

## Does your dance tell a story?

*In this turbulent era, how can your dance practice make a difference? One choreographer explores how identity and political issues can inspire creativity and activism*

by Waeli Wang

“What is the story?” That was my first question back when I was trying to figure out what choreography was—I thought dance always had to tell a story, or else why were we dancing? When I used to ask older dancers and choreographers what the stories were within the works they were creating, I was often met with shock, a shrug, a pitiful look. Was I serious? Yes—my younger self craved some kind of narrative arc with finality. I wanted to get into a person’s brain to understand what people were thinking in their dancemaking and artmaking processes.

As I grew in my own work and in witnessing others, I came to realize that art is a form of communication shaped by the artists, whether there is a story or not. Dance doesn’t have to have a story at all; it can embody ideas or simply stand for what it is—movement, rhythm, a celebration of the body. Even so, my craving for story never subsided, and that is where my own artmaking begins.

Several years after graduating from a film studies program, I was making dances and films that came from instinct, an intuition that I could not yet explain. I found myself leaning into stories of self, narratives told in abstracted, non-linear, interdisciplinary works that investigated my own lived experiences. I felt a visceral need to document what happens, drawing from personal, familial, sociopolitical, historical, and artistic contexts to create critical works.

My deep study about identity politics and the Asian American experience really began in the shock I experienced after the 2016 presidential election. I remember getting the election results in the morning after going to sleep, confident that Hillary Clinton would prevail. The devastation that I felt was so profoundly deep that a guttural exhalation of the words, “Oh my god,” escaped my mouth. It was a voice I didn’t recognize. I spent that day in a deep gloom with the rest of New York City, feeling betrayed by the country where I was born. Later, I wrote in my notes—

At some point during the day, I remember thinking, oh, I’ve never felt this way before. You need to catalogue this feeling and make some art from it. You need to weaponize your art.

That is what brought me back to school. In 2017, I began an MFA at the University of California, Irvine, full of fury and an undeniable rage over the political and racial controversies that were coursing through America. I could not idly stand by when there were people in power trying to kill BIPOC, LGBTQIA+, ADA... honestly, all of us. I wanted to be better and do better, and I saw graduate school as an opportunity to move forward with both my fury and my research, to find a way to “weaponized” art. But where to begin?

The plight of many graduate students, including myself, is not knowing how to pare down and focus our studies. When I arrived in grad school, I thought I would take on all of racism,

researching and sharing the complex histories of the United States of America that are rooted in white supremacy, stolen land, violence against Black and Brown bodies in connection to my own personal history. It was obviously too much. Again, I was faced with the question of what to say first? Do I start with the election? The history of racism in the United States? My own experiences as an Asian American living in the States? My dancemaking process? After long pondering, reading, and storytelling exercises in my first research methods class, I decided to begin by thoroughly investigating my feelings around an experience that occurred while I was living in Brooklyn, which I named the *catalyst incident*.

### The Catalyst Incident

I was on my way home, exiting the subway platform of the Clinton-Washington stop off the A/C line, on a cold winter night. It had been a normal day, nothing special; I was thinking about getting back to the warmth of my apartment. There were plenty of people exiting the stop at the same time, pouring onto the dim sidewalk with only street lamps and twenty-four-hour bodega storefronts illuminating the night. As I turned the corner, I heard one of two Black men who were hanging out directly outside the subway stop say, “Have a good night.” I ignored it and kept walking. I didn’t know them.

As I quick-stepped further down the block, I heard the other man shout after me, “You better go back to China! Or Korea!” I stopped. My heart was in my throat. I asked myself so many questions in a split-second—do I feel safe? Should I say something back? What are the consequences if I do? How many times have I stayed silent? What would my mother do? (I knew the answer to that one: walk away even faster). Then—aren’t you tired of this shit, of holding back your anger?

I whipped around and all I could muster was, “Excuse me??” Then, we had a yelling match, interrupting each other, trying to get a word in over the other. Me, trying to prove my Americanness. Him, trying to weight my foreignness. My voice was shaking throughout, until another Black man standing close by me interjected, saying, “Don’t argue, don’t argue.” I tried to explain, “I’m trying to educate.” He mused, “It doesn’t work that way. But good luck with that.”

What did that mean, I wondered. “It doesn’t work that way”? In what way(s) does it work?

In unexpected ways, the *catalyst incident* lingered in my mind and directly connected me to the legacy of oppression that is American history. It was the first time I spoke up in the face of a racist remark directed at me. I began thinking about the many moments that could fill hundreds of pages documenting racism I had experienced throughout my life. How would it become a thesis project? I started by studying the history of racism against Asian Americans, and, because of that specific incident, the history and recent interactions between Asian Americans and Black

Americans in Brooklyn. The *catalyst incident* was a call to action for me, a call to choreography directed through the lens of critical race theory.

In the spring of 2019, I had finished my written thesis and presented *Skin We Wrought*, a thirty-minute interdisciplinary work that resulted from exploring identity politics myself and with the dancers. As my collaborators, they also became active artist citizens. Throughout our rehearsal process, we shared stories of where we were from, who we are, how race has shaped our identities, our memories, and how we related to each other in community. We wrote poetry and embodied our identities, all of which was reflected in interwoven choreographic and cinematic vignettes we shared with the audience. We unpacked much that had been repressed, unspoken, and invisibilized, having to do with identity, ancestral heritage, and cross-racial intersections.

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My artmaking is my activism. My personal experiences feed my artmaking. I am dedicated to equity, liberation, justice, and solidarity for us all, because our humanity is not up for debate. In mapping my own role in what Deepa Iyer calls “the Social Change Ecosystem,” I know I am a committed storyteller. I know dance can be about anything, or nothing at all, but as Iyer emphasizes, storytellers can “draft and share our community stories, cultures, experiences, histories, and possibilities through art, music, media, and movement.”

So, now it's 2020. Another election year and a year that has been disrupted by a global pandemic and a radical resurgence of the Movement for Black Lives. While I was by no means prepared for COVID-19, I was prepared for the outrage over the killing of George Floyd and the mass mobilization over social justice issues. I was ready because of the *catalyst incident*. Because for several years I had been reflecting on these issues, researching them, and having ongoing conversations on race/racism. Because I had already had a bit of time to unpack the relevant issues, I had the space to help others unpack, and to ride the wave of despair with them. We don't have to be alone in this awakening.

While I have learned to respond differently to the inherent oppressive systems that we grew up in—to racist moments—my initial reaction of fear and anger remain. Sometimes it is an unbearable weight, but sometimes it's fuel to reach for better things. These are the stories I choose to share in my artmaking.

I return to the question, “What is the story?” We asked ourselves this question throughout the making of *Skin We Wrought*. In the process, we learned to cultivate community, be vulnerable

with each other, and cultivate empathy in what scholars have called “thick solidarity.” We shared our own stories in the artistic world we created together. I urge you to consider the stories you are telling. What needs to be heard? How can you convey it? How can you build collective power to share a particular story, using your art and dance practice?

Sources:

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