

In August 2020, during a global pandemic and ongoing uprisings against systemic racism and police brutality in the wake of George Floyd's murder on May 25, Nadine George-Graves—scholar, director, dramaturg, choreographer and Chair of the Department of Dance at Ohio State University—met on zoom with Okwui Okpokwasili—writer, dancer, performance maker, and choreographer—as part of the “50WomenAtYale150” series.

*The two women—friends who are deeply aligned in thinking about ways to reconfigure and reimagine the performative space—met to discuss Okpokwasili's performance and installation, *Sitting on a Man's Head*, created with her husband and partner Peter Born as part of the *Danspace Project 2020 Platform: Utterances from the Chorus*, a program that was cut short by the shutdown of New York City in March 2020. Building on ideas of shared practice and reoriented relationships between audience and performers, Okpokwasili's and George-Graves's conversation considers new and radical modes of being together and caring for each other, both in artistic practice and in how that practice can extend into the rest of our lives. Their dialogue invites us to entertain the notion that, even amidst the most ungenerous circumstances of our changing world, daring to be generous—perhaps even virtuosically—can open the possibility to renewed curiosity and surprise.*

This talk was co-sponsored by Yale Women, the Yale Alumni Association, and the Yale Black Alumni Association, with technical assistance from Wendy Maldonado D'Amico.

Nadine George-Graves: Good afternoon, everyone. Today I have the pleasure of introducing our featured speaker and my beloved friend Okwui, a Brooklyn-based multi-disciplinary performer. On a personal note, I've known Okwui since college. And I've always been in awe of her brilliance and deep commitment to her work as an artist. I was thinking of how to introduce you, Okwui, and I remember working with you in college, on *Jesus Christ Superstar*. I choreographed it, and you played, I think, Judas Iscariot.

Okwui Okpokwasili: [*Laughing*] Yeah, I did.

NGG: I remember beautifully choreographing every five, six, seven, eight. There might have been a jazz hand or two.

OO: Yeah, there may have been.

NGG: And I got to you, Okwui, and I was just like, "You know what? Okwui, you just go." And I think that says a lot right there. So I'm honored to be in conversation with you. And I want to thank you so much for being here. Let's start. Yale asked me to ask you first to talk about your Yale days, your time as a student, how that might have influenced your artistic journey. Is there anything you want to say about yourself and pivotal moments that got you here?

OO: First of all, I want to say, thank you. It is an honor to be here at Yale, fifty years honoring women at Yale college, and one hundred and fifty years honoring women at the university. And speaking to you, my dear Nadine George-Graves, who is an incredible mover, maker, artist, rigorous

intellect herself around performance. So the one thing I'll say about Yale is that I think what was really, really important in my development and growth were the resources that they gave to undergraduates to make their own work. To do these experiments like *Jesus Christ Superstar*. Was it in Morse, I think? You know what I mean? That was funded by the Yale Dramat, right? Which is this incredible resource for all of us at the different colleges where we get access to funds to make our own productions. And I used those resources, often, to do my work, and to do collaborative work with others. I think that was just super. It was singular and very significant in thinking about the capacity to make work and thinking and realizing that I had the capacity to make work and also thinking collaboratively in a big way. I mean, I feel like not only did I do that—I remember also working with people on their own projects, particularly there was Ronobir Lahiri, who was Yale '94. He did a version of the *Ramayana* and it happened outside. I think it was the Saybrook and J. E. Courtyard? I think he utilized both. One was kind of grass. One was stone. And actually during the course of this piece, we moved through the courtyards. I hope that answers the question.

NGG: I'm in this—and we can talk about our little worlds, you know. I've been teaching undergrads for a while and I think that there is a sense of maybe, maybe a little bit of entitlement—let's, let's be real, you know, Yale has the money—but also just freedom, to do what we do without really knowing the rules sometimes. Well, it's also having the resources. I run up against, often, undergrads who didn't get cast in the main stage and then they're like, "Oh, well, guess I'm not going to perform." And I'm

like—especially when I was in San Diego—“It’s warm! Go outside, do something,” you know? So maybe there’s something, you know, important about that permission and those resources that are available, but also just the blissful ignorance of not necessarily knowing that you weren’t supposed to do things without a grownup’s permission.

OO: Exactly. And I think, you know, sometimes we took inspiration from text, we were looking at the Living Theater, we were reading about the experiments of the Wooster Group. We were reading Suzan-Lori Parks. We were looking at all of these people who were in some way trying to reformulate, rethink how work is made from not just the text and the form and shape of the actual performative product, but also in terms of the strategies of making work. The strategies of thinking about, okay, how do we reflect on what we are doing as art makers, a kind of imagination about how we want to live in the world, right?

Like how does the work that we make perhaps send a signal or start to plant a seed for other ways of living that aren’t predatory, that aren’t purely transactional, that are grounded in an idea of building art and culture, but also thinking about care. And, you know, just thinking like imagining having a space to imagine things you may not have seen, but definitely dream about, that are also beyond your own immediate desire for gratification or, I don’t know, it’s not just about developing a product to be sold, right? But there’s a whole ethos around what it means to come together and build something together that speaks to something larger about a community. Like when you look at the people around you, not just as agents

of your own vision, but as collaborators in visions that you might not have imagined, but they can inspire you to think even bigger than you had thought. Not just like, “Ooh, I’m going to make this *brilliant* show.” You know? No, it’s like, what if, what if we looked at each other as all possessing the capacity to...

NGG: Fill in the blank? Right?

OO: To fill in the blank, but actually, sometimes, I feel like I can be overly careful with language, but sometimes I feel like I spew. And so I’m toggling between, is that really the word? But I feel like everybody has a contribution to make, right. And I’m thinking about, you know, you might say, “Oh, this is a lighting designer. They’re an amazing lighting designer.” But maybe they come in and have something really essential to say about sound, right?

NGG: Thank you, thank you.

OO: Or something to say, you know, or someone comes into the piece and you thought they were a choreographer, but maybe they have an incredible dramaturgical impulse that you should follow. Right? Because just how do you allow, how do you make space for the people that come in as collaborators with you to kind of keep bursting the bonds of how you think you should be working and constantly making you reconfigure relationship. Like being open to that. And I just feel like all of the collaborative relationships that I started to build at Yale—some of them that I continue to this day, and especially my

husband, he also went to Yale and we were collaborators—so just constantly allow yourself to be surprised. Allow your curiosity to be piqued, allow yourself to be pushed beyond what you imagined was possible.

NGG: You make it sound so easy, right?

OO: No, it's very... stressful.

NGG: Yeah. And also it feels like it should be easy. And there's a way in which, there is this impetus to perhaps have a mastery of form. So I'm virtuosic in this technique, in this form and by these parameters and by this definition. And what happens when the commitment to that form doesn't allow for other things to happen? Right? And how do we measure virtuosity in other ways? So how are you virtuosic as a collaborator? How are you virtuosic in allowing the work to be what it is without imposing rules or definitions on top of it from the beginning? Or how are you virtuosic in recognizing the stakes, how are you virtuosic in your generosity of yourself and your honesty. Right? And I think, and I will say sometimes, you know, the stakes are high, and things are dangerous. Things get out of control. I believe we burned that—we burned it down.

OO: Mm-hmm. We burned it down. Yeah. I feel like at the Afro-Am house, I feel so bad. I remember we would go in there and we were working on a piece and I remember I was like smoking cigarettes in there. And I can't remember the name of the incredible dean who was there. She was like, "Can you not do that?" But you know, we're, we're

experimenting, and we just, we were feeling free and feeling ourselves and it's true. Sometimes you're like, okay, what are the limits of that freedom? You know what I mean?

But you know, I also think that there's a responsibility that we have to each other to just kind of, I don't know, I'm just thinking of Suzuki, right? Like the Zen beginner mind. How to always kind of, how to have a beginner's mind about all of it. And so maybe that means... Do we have to discard ideas about virtuosity? Do you know what I mean? Like how do we divorce virtuosity or ideas of perfection from... Or, I don't know, is virtuosity...you know, I started thinking about Noh performance, right? This like ancient and thousands and thousands, thousands years old practice, right? Where people are kind of doing the same, ostensibly the same, thing. They have a very, very strict and very specific container that they have to inhabit. Right? But, you know, the way they inhabit that, those particular possibilities, maybe the movement of how the head moves is maybe very uniquely and individually their own. And so there is a potential for a kind of virtuosity and also a spirit to transmit through this very, very strict container. So now I'm like, well, I guess we don't have to discard virtuosity *so* much, but I guess I'm not interested in virtuosity. I'm interested in practice and I am interested—

NGG: Yes. You just also happened to be virtuosic. I'm going to say it out loud.

OO: That's why I be loving you Nadine. That's why I be loving you.

NGG: Yeah, you walk into the room virtuosically, but what I'm also hearing is this recognition of other possibilities that might be...rhythm? That might be an energy, might be something else that we value, as opposed to, you know, getting your leg up to here. And I think that that's part of what people are recognizing in your work, even when we can't quite articulate in a review, what she's doing, what the genre is, what that means, but like, *oh my God*, that was amazing.

OO: But it's not just what *I* do. It's not just what I do. There's a whole container around that. I like working with collaborators.

NGG: Right, but it's what you bring out. It wouldn't happen without you.

OO: That's true, because there's a dynamic conversation that I'm having with my collaborators and all of the elements of the piece.

NGG: So I've been told that I should go to the clip, because we're just chit-chatting.

OO: Oh, sorry. You know, Nadine and I were supposed to go have a coffee. Back in pre-COVID days.

NGG: Yes. That's right. So this is really just our coffee talk.

NGG: The last time we saw each other face to face was in January at the Gibney . Yes. We saw a performance. You came to a performance of *Afro/Solo/Man*¹ that I

dramaturged and I moderated a discussion and I'm thinking about that moment here because I think that was another moment where I realized how important the audience is to creating—I'm going to say out loud—a ritual *and* a performance. And that's really connecting me to you and your work and what can happen in your performance. And so the clip that we chose is from a performance that really speaks to that, right? It brings you in—all of your work brings people in.

OO: It's a practice.

NGG: It's a practice. And I'm going to say sometimes your work, I must say, sometimes it is *excruciating*.

OO: Good! *[laughs]*

NGG: But it is always powerful. It's always powerful. And so we were going to talk about this piece and your work [over coffee] and then the world fell apart...several times. So we're picking up, and maybe we can watch this and think about ritual, theatrical dance practices, spaces for recognition and restoration. The clip is from the performance I *didn't* get to see [live] in March called *Sitting on a Man's Head*² that happened at the Danspace Project. And I think it is getting at these conversations about rhythm and what's possible, and who we are as performers and audience members, and blurring those lines.

OO: Yeah, it's a practice really. I mean, it was an attempt actually to do a *non-performance*. An attempt to sort of start to build modes of being with strangers in sacred ways,

in creative ways, to make space for the utterances that people need, you know, to emit.

[technical difficulties showing clip from Sitting on a Man's Head]

OO: No problem. This is an attempt to build a chorus as we sing it. I love it.

Wendy Maldonado D'Amico: Why is it not playing?

OO: This is *zoom*, that's why.

WMD: It's always zoom's fault, right?

OO: So people are speaking in the chat. I'm going to look in the chat, y'all. Somebody has made a suggestion for a solution for this in the chat. I guess this is kind of what I like about this. Nothing is really too serious right now. We're all here. We all know. We've all had our technical issues with zoom.

NGG: And there's this radical forgiveness, I think, for awhile. So my students, in March, radically forgave me, as I tried to figure out how zoom worked, I became one of those old professors, "Oh, I don't know how this works." I became one of the old professors. I don't think they're going to forgive me as much in the fall.

WMD: I don't know why this isn't working and I'm so embarrassed.

OO: No, please don't be. We can also skip it because you know what? I can just talk about it. And people can please go check out the clip, maybe we'll put a link to it, you know, because it's really, it's not really anything—to be perfectly honest with you. It's not something spectacular; it's not a spectacle. We designed something, it actually was my first time co-curating an exhibition that happens with Danspace Project. It's a place of performance, but there have been ten platforms designed since 2010 that are basically these ongoing exhibitions over the course of five weeks around a particular line of inquiry.

They've done things like *Lost and Found*, which was considering the works of artists who passed away from AIDS. How have we lost them? How are we finding them? Asking artists to sort of re-engage with some of the works of those folks. There was another platform, *Dancing Platform Praying Grounds*, considering how sites of worship have shaped religious, African diasporic and postmodern dance practices over the centuries. The curatorial investigation uncovered the invisible and vanished bodies who built St. Mark's church in the city—namely the slaves, the enslaved people who built the church. *This* platform (or the platform I co-curated) was designed around the chorus: what are the possibilities, as a community, for us to come together, to sing together, to speak together, to cry together? Is it possible—one of the questions was—is it possible for us to utter together, to shape and weave a sonic space together?

So, there are a number of ways in which the platform or this exhibition tried to make space for shared artistic

practice, possibilities of engaging the public and building different types of relationship with audience. All of these ways where we are trying to ask: what are ways that we can creatively take care of each other, listen to each other with generosity? With almost an *unbearable* generosity.

WMD: Let me, let me try and share this once more, one more time, ladies. I'm just stubborn.

OO: That's the Yale lady way.

NGG: Do not accept defeat. We're going to get an "A" in zoom.

OO: So we can see it, but we can't hear it for some reason. It's all right, love. Okay. I feel you, Wendy. No worries at all.

WMD: We'll send out the link to the video.

NGG: I was going to say—I say this to my students about lots of things, and I'll say this to all of us—let's put our finger on our pulse. Right? So put your finger on your pulse right now. Wendy, put your finger on your pulse. It's probably racing. Let it go. What does that mean? What does it mean about our expectations? About what zoom's supposed to be and what a clip during a webinar's supposed to look like and what does it mean that now, we're going to listen to them talk about something that I didn't get to witness *right now*. I'm going to have to be patient and wait and give myself the practice of actually going and clicking on it myself later on, and then think back to what they talked about. Right? What does that mean? And how do we allow that to be what it is right now, too?