You could make a piece called *Revolution* and who knows *what* about that movement is "revolution." In China, modern dance is a hit, but if you are a writer, [and you write something controversial] you get arrested. But you can make a modern dance and call it *Cat,* and nobody knows what the choreographer means except [that it's called *Cat*.] So I really have to think about this dilemma. We want to get it right; we don't want it to go over [people's] heads. At the same time, how do we become more articulate and encouraging? I want to be fully accessible, and give every ounce of my body to the younger generation. I think we have a responsibility for the young people. I mean this is a world that we made, it's not everybody's fault.

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